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How Do Evangelical Christian Secondary Schools Approach Sex Education?

Benjamin J. Hummel

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of Bethel University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

St. Paul, Minnesota

2023

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Abstract

Numerous studies look at the impact of sex education programs in public schools in the United States, but there is a lack of research on how private Evangelical Christian schools approach the topic. This study aimed to explore the attitudes and experiences of students, staff, and parents about sex education in Evangelical Christian schools. Using a qualitative approach, focus group interviews were conducted with separate groups of students, staff, and parents at two different Evangelical Christian schools. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Themes emerged from the focus group interviews. The two Evangelical Christian schools in this study articulated clear beliefs and statements on sex and sexuality but sex education was often informal and teacher-dependent. Sex education resources and coverage of topics lacked depth and cohesion, which resulted in limited impact. Students, staff, and parents wanted more conversations in school on sex and sexuality but were concerned about how sex education could be delivered effectively. All stakeholder groups agreed that sex education should be taught in Christian schools. Respondents agreed that parents have the primary responsibility in the sex education of their children, but that the Christian school is a valued and trusted partner. In the end, each group believed that more time needed to be spent on sex education spread out across multiple years. The findings from this study showed students and parents were open to more sex education and described the need for a more formal approach to sex education that requires training for staff. A large-scale quantitative study of sex education practices in Christian schools would be beneficial to gain a broader perspective of what is happening across the country.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation work to my family who have supported me and sacrificed over the past few years of this journey. Trying to write a dissertation while moving from Austria back to the United States and starting a new role in a new place was difficult. Thank you to my wife Sarah for your words of encouragement and for pushing me to finish! Thank you to my sons Harrison and Alexander for being understanding during the weekend hours I worked to get things done. I love you all!

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my parents, Dale and Marcia Hummel for their encouragement and for putting a love of learning into me from the beginning. Your prayers mean so much!

Thank you to the many colleagues that I have worked with from Neuqua Valley High School, St. Charles North High School, the International Christian School of Vienna, and Statesville Christian School. I have learned at each stop on my journey and worked with many wonderful people who have pushed me to improve. Thank you Dr. Brobst for the support and help in getting started on my doctorate.

I am grateful to the student who asked me really hard questions about why my school at the time was not tackling some of the tough topics in sex education. His questioning pushed me toward my research topic. I appreciate the students who ask tough questions. They deserve to be answered.

Thank you to the students, staff, parents, and schools that hosted me and allowed me to do my research. I did not have an easy time finding schools that would host me, so I am appreciative of your openness and candor. I was impressed with how both schools wanted to learn, improve, and grow.

Dr. Lindstrom, thank you for your quick feedback and consistent support. You were great to work with and made the process much easier. Dr. Nichols-Besel and Dr. Hinkle, thank you for

your feedback and willingness to serve on my committee. I valued your investment and kind support.

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List of Abbreviations

ACSI: Association of Christian Schools International

AOUM: Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage

CDC: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

EBI: Evidence-Based Interventions

LGBTQ: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning or queer

NCES: National Center for Education Statistics

SIECUS: Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States

STD: sexually transmitted disease

STI: sexually transmitted infection

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Chapter One: Introduction

Introduction to the Problem

As a relatively new secondary principal at an international Christian school, the researcher cannot forget when a senior student leader who described himself as an atheist walked in to have a meeting with the head of the school and proceeded to criticize the school for avoiding hard topics and discussions. The student emphasized how great the teachers were and how loving and caring the environment was at the school but felt there was a lack of conviction in how issues like same-sex attraction were discussed. The student implored the leadership team to be all-in on their convictions and beliefs if the school was going to claim to be a Christian school. After this interaction, the researcher walked away convicted, particularly about what was being done at the school to talk about sex and sexuality. The school had no real sex education curriculum outside of some biology and health lessons that included a brief discussion of reproduction and sexually transmitted diseases. Reflection on the conversation caused the school leadership team to wonder what kind of a disservice the school was doing, so they embarked on a journey to address relevant topics and the real-life concerns of students around sex and sexuality. The leadership team also started researching what other schools were doing and had a difficult time finding anything of substance, which motivated a deeper investigation into the experiences and approaches of other Christian schools. After months of investigating, the researcher found that there may be a major disconnect between what Christian schools are providing and what students need for their health and physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual development.

The expectation for public schools to provide sex education in the United States became prevalent in the 1960s (Dent & Maloney, 2017). The increased emphasis on sex education in the 1960s lined up with the introduction of birth control and the sexual revolution (Huber & Firmin,

2014). In the 1970s, sex education became more politicized as conservative groups responded to new sex education programs that encouraged safe sex during sexual experimentation (Huber & Firmin, 2014). With the growth of the Christian Right and the influence of Christian Evangelicals on public policy came a significant increase in abstinence-based programs in the United States during the 1980s (Dent & Maloney, 2017).

Abstinence-based programs generally teach that a monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity (Santelli et al., 2017). These programs tend to limit discussions on safe sex or other controversial topics. Currently, there is a wide range of sex education programs in the United States which include abstinence-based programs and comprehensive sex education programs that focus on a much more inclusive view of sex and sexuality (Dent & Maloney, 2017). While comprehensive sex education is a broad term, comprehensive programs include education on sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, and condoms (Irene & Stan, 2019; Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Comprehensive sex education programs typically also include an abstinence message (Irene & Stan, 2019). While much research has been done to look at the impact of different sex education programs in public schools on behavior, it was challenging to find any significant studies that examined sex education in Christian schools. The lack of information on sex education in Christian schools is concerning because adolescents in Christian schools are engaging in sexual activity and may not be receiving important information to help them navigate the realities of their experiences.

Statement of the Problem

Up to 50% of adolescents under 18 have had sex, a group disproportionately and negatively affected by sexually transmitted diseases (CDC, 2017). Yet, sex education is inconsistently integrated at the over 7,000 Christian private K-12 schools in the United States

(NCES, 2008). Evangelical Christians place a high value on abstinence-until-marriage according to biblical principles, however, marriage patterns are changing across all demographics. In a recent study, researchers identified the rising average age of first marriage in the U.S. as compared to the minor changes over time in the average age of first sexual intercourse (Santelli et al., 2017). The first sexual intercourse for men was at age 18.1 on average as compared to 29.8 for the first marriage, while the first sexual intercourse for women was at age 17.8 and the first marriage was at 26.5 (Santelli et al., 2017). The gaps of 11.7 and 8.7 years for men and women leave many years of potential premarital sexual activity and illustrate the need for meaningful sex education in the U.S. Further, most self-identified Evangelical Christians are engaging in premarital sex as evidenced by statistics from the General Social Survey: between 2008 and 2018, 86% of females and 82% of males who were never married and identified as fundamentalist had at least one opposite-sex sexual partner since the age of 18, while 57% and 65% respectively, had 3 or more sexual partners (Ayers, 2019). The prevalence of sexual activity from adolescence and into young adulthood is similar regardless of whether individuals identify as Evangelical Christians.

There are numerous issues for adolescents in the United States when it comes to sex; for instance, adolescents are disproportionately impacted by sexually transmitted diseases. Rates of chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis continue to rise in the U.S. From 2017-2021, cases of gonorrhea grew by 28% and cases of syphilis grew by 74%, continuing an alarming trend (CDC, 2021). The U.S. has higher teen pregnancy and birth rates than many other developed nations in the world (Mark & Wu, 2022; Stanger-Hall & Hall, 2011). Researchers also observed a strong correlation between high religiosity and high teen birth rates when studying states in the U.S. (Strayhorn & Strayhorn, 2009).

Perceptions and beliefs about sexuality are rapidly changing. As an example, in 2004, a Pew Research Center survey showed that 60% of Americans opposed same-sex marriage as compared to 31% who were in favor. In 2019, 61% of Americans supported same-sex marriage while 31% opposed it (Pew Research Center, 2019). A 2021 Gallup poll on values and beliefs in the United States provides valuable insights into how the beliefs of Americans have changed over the past twenty years since the poll started in 2001. The number of Americans who believe that sex between an unmarried man and an unmarried woman is morally acceptable rose from 53-73% and the number of Americans who believe that having a baby outside of marriage is morally acceptable rose from 45-67% (Gallup, 2021). Gallup measured how many people believed that it is morally acceptable to change one's gender for the first time in 2021 and 46% of respondents said it was morally acceptable (Gallup, 2021). Teenagers live in a complex and changing landscape when it comes to sex and sexuality and need an education that matches reality.

Views on sex and sexuality in the United States are rapidly changing across many groups, including Evangelical Christians (Pew Research Center, 2019). Parents, educators, pastors, and health professionals all seem to agree that sex education is important and needed (Dent & Maloney, 2017; Hach & Roberts-Dobie, 2016; Santelli et al., 2017; Yu & Lee, 2018), yet a lack of studies that investigate approaches to sex and sexuality education in Christian private schools means that many students may not be receiving the type of education that can protect them from engaging in risky sexual behaviors or understanding important issues and perspectives on sexuality. What is not known at this time is if sex education is being taught, how it is being taught, and what attitudes and experiences shape different approaches to sex education at Christian schools. With this information, Christian schools will be able to better understand how

to meet the needs of students and families in an important area of adolescent growth and development.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to explore the attitudes and experiences of students, staff, and parents as they relate to sex education at different Evangelical Christian secondary schools and learn about how different sex education topics are approached in those schools.

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined in this study:

RQ1: How are Evangelical Christian schools in the United States educating their students about sex and issues of human sexuality?

RQ2: What are the attitudes and lived experiences of different stakeholders as they relate to sex education at Evangelical Christian secondary schools?

RQ3: What are the similarities and differences in the views and approaches of different stakeholders on the topic of sex education at an Evangelical Christian school?

Significance of the Study

The intent of this study was to explore the approach a small sample of Evangelical Christian schools take to teach about or talk about sex education and understand the lived experiences of key stakeholders in those schools. A large body of research exists on the topic of sex education, particularly the different abstinence-based and comprehensive sex education approaches in schools around the United States and across the globe (Birch, White, & Fellows, 2017; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Irene & Stan, 2019; Leung, Shek, Leung, & Shek, 2019; Manlove, Fish, & Moore, 2015; Narvaez, Chiem, Jude, & Brown, 2021). Several studies

examine the role that religion plays in shaping attitudes and approaches to sex education (Ott & Stephens, 2017; Paik, Sanchagrin, & Heimer, 2016; Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013). Broad agreement exists that sex education is important to meet the needs of young people (Dent & Maloney, 2017; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Hach & Roberts-Dobie, 2016; Yu & Lee, 2018). A review of the research showed a gap of knowledge when it comes to looking at how sex education is approached in Evangelical Christian schools. The Association of Christian Schools International, the largest association of Evangelical Christian schools, claims to represent 20,000 schools and over 5.5 million students worldwide (Association of Christian International Schools, 2023). In the U.S., ACSI represents about half a million students, but when including all other Evangelical Christian school associations together, there are tens of thousands of additional students in the U.S. (Broughman, Kincel, & Peterson, 2019). Because of the significant number of students enrolled in Evangelical Christian schools, it is important to know about the sex education those students are receiving.

Despite the lack of research on Christian schools and sex education, there have been a few studies in which scholars have addressed the attitudes of Christians toward sex, sexuality, and sex education. Researchers have found evidence of growing support for sex education and conversations about sexuality among some Christian groups (Dent & Maloney, 2017; Hach & Roberts-Dobie, 2016; Pew Research Center, 2019). Yu and Lee (2018) suggested that Evangelical Christians should introduce a comprehensive Christian approach to sexuality. There is a growing call for Evangelical Christians to think critically about their approach to sex and sexuality, including positive messages about sex (Yu & Lee, 2018).

Christian schools are a natural place for positive messaging and a comprehensive Christian approach to sexuality, but the body of research on how Evangelical Christians are

approaching sex education is extremely limited. One study was conducted to look at how sex education takes place in Protestant churches and the willingness of pastors of those churches to talk about sex with adolescents (Hach & Roberts-Dobie, 2016). The promising research indicated a willingness on the part of church leaders to talk about the topic in their churches, but Hach and Roberts-Dobie called for more exploration of sex education practices in different Christian denominations. Dent and Maloney (2017) conducted a study to explore how Evangelical Christian parents feel about abstinence-based education in public schools. The study found that the parents surveyed were supportive of a more comprehensive approach if it was not normative in nature. Dent and Maloney discussed the need for future research on how school-based sex education lines up with parents' values and to determine if abstinence-based and sex-positive attitudes are supported across Evangelical communities.

This study contributes knowledge to the practice of Christian education leaders and begins to fill the gap in sex education literature specific to Evangelical Christian schools. While there is a growing call for meaningful sex education in Evangelical Christian circles, research and discussion of best practices are not easily found to inform and guide school leaders. This study is meant to provide a starting point for further research on what is being done about sex education in Evangelical Christian schools and to start a conversation on how to best meet the needs of the students and families those schools serve.

Definition of Terms

Throughout this study, the term *normative* is used when discussing sex education. *Normative* can have different connotations based on context. For this study, *normative* is used to describe making a value judgment. *Normative* sex education refers to sex education that is making a moral judgment on whether a practice is right or wrong.

“Christian” is a broad term that describes a vast umbrella of views and denominations, so the focus of this study is specifically on *Evangelical* Christian schools. *Evangelical* is also a broad term that can take on many meanings. At its root, *evangelical* refers to the “good news” of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In recent history, *evangelical* has taken on a more political tone in the United States. For this study, *evangelical* refers to Christians who follow a common set of core beliefs that emphasizes the importance of the Bible as the ultimate authority on all matters, the need to trust in Jesus Christ alone for salvation through his death on the cross, and the desire to tell others about Jesus so that they can be “born-again” as well (National Association of Evangelicals, 2021). The largest Evangelical Christian school organization in the United States is the Association of Christian Schools International and their statement of faith reflects these central characteristics of *evangelical* (Association of Christian Schools International, 2020).

Fundamentalist is a term used in this study to describe conservative Christians who hold many of the same core beliefs as evangelicals. In many circles, *fundamentalism* has negative connotations of intolerance and narrow-mindedness. The term can be used more narrowly to describe certain denominations or branches of Christianity, but for this study and in the research used in this study the term is used more broadly for those who hold to the traditional “fundamental” beliefs of Christianity.

Stakeholder is a term used to describe a person or group that had a vested interest in the Christian schools that were studied. Key *stakeholders* for this study were students, parents, and staff at those schools.

Abstinence-based sex education and comprehensive sex education are further described and defined throughout Chapter two. *Safe sex* is used as a term throughout the study and refers to using methods and devices to lower the risk of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

The terms *sex and sexuality* are used throughout this study. *Sex* refers to the physical acts of procreation and erotic pleasure. *Sexuality* is a broader term that includes activity, orientation, identity, and attitudes (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*, n.d.)

Organization of the Remainder of the Study

Chapter two of this study provides an overview of the history of sex education in the United States and gives general background about how sex education is approached in other countries as well. Chapter two provides the context and demographics of Evangelical Christian schools in the United States. The chapter covers the two main types of sex education: abstinence-based and comprehensive. Additionally, chapter two reviews studies on the impact of religion on sex education.

Chapter three outlines the research design for this study. Chapter three provides the theoretical framework that describes the instrumentation and protocols for the study. Detailed descriptions of sampling, data collection and analysis procedures, limitations, and ethical considerations are given.

Chapter four provides the findings of the study and describes the themes that emerged from focus group conversations based on the research questions.

Chapter five discusses the findings and offers conclusions, implications of the study, and recommendations for further research.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and experiences of students, staff, and parents as it relates to sex education at Evangelical Christian secondary schools with a desire to understand how different sex education topics are approached in those schools. An overview of the history of sex education in the United States will provide an important context to begin this literature review. Next, studies of sex education outside of the U.S. are highlighted. The focus of the literature review then turns to understanding the two prevalent types of sex education in the U.S.; abstinence-based and comprehensive. The rest of the literature review discusses studies that look at the impact of religion on sex education and provides an overview of Evangelical Christian school demographics and commonly held views on sex education. The literature review concludes by considering authors who have suggested a comprehensive approach to Christian sex education.

Overview of Sex Education in the United States

In the early history of the United States, sex education took place in the home, and abstinence until marriage was the generally expected practice (Huber & Firmin, 2014). The idea of sex education in schools started during the Progressive Era of the early 1900s when there were increasing problems with sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the beginning of the social hygiene movement (Huber & Firmin, 2014; Wiley, 2012). Schools during the Progressive Era were thought of as places for social activism and reform, which led to a scientific and health-based approach to sex education (Huber & Firmin, 2014). By 1920, an estimated 40% of high schools had sex education in some form (Huber & Firmin, 2014). The underlying belief was that abstinence until marriage was the best way to prevent disease and immorality and birth control

methods contributed to fewer children for those who were unfit to reproduce (Huber & Firmin, 2014). Through the 1950s, sex education in schools was viewed as character education with an emphasis on abstinence and faithfulness for a happy marriage (Huber & Firmin, 2014).

The advent of the birth control pill in 1959 helped to bring about a new era in the United States where attitudes and views of premarital sex changed. Advances in contraception and a myriad of cultural changes led to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s (Huber & Firmin, 2014; Wiley, 2012). During this time, ideas of free love and open sexuality emerged, which helped usher in new philosophies about values-neutral sex education and the approach of comprehensive sex education (Huber & Firmin, 2014). Sex education became a political issue in the 1970s as there was a shift in sex education from preventing sex until marriage to protective sex during experimentation (Huber & Firmin, 2014). The 1980s saw the reaction of conservatives who wanted to bring back abstinence-based education to replace safe sex education. The abstinence movement became largely associated with the agenda of the Christian Right during this time (Williams, Dodd, Campbell, Pichon, & Griffith, 2012). The focus at the time was on the damage caused by sex outside of marriage, such as HIV, poverty, and an increase in the use of welfare services by single mothers and their children (Huber & Firmin, 2014). Sex education in the United States has always been an issue mainly dealt with at the state level and then carried out on the local level; however, starting in the 1980s and 1990s, federal government funding led to a rise in abstinence-based programs (Huber & Firmin, 2014; Leung, Shek, Leung, & Shek, 2019).

The 1996 Welfare Reform Act brought in heavy federal government involvement and funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs (Wiley, 2012). The focus on federally funded abstinence programs peaked between 1998 and 2009 and continued until the Obama

presidency when funding for abstinence programs was largely cut and the focus shifted to federal funding for contraceptive-based programs rebranded as abstinence-plus (Huber & Firmin, 2014; Lindberg & Maddow-Zimet, 2012; Schalet et al., 2014). These programs endorsed under the Obama administration were also termed comprehensive sex education programs or evidence-based interventions (EBIs) (Calterone Williams, 2011; Leung et al., 2019; Schalet et al., 2014). The 2010 Personal Responsibility Education Program represented a major shift in federal funding towards programs that taught about abstinence and contraception. The Trump administration moved back towards federal funding for abstinence-based programs (Leung et al., 2019).

Recent studies help to understand the current situation in the United States as it relates to sex education. Comprehensive sex education programs that cover a wide range of topics on sex and sexuality with a focus on contraception and safe sex practices are broadly supported across the United States by both Democrats and Republicans, conservatives and liberals, and diverse groups across religions, races, and socioeconomic classes (Huber & Firmin, 2014; Kantor & Levitz, 2017). However, sex education programs are inconsistent and vary widely from state to state, and even between school districts on a local level (Leung et al., 2019). At the national level, the federal government takes a role in funding and endorsing sex education programs, but the reality is that the federal government has little control over what gets taught in classrooms. Most control or influence on education comes at the state and local levels. Each state in the United States has different requirements for sex education and each local community can have additional expectations for what is or is not in the curriculum. The content of sex education varies even within school districts and schools based on the curricular choices of individual teachers (Carrion & Jensen, 2014). When Carrion and Jensen studied the curricular decisions of

public school sex educators, they found that students rarely get standardized information and there is often a gap between the intentions of the teacher and what students actually learn. Some teachers avoid controversy and stick to the book, while others have open conversations with students and engage in meaningful dialogue. The result of this lack of consistency is that many sex education programs are inadequate and do not meet the needs of students or even educate them before their first sexual experiences (Goldfarb & Liberman, 2021; Lindberg & Maddow-Zimet, 2012; Markham et al., 2014; Pound, Langford, & Campbell, 2016; Santelli et al., 2018).

Statistics show the lack of impactful sex education for adolescents in the United States: about half of high school students in the United States have had sex, and many of those students did not use a condom or birth control (Hall, Jones, Witkemper, Collins, & Rodgers, 2019; Markham et al., 2014). The United States has teen birth rates consistently higher than other developed countries, with up to 82% of teen pregnancies unintended each year and 75% of pregnancies out of wedlock for the age group 15-24 (Manlove, Fish, & Moore, 2015; Mark & Wu, 2022; Paik, Sanchagrin, & Heimer, 2016; Rohrbach et al., 2015). Almost half of all sexually transmitted infections occur between the ages of 15-24 and it is estimated that 25% of all sexually active females have a sexually transmitted infection (Fowler, Schoen, Smith, & Morain, 2022; Manlove et al., 2015; Paik et al., 2016; Schalet et al., 2014). Even in conservative Christian settings, premarital sex is widely practiced (Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013).

When it comes to curriculum, there are myriad options to choose from for sex education, whether abstinence-based or comprehensive. Several studies have focused on analyzing the effectiveness of these programs, such as Birch, White, and Fellows (2017) who analyzed 74 different abstinence-based programs. Manlove et al. (2015) looked at 85 different programs being used in the United States, which included both abstinence-based and comprehensive

programming. Wilson, Goodson, Pruitt, Buhi, and Davis-Gunnels (2005) looked specifically at 21 Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage programs available in the state of Texas. Curricula must meet local and state standards, but there is no lack of options available for public schools to use. In practice, teachers are often the ones who have a key role in choosing and implementing the curriculum.

Sex education curriculum suffers from a lack of accountability. Standardized testing provides accountability and data for many subject areas, but sex education is not part of any standardized testing that is required (Wilson & Wiley, 2009). The autonomy of teachers to select and implement sex education also creates accountability issues. One example of the lack of accountability in sex education curriculum selection comes from Wilson and Wiley, who found in their study in Texas that teachers who selected Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage curricula made their choice largely based on factors like their frequency of attendance at religious services.

Sex Education Outside of the United States

Sex education has different nuances in cultures around the world but in the modern world that is connected by technology, there are many striking similarities in how sex education is approached. In Europe, there are no common standards that exist for sex education (Loeber et al., 2010). Unsafe sex is largely viewed as a health and poverty issue and generally, a comprehensive, rights-based approach to sex education is advocated (Loeber et al., 2010). Like the United States, there was a sexual revolution in Europe in the 1960s that brought more freedom which led to a new importance placed on sex education (Loeber et al., 2010). Sex education has been shown to increase the likelihood of contraception being used, delay first sex, and decrease the likelihood of crisis pregnancy in European studies (Bourke, Boduszek,

Kelleher, McBride, & Morgan, 2014). Sex education in Europe is largely missing the mark in having a standardized curriculum, emphasizing proper teacher training, and meeting the needs of adolescents (Leung et al., 2019; Pound, Langford, & Campbell, 2016). One exception might be Finland, where there is a clear national curriculum with many hours spent across several years and extensive teacher training on sex education (Loeber et al., 2010).

In studies that looked at other countries and their sex education programs, such as China, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan, Brazil, and Iran, the clear themes included a lack of meaningful curriculum and the absence of well-trained teachers and timely delivery of sex education content (Leung et al., 2019; Pound et al., 2016). Pound et al. (2016) pointed out that student concerns about curriculum, teacher training, and sex education coming too late were consistent no matter what country the study came from. Taiwan stood out as a country that had positive effects from its sex education program (Leung et al., 2019). As was the case in Finland, this seemed to be the result of a national curriculum with clear guidelines and ongoing extensive training for teachers (Leung et al., 2019).

Abstinence-based vs. Comprehensive Sex Education

The most prevalent types of sex education in the United States are abstinence-based and comprehensive. Another way to think of the different approaches is an abstinence-until-marriage approach as opposed to an abstinence-until-older approach (Markham et al., 2014). There are many other names for abstinence-based sex education such as risk avoidance programs or sexual risk avoidance education (Birch et al., 2017; Markham et al., 2014). Comprehensive sex education is a broad term that encompasses many programs such as abstinence-plus, rights-based sex education, or risk reduction (Markham et al., 2014; Rohrbach et al., 2015; Rosenbaum &

Weathersbee, 2013). The main difference between the two approaches is the underlying philosophy.

Abstinence-based sex education. There are several variations of abstinence-based sex education, but all abstinence-based programs are similar in their underlying values (Dent & Maloney, 2017). While abstinence-based programs put abstinence as the focal point of their education, there is not much consistency in those programs, which has made it difficult to research their ultimate impact or behavioral outcomes. Abstinence might be the only way to practice 100% safe sex, but researchers show that abstinence-only programs can lead to less use of contraception, a lack of understanding of safe sex practices, and do not generally represent the desires of the parent community (Dent & Maloney, 2017; Hach & Roberts-Dobie, 2016; Yu & Lee, 2018). Dent and Maloney suggested that even conservative Christian parents are opposed to abstinence-based sex education because of the information that is omitted.

Abstinence-based programs in the United States showed only a few cases of mild success at creating positive behavior change with no evidence of lasting positive outcomes (Yu & Lee, 2018). A study of a risk avoidance program in a middle school showed no lasting impact on students' sexual behaviors (Markham et al., 2014). Birch et al. (2017) conducted a study of 74 different abstinence-based programs across 27 different organizations. They concluded that some programs produced significant but small changes in behavior. The main impact was a reduction in sexual initiation rates, but programs were implemented inconsistently. Another broad study of abstinence-based programs was conducted by Manlove et al. (2015), who looked at 103 evaluations of 85 different programs. They concluded that about one-third of the programs were effective. The main shortcoming of those abstinence-based programs was a lack of discussion on contraception. While several academic reviews concluded abstinence-based

programs are ineffective in delaying sexual debut or reducing risks, there are studies that show all types of sex education delay the initiation of first sex (Lindberg & Maddow-Zimet, 2012).

Critics of abstinence-based sex education point out that abstinence-based approaches are closely aligned with Evangelical Christian morality and the biblical concept of sex being reserved for marriage between one man and one woman (Calterone Williams, 2011; Leung et al., 2019; Paik et al., 2016). Attendance at religious services is the strongest indicator of whether someone will support abstinence-only until marriage (Calterone Williams, 2011). The most glaring weakness pointed out in abstinence-based programs was a lack of discussion about contraception (Hall et al., 2019; Manlove et al., 2015; Shepherd, Sly, & Girard, 2017). Most states in the United States still emphasize abstinence-based education and only 20 states and Washington D.C. formally require information about contraception as part of sex education (Fowler, Schoen, Smith, & Morain, 2022; Hall et al., 2019). Abstinence-based education often lacks discussion of several topics related to sex education such as sexual refusal skills, the LGBTQ community, gender inequity, and sexual double standards (Santelli et al., 2018; Schalet et al., 2014). Abstinence-based approaches are generally ineffective with adolescents who are already sexually experienced (Shepherd et al., 2017).

Despite many shortcomings, there are advocates for abstinence-based sex education because it is the only 100% effective way to avoid risks such as unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Zeiler, 2014). There are also long-term consequences of sexual activity, such as the loss of educational opportunities and a cycle of poverty due to teenage pregnancy (Schalet et al., 2014; Zeiler, 2014). While abstinence-based sex education might help to delay first sex, the long-term impacts are hard to quantify, and programs do not meet the needs of those who have already chosen to be sexually active.

Comprehensive sex education. Comprehensive sex education programs include a wide range of topics on sex and sexuality. Contraception and safe sex practices are key focal points, along with discussions about sexuality and health. One of the underlying concepts of comprehensive sex education is that it can be potentially harmful or detrimental to have restrictive or negative perspectives towards sex when talking with adolescents (Yu & Lee, 2018). Support for comprehensive sex education has been seen across several studies and that general support extends from liberals to conservatives and across Democrats and Republicans (Kantor & Levitz, 2017; Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013). The support for a more comprehensive sex education approach that positively views sex has been consistent across diverse communities (Dent & Maloney, 2017; Heller & Johnson, 2013). Dent and Maloney (2017) showed in their study that many Evangelical Christians were opposed to abstinence-only sex education because they wanted their students equipped with information if they did not choose to follow the values of the family. Hach and Roberts-Dobie (2016) found that a group of mainline Protestant faith leaders agreed with a comprehensive approach to sex education.

Research shows the benefits of comprehensive sex education, such as an increase in the use of contraception, first sexual intercourse at an older age, increased STI testing, and even a decrease in crisis pregnancies (Bourke et al., 2014). Numerous studies show broad support for the positive outcomes of comprehensive sex education programs (Calterone Williams, 2011; Hall et al., 2019; Leung et al., 2019; Rohrbach et al., 2015; Schalet et al., 2014). Direct instruction on contraception use makes adolescents more likely to use contraception (Lindberg & Maddow-Zimet, 2012). Proponents of comprehensive sex education point to the reality that many teens are sexually active and find abstinence-based education unrealistic (Pound et al., 2016). Hall et al. (2019) stated in a detailed study of state policies on sex education that comprehensive sex

education programs accounted for a 31% reduction in sexually transmitted infections and an 11% decrease in the pregnancy rate in adolescents. Many researchers agree on the benefits of comprehensive sex education.

While there are many research benefits of comprehensive sex education programs, shortcomings and inconsistencies are often found. Manlove et al. (2015) found that only about 21 of the 47 comprehensive sex education programs they reviewed were effective. Studies by Markham et al. (2014) and Shepherd et al. (2017) showed that comprehensive sex education programs had limited if any, impacts on behavior in middle school students. Comprehensive sex education programs have gaps in the topics they cover, similar to the gaps in abstinence-based programs. Many comprehensive sex education programs do not cover sexual refusal skills, and the emotional consequences of sexual activity, or discuss topics like healthy relationships and sexual violence (Hall et al., 2019; Santelli et al., 2018; Zeiler, 2014). The content and application of comprehensive sex education programs vary greatly from state to state (Hall et al., 2019). Schools generally lack the resources, training, and expertise to effectively carry out comprehensive sex education (Saul Butler, Sorace, & Hentz Beach, 2018). Despite numerous shortcomings, comprehensive sex education programs are more effective than abstinence-based programs in educating students on contraception and in meeting the needs of sexually active students.

Summary. The terms “abstinence-based” and “comprehensive” for sex education are broad. Within both approaches there are differences based on individual programs and curricula, however, it is helpful to organize some broad and general comparisons of the two approaches as done in Table 1. The table was compiled from a review of many sources, but there were a couple of key documents that provided excellent comparative information. The abstinence-based

information in the table was largely based on the federal government’s Title V definition of “Abstinence Education” found in an article by Wilson and Wiley (2009). The comprehensive sex education information was largely based on descriptions found in the National Sex Education Standards (2020), developed by the Future of Sex Education Initiative, a partnership of several organizations, including SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States). The National Sex Education Standards are the closest thing to a national curriculum that exists, as it is estimated that about 40% of United States school districts have adopted these standards (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021).

Table 1

Comparison of Abstinence-based and Comprehensive Sex Education

| | Abstinence-Based | Comprehensive |
|------------|---|---|
| Purpose | Teach the positive benefits related to abstaining from sexual activity. | Teach that sexual activity is a normal, natural, and healthy part of life. |
| Goals | Delay sexual activity, reduce the number of partners, and avoid unintended pregnancies and STDs. | Delay sexual activity, reduce the number of partners, avoid unintended pregnancies and STDs, and increase condom and contraceptive use. |
| Abstinence | The expected standard for school-aged children is to abstain from sex outside of marriage. Abstinence is the only way to completely avoid unintended pregnancy, STDs, and other related health problems. | Abstinence is the only way to completely avoid unintended pregnancy, STDs, and other related health problems. Abstinence is an option but does not represent the wide range of views on sex and sexuality and is |

| | | |
|--------------------|---|--|
| | | not a fair or realistic expectation for students. |
| Role of Marriage | A monogamous and exclusive relationship is the right context for sexual activity. Sex outside of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects. | Marriage is not the exclusive place for sexual activity. |
| Coverage of Topics | Puberty and adolescent sexual development, self-sufficiency before sex, healthy decision-making, anatomy and physiology, sexual violence, sexual health, and STDs | Consent and healthy relationships, anatomy and physiology, puberty and adolescent sexual development, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation and identity, sexual health, interpersonal violence |

Impact of Religion on Sex Education

Private religious beliefs and sex education in public schools do not always mix well because of the different underlying value systems. Some recent studies showed a negative correlation between the frequency of religious service attendance and support for sex education in schools (Hall & Rodgers, 2019; Heller & Johnson, 2013). The exact reason for this lack of support is not clearly indicated, but Dent and Maloney (2017) suggested that the concern for Evangelical Christians was more about normative values being taught and less about the information. Other studies established a connection between fundamentalist views of the Bible, which see the Bible as the ultimate authority and truth, and negative attitudes towards sexual minority students (Hall & Rodgers, 2019; Kelly, Sutton, Hicks, Godfrey, & Gillihan, 2018).

Joldersma (2016) suggested that Christian schools are places where LGBT students are subject to both explicit and implicit discrimination, along with daily microaggressions. Together, this research points towards an incongruence between comprehensive sex education and Christian belief, especially the more conservative views of Evangelical Christians in the United States.

Religiosity was also linked to the use of less contraception in different studies, which is not surprising considering the link between abstinence-based program support and religiosity (Hach & Roberts-Dobie, 2016; Paik et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2017). In one study of abstinence pledgers, Paik et al. (2016) found that pledge breakers had a higher risk of HPV and nonmarital pregnancy. While those same adolescents tended to delay sex, once they did have sex, they were much less likely to use condoms. The reality of the study was that most adolescents broke their pledges to remain abstinent until marriage, while the main message they heard was about the ineffectiveness of contraception. Even many adolescents who identify as being conservative and religious end up having premarital sex. In a study of Southern Baptist churches in Texas, it was found that around 70% of young married couples had engaged in premarital sex and abstinence was only common in one of the nine churches in the study (Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013).

Religious beliefs can have a positive impact on the values and sexual behaviors of adolescents. A study from England and Wales by Francis, ap Siôn, and Village (2014) demonstrated that independent Christian schools have a significant influence on the values of their students, including the shaping of a more conservative view of sexual morality. Students who have high religiosity also delay sexual activity, have fewer sexual partners, and engage in less risky sexual behaviors (Hach & Roberts-Dobie, 2016; Paik et al., 2016; Yu & Lee, 2018). Yu and Lee (2018) focused on evangelical Christians in their study and reported that church

attendance and religious salience were protective factors that led Christians to delay sex. Rosenbaum and Weatherbee (2013) found that highly religious adolescents delay sex, but that does not often last until marriage. Religious beliefs are complex but play an important role in views on sex education. Perhaps faith-based organizations are being underutilized in helping with sex education for adolescents, as 87% of high school students are affiliated with a religious organization (Williams et al., 2012). While research suggests churches and faith leaders are willing and interested in helping with sex education, there is a real lack of training on the topic (Hach & Roberts-Dobie, 2016; Williams et al., 2012).

Christian Schools and Sex Education

Christian education has existed for centuries and has a rich history in the United States. Conservative evangelicals saw the government as an ally in protecting family values and parental rights through the 1950s, but from the late 1960s forward there was a shift in attitude based on the rise of rights-conscious liberal political movements (Williams, 2013). In public schools there was a new emphasis on teaching evolution, the introduction of a new national sex education curriculum, and the court-mandated racial integration of public schools (Williams, 2013). The result was a rapid increase in Evangelical Christian schools that coincided with the conservative reaction of the 1970s and 1980s as seen through the rise of organizations like the Moral Majority (founded 1979), Focus on the Family (founded 1977), and the founding of the largest current Evangelical Christian school organization, the Association of Christian Schools International, in 1978 (Association of Christian Schools International, 2023).

Understanding the demographics of those who attend private Christian schools and more specifically ACSI schools provides an important context for their views on sex education. Specific demographic overviews of Christian schools are hard to find. At the national level, the

most complete information is found in the results of the Private School Universe Survey. The most recent results from the 2019-2020 school year were released in 2021. In the fall of 2019, there were over 30,000 private schools operating in the United States, which represented about 4,600,000 students and 480,000 teachers (Broughman, Kincel, Willinger, & Peterson, 2021). Out of those private schools, 66% had a religious orientation representing 76% of students and 68% of teachers (Broughman et al., 2021). One of the categories for religiously affiliated schools in the report is “Conservative Christian” schools, which would be the closest categorization in the report to Evangelical. There were some additional organizations, such as Christian Schools International and Southern Baptist, which could have been included under “Conservative Christian” but were tagged as “Other Affiliated” for this report. ACSI was by far the largest conservative Christian organization representing 2,345 schools in the United States with around 486,000 students and over 51,000 teachers. The next two largest organizations, Accelerated Christian Education and the American Association of Christian Schools represented about 1,500 schools and 120,000 students together.

Overall, the “Conservative Christian” school category made up 12.1% of all private schools and 12.7% of all students in private schools (Broughman et al., 2021). The largest number of conservative Christian schools were found in the suburbs (Broughman et al., 2021). The racial breakdown of conservative Christian schools came out to 68.6% white students, 11.2% black students, 9.2% Hispanic students, and 5.3% Asian students (Broughman et al., 2021). The demographic makeup of conservative Christian schools was like the demographic makeup of all private schools in the United States. For example, the number of white students in all private schools was 65.6%.

The most descriptive demographic information from the Association of Christian Schools International came in the form of a tuition and salary survey from the 2020-2021 school year. The report was sent out to member schools and can be found online through the ACSI website. While only 692 schools responded to the survey with a 24% response rate, the report still gives a glimpse of who is attending ACSI schools. Of the schools that responded, 86% were founded in the past 50 years (Association of Christian Schools International, 2021). 52% of the schools were church-affiliated, while 48% were independent. The median ACSI school had an annual tuition between 6,386 and 7,775 dollars. Most schools offered need-based tuition assistance, along with discounts for pastors, missionaries, and faculty. When looking at faculty demographics, the median school had teachers that were 84% female and 86% white. The median school also had a student population that was about 79% white. An analysis of school admissions policies showed that 54% of ACSI schools surveyed had a policy where at least one parent had to agree with the statement of faith and morality standards of the school. 12% of schools had a policy where both parents had to agree and 26% had a policy where the parents must acknowledge the statement of faith.

The demographic information on private Christian schools, and even on an individual organization like ACSI still only paints a broad picture. The diversity of views and practices seen in public schools is also experienced in private schools. ACSI has its own accreditation process with standards for schools, but there are also schools with only membership and no accreditation through ACSI. Additionally, some schools hold multiple accreditations and must meet standards for each accrediting organization, including ACSI. There is no standard practice for the governance of private Christian schools or curriculum adoption. Some schools have churches that are very involved in their oversight, while some operate independently with a

school board that provides the main oversight for the school. The lack of consistency in school governance and curriculum adoption creates another obstacle to how a controversial issue like sex education gets covered from school to school.

When it comes to a topic like sex education, it is to be expected that even within Evangelical Christian schools there will be a wide variety of opinions and approaches. ACSI does not have any expectations or policies on sex education, even though they clearly state the main beliefs in their statement of faith (Association of Christian Schools International, 2023). While there are many other Evangelical Christian school organizations, ACSI is currently the most prominent, and looking at their statement of faith helps to understand the common beliefs that are found in most Evangelical Christian schools. The ACSI Statement of the Faith emphasizes core Evangelical Christian beliefs, such as the inerrancy and inspiration of the Bible, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and salvation through faith in Jesus's death on the cross. The ACSI Statement of Faith also clarifies the belief that sexual intimacy is reserved for one man and one woman in a marriage relationship and that each person is created as either male or female. While there is no research existing that indicates the practices of ACSI or other Evangelical schools when it comes to sex education, the core beliefs on the subject are clear.

ACSI has a textbook company called Purposeful Design Publications, which includes a health curriculum for middle and high school students. The curriculum is called "Total Health" with a version for middle school and a version for high school. After reviewing a sample of their materials, the curriculum covers topics including puberty and maturation, pregnancy, moral purity with a focus on abstinence, why and how to wait for marriage, healthy relationships, anatomy, and STDs (Boe, 2005). The curriculum emphasizes Biblical purity and morality, and teachers are encouraged to involve and inform parents (Boe, 2005). Nothing was in the

curriculum materials on topics like same-sex attraction, sexual identity, or contraception. Many of the suggested resources for supplementing the textbook were old and dated, including some materials developed and adopted in the 1980s.

The coverage of sex education is largely left up to the discretion of individual private schools. Curriculum and materials for sex education from a Christian perspective are sparse and what can be found is basic and often dated information. Wilson and Wiley (2009) investigated the power of teachers in public schools over what gets taught in a sex education classroom and found that the teachers were often left to not only select a curriculum but also were the decision-makers of what was taught in the classroom, with little to no accountability. While Wilson and Wiley did not talk about private schools or Christian schools, the influence of parents, churches, school boards, and individual teachers produced similar concerns and complexities for sex education.

Comprehensive Christian Sex Education

Sex and sexuality are hot-button issues in the current culture, and Christians are being challenged to take a closer look at what sex education looks like in their churches and schools. At the college level, Ott and Stephens (2017) pointed out the silence in theology programs on the topic of sex and advocated professional development for professors to be trained in how to address those topics with students. Kelly et al. (2018) and Joldersma (2016) presented research that challenges Christians to consider how they think about and treat sexual minorities. Dent and Maloney (2017) suggested that Evangelical Christian parents are more complex than the Christian Right and their abstinence-based views. Overall, the parents in their study wanted a more comprehensive sex education in public schools, as long as the programming was not normative in nature. Yu and Lee (2018) called for a Christian comprehensive sex education

approach that includes the discussion of contemporary sex culture and preventive methods. Green, Oman, Vesely, Cheney, and Carroll (2017) called for faith-based comprehensive sex programs that meet the needs of those who are sexually active. Green et al. found no comprehensive and rigorously evaluated sex education programs for communities of faith, despite statistics indicating that students and adults agree that religious groups should be doing more to help prevent teen pregnancy.

These studies represent a growing acknowledgment that the current abstinence-based approaches are not sufficient and a growing recognition that students in Christian communities might be especially underserved in effective sex education. Perhaps the most telling statistic is that 65% of Texas Southern Baptists, a strongly conservative Christian group, supported secular sex education because they believed that they did not receive sex education anywhere else (Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013).

Summary

Sex education has a long and complicated history in the United States. The main debate in sex education has recently centered on whether public schools should take an abstinence-based or comprehensive approach. In the world of Evangelical Christian schools, little has been researched on how sex education is approached, but there is evidence of growing dissatisfaction with the current state of sex education. Finding out what is actually going on in some Evangelical Christian schools to discuss topics of sex and sexuality is an important step in better understanding the full landscape of sex education in the United States, as so many students are educated in these schools each year.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the attitudes and experiences of students, staff, and parents about sex education at different Evangelical Christian secondary schools and learn about how different sex education topics were approached in those schools.

Research Design

This study followed a qualitative approach using focus group questions as the primary source of data. The approach was also phenomenological because the focus was on the lived experiences of the individuals and groups in the study and the meaning that those individuals and groups gave to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Since this phenomenological study looked at the specific contexts of individual schools, a multisite case study design was used.

A case study is an in-depth analysis of a case that is bounded by time and activity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell & Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2016) and this type of research design is often used to answer “how” and “why” research questions (Yin, 2009). The researcher gains thorough knowledge through an intense study of a case over a period of time (Patten, 2018). The unit of analysis is more important than the topic of investigation in a case study (Merriam, 2016). Data collection is in-depth and involves multiple sources of information (Creswell & Creswell, 2014; Merriam, 2016). Case studies work well with a phenomenological approach because a case study design emphasizes describing and making sense of localized experiences (Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Trainor & Graue, 2012).

While case studies can give the researcher a great understanding of a bounded case, the data is hard to generalize, so there can be a benefit to researching multiple cases (Bogdan &

Biklen, 2007). Multiple cases or comparative case studies are often more compelling and enhance external validity and generalizability (Merriam, 2016) so this study included two different schools.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on a constructivist approach. Social constructivists focus on the subjective meanings that individuals make of their experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). Constructivists ask open-ended questions that are broad and general so that participants can construct their own meaning of whatever is being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). A semi-structured focus group interview for data collection was a natural fit for this framework. Historical and cultural contexts and settings are important from a constructivist worldview as they help shape how individuals construct meanings (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). Ultimately, a constructivist worldview demands that the researcher recognize their own context and how that might shape the study and any interpretation of information (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). The constructivist works inductively to develop a pattern or theory of meaning (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). There was not much research on sex education in Christian schools, so the exploratory nature of this qualitative approach fit well. The focus of the study was on the experiences of different individuals and stakeholders and how they made meaning out of those experiences.

Constructivism is interpretive research and works together well with a phenomenological approach (Merriam, 2016). From this perspective, knowledge is constructed through social interactions as people engage with the world around them (Merriam, 2016). The focus of both constructivism and phenomenology is on the lived experience of participants, so these approaches work well together. Knowledge is always informed by experience and context,

which is done in a social setting. A constructivist approach also shaped the desire to use focus groups and interviews to note how the groups constructed meaning.

In a qualitative phenomenological approach to research, the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals and groups about a particular phenomenon through the views of different participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). Researchers attempt to understand the meaning of these phenomena or events as they relate to ordinary people in specific situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Underlying this approach is an interpretive understanding of humans as social beings (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Phenomenological research includes an underlying assumption that there are mutually understood core experiences, or an essence to a shared experience (Merriam, 2016). Those essences or core experiences are found by bracketing, analyzing, and comparing the experiences of different people (Merriam, 2016).

The researcher should come away from a phenomenological study feeling that there is a better understanding of what it is like for an individual or group to experience the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2016). A phenomenological approach was a natural fit for this study because of the emphasis on understanding the lived experiences of different stakeholders as they related to sex education in an Evangelical Christian school. Further, a phenomenological approach with a case study design worked well since understanding the essence of an experience requires a definition of the context where that experience took place (Trainor & Graue, 2012).

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined in this study:

RQ1: How are Evangelical Christian schools in the United States educating their students about sex and issues of human sexuality?

RQ2: What are the attitudes and lived experiences of different stakeholders as they relate to sex education at Evangelical Christian secondary schools?

RQ3: What are the similarities and differences in the views and approaches of different stakeholders on the topic of sex education at an Evangelical Christian school?

Instrumentation and Protocols

The instrument for data collection was a semi-structured focus group protocol that was used for all different stakeholder focus groups. In qualitative, phenomenological studies questions are less structured and open-ended (Merriam, 2016). The protocol had built-in follow-up question ideas and probes that allowed the focus group to move in different directions based on their responses. The protocol began with some important background information questions and then moved into specific questions that were each linked back to the three research questions for the study. The protocol was designed with the research questions in focus but also used interview questions created by Hach and Roberts-Dobie (2016), who looked at the attitudes of Protestant faith leaders towards sex education in churches. Hach and Roberts-Dobie (2016) used a Guttmacher Institute sex education questionnaire from 1999 as the basis for their questions. The data from that questionnaire was used as an instrument for multiple articles from the Guttmacher Institute (Darroch, Landry, & Singh, 2000; Landry, Kaeser, & Richards, 1999) and was adapted in additional studies such as a study on sexuality curriculum in rural areas (Roberts-Dobie, Losch, Vestecka, & Morse, 2010). In Table 2, the three research questions are shown linked to the corresponding focus group questions that were asked. The complete focus group question protocol is in Appendix A.

Table 2

Focus Group Questions as Linked to Research Questions

| Research Questions | Focus Group Questions |
|--|---|
| <p>RQ1: How are Evangelical Christian schools in the United States educating their students about sex and issues of human sexuality?</p> | <p>5. Suppose someone were to ask you what the school’s approach to sex education is. What would you say to them?</p> <p>6. To your knowledge, does the school have any type of sex education curriculum, books, or materials?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">a. If there are curriculum, books, or materials, what are they?</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">b. If no curriculum, what is taught?</p> <p>7. Are there any official policies or published positions on sex and sexuality? If yes, what are they and where can they be found?</p> <p>8. Have there been any discussions about abstinence, same-sex attraction, sexual identity, abortion, STIs, safe sex, healthy relationships, or contraception at the school? (Go through slowly and count hands for how many have heard conversations on each topic).</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| | <p>a. If yes, what was the context of those conversations, and which topics are covered?</p> <p>b. If no, why do you think those conversations have not taken place at school?</p> <p>9. Who is involved in making decisions about what gets taught on sex or sexuality at the school?</p> <p>10. Are parents informed about what gets taught about sexuality? If yes, how are they informed?</p> |
| <p>RQ2: What are the attitudes and lived experiences of different stakeholders as they relate to sex education at Evangelical Christian secondary schools?</p> | <p>4. What has been your personal experience with sex education in schools and did you feel like that experience was positive or helpful? Why or why not?</p> <p>8. Have there been any discussions about abstinence, same-sex attraction, sexual identity, abortion, STIs, safe sex, healthy relationships, or contraception at the school? (Go through slowly and count hands for how many have heard conversations on each topic).</p> |

| | |
|---|--|
| | <p>a. If yes, what was the context of those conversations, and which topics are covered?</p> <p>b. If no, why do you think those conversations have not taken place at school?</p> <p>9. Who is involved in making decisions about what gets taught on sex or sexuality at the school?</p> <p>10. Are parents informed about what gets taught about sexuality? If yes, how are they informed?</p> <p>14. What are the benefits of teaching sex education in a Christian school?</p> <p>15. What are the potential negatives of teaching sex education in a Christian school?</p> |
| <p>RQ3: What are the similarities and differences in the views and approaches of different stakeholders on the topic of sex education at an Evangelical Christian school?</p> | <p>11. Do you believe that sex education should be taught in Christian schools? Why or why not?</p> <p>12. In your opinion, who has the primary responsibility of teaching about sex and sexuality in a Christian school community?</p> <p>13. What would the ideal sex education program look like at your school? What topics would you be sure to include?</p> |

| | |
|--|--|
| | <p>14. What are the benefits of teaching sex education in a Christian school?</p> <p>15. What are the potential negatives of teaching sex education in a Christian school?</p> |
|--|--|

Field Test

The focus group questions were field tested to practice the questions and ensure that the questions were effective in answering the research questions (Patten, 2018). The questions were modified by the dissertation chair and committee, and then by peer review. The field test was conducted at a school that was not a part of the study. Questions were asked to a mixed focus group of students, parents, and staff members at the school. The field test was useful for adjusting questions and getting a sense of the length and pace of the focus group discussions.

Sampling Design

The sample for this qualitative study was selective and used the principles of purposive sampling to select participants who had the knowledge and willingness to share their experiences with sex education at Christian schools (Orcher, 2014). Several Evangelical Christian schools in the United States that belonged to the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) were contacted to find school directors who were open to conversations about the study. An Evangelical Christian author who sometimes works with schools on the topic of sexuality was also contacted and the author helped the researcher make connections with potential schools. After some preliminary emails and research on the schools that were contacted, two Christian school leaders responded that were both in large metropolitan areas in the United States and were interested in participating in the study.

In collaboration with school leadership, three different focus groups of four to nine participants at each school were formed. One focus group was made up of senior students who were over the age of 18, one focus group was made up of staff, and one focus group was made up of parents. The goal was to find people who were open to talking about their experiences with sex education and who were also key stakeholders and voices in the school. Another goal was to create diverse groups that included males and females, a broad range of ages, and different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The hope was to create focus groups that gave different perspectives and a broad view on the topic of sex education.

The original goal was to have focus groups of six to ten participants and that goal was achieved in all but one parent focus group, which consisted of four participants. Parent groups were the hardest to put together due to busy schedules and parents who forgot or did not show up for the focus group. Outside of the one slightly smaller group, the goals for diversity and size were met.

Data Collection Procedures

The Association of Christian Schools International is a large network of Christian schools around the world representing around 20,000 schools and 5.5 million students around the globe, including around 3,000 schools in the United States (Association of Christian Schools International, 2020). All ACSI schools share a common statement of faith and similar Evangelical Christian values, making the schools that have membership in the association a prime target for research on how Evangelical Christian schools are educating their students on sex and sexuality. Potential ACSI schools in metropolitan areas in the United States were contacted through email to gauge interest in the proposed study. The researcher was also in regular contact with an Evangelical Christian author on the topic of a biblical view of sexuality,

who has worked with different ACSI schools in the United States and Canada and shared some of his contacts.

After writing several emails to potential schools, online meetings were set up with the leaders of schools who responded with interest. In meetings with school leaders, an overview of the proposed study was given and there was an initial discussion of whether the school wanted to proceed further with involvement in the study. Once a potential school agreed to the study, the researcher worked together with school leadership to form focus groups based on availability, willingness and suggested stakeholders. Potential participants were contacted by email with proposed dates and times. The researcher worked through the contacts suggested by school leadership until a group of at least six participants was formed. On the day of the focus group, one of the parent groups had some no-shows which led to one group of four participants.

All participants in focus groups were volunteers and were given information prior to the study to understand the purpose of the study. Participants were walked through the process of informed consent, including a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. Potential participants were given the opportunity to ask questions either through email or by phone to make sure they were comfortable participating in the study. One group consisted of current students 18 and over while a second group consisted of parents, and a third group consisted of staff and school leaders. The focus groups were conducted on-site in face-to-face meetings that took place in a private conference room.

The same interview protocol was followed with all of the focus groups and the same semi-structured interview questions were asked of each group. Focus groups lasted from 52 to 68 minutes each. Focus groups were recorded for transcription purposes and all participants were made aware of the recording and had an opportunity to review the transcripts. The

researcher asked questions and took notes during the focus groups, which were focused on key thoughts and group dynamics that emerged during the focus group. Immediately after the focus group was over, the researcher provided a chance for debriefing to all participants as a group and several of the groups engaged in a short debriefing. Individual debriefing opportunities were offered but none of the participants were interested in individual follow-up. The researcher wrote some quick notes and memos right after the interview process was over, focusing on initial impressions of group dynamics and key moments of the conversations.

In addition to the focus group conversations, the researcher was given access to key documents that outlined any policies or positions that involved sex and sexuality at each school. Both schools in the study produced documents that outlined the schools' positions and were referenced by participants in the focus group. School staff members were also helpful in providing PowerPoints and curricula that were used by teachers in classes that discussed sex.

Data Analysis

All focus group interviews were transcribed from recordings. A professional transcriber was contracted to make the transcriptions. Once the transcription was complete, transcripts were read through in their entirety and compared with the recorded focus group conversations multiple times. Member checking was practiced by giving the participants the opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy and then respond with any discrepancies or concerns (Merriam, 2016). No concerns or discrepancies were reported. Any personal information was removed from the transcripts to protect confidentiality.

After reviewing all transcripts multiple times to get a sense of emerging themes, the researcher systematically worked through each of the six transcripts using a manual coding process. Different colored highlighters were used to highlight key responses in each transcript

that corresponded to the three research questions for the study. Highlighted responses were then transferred to a new document to analyze response patterns from within each focus group and then across all six focus groups. The researcher compared the highlighted responses in many ways. Student, staff, and parent groups were compared between the two different schools, and student, staff, and parent groups within the same school were compared. The researcher saw key differences and similarities when comparing the highlighted responses.

The documents produced by each school were analyzed and provided an important reference point for the conversations held in focus groups that mentioned core documents and to understand the published and public stance of the school. Each document was carefully read multiple times for key themes, repeated phrases, and content.

Limitations/Delimitations

The qualitative design of this study had several key limitations. The sample for this study was purposive and limited to a small number of sites and participants. The focus of this study was not to find widely generalizable findings but to learn from in-depth focus group conversations. The schools selected for this study were based on contacts the researcher made through mutual acquaintances and based on the willingness of the schools that participated. Several schools never returned the researcher's emails or requests, so there could have been a volunteer bias as to why the schools that did respond wanted to be part of the study. Because of the limited number of participants and the lack of a random or representative sample, the findings of the study do not necessarily apply to all, or even most, Evangelical Christian schools. The findings only represented the views of the participants in the focus groups at the schools where the study was conducted.

Data collection was in the form of focus group questions. The researcher was the research instrument and there is always the possibility that researcher bias could play a role in how the focus group was run. To mitigate the effects of bias, member checking was practiced with participants by sending the transcripts of the focus group conversations to the group members who wanted them and giving them a chance to look over the transcript to make sure it accurately reflected their words (Merriam, 2016). The researcher also accounted for bias by writing analytical notes and bracketing reflections after each focus group was conducted.

Data from any interview is always filtered through the view of the interviewees and the interviewer (Creswell & Creswell, 2014). The data is indirect and focused on the experience of the interviewee. In a focus group, there are also group dynamics that can influence responses and discussion. The researcher took notes about group dynamics during the focus group session to help account for the unique dynamics of each focus group. With a topic like sex education, there was also the possibility that participants were not willing to share exactly what they wanted to. Time constraints also play a factor in the focus group process. In choosing focus groups over interviews, the researcher was able to hear from more people but did not get the same depth that is achieved in a one-to-one interview. To mitigate some of these factors, providing an opportunity to debrief with individuals was important. A flexible approach also allowed for further questions and conversations after the focus group was finished. Ultimately, there may be a difference in how individuals answer questions one-to-one as opposed to in groups, but as an exploratory study, the findings were valuable to start understanding attitudes toward sex education in Christian schools.

Ethical Considerations

The most important ethical considerations for this qualitative study are outlined in the principles of the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). The first consideration is respect for persons as described by the principles of informed consent (Orcher, 2014; Patten, 2018). All participants in the study had easy access to the researcher and all relevant contact information before, during, and after the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the benefits, and the risks, and they were informed that they could withdraw at any time. Participation in the study was completely voluntary.

The Belmont Report also calls for beneficence and under this principle it was important to minimize harm by assuring anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study. The researcher did not use any personal identifiers when recording data and used codes based on where participants were sitting during the focus group. Those codes were used throughout the transcription process to place quotes in context and keep the data organized. The two Christian schools studied wanted to remain anonymous, so it was essential that all descriptions and demographic information about the schools were general enough to not identify them. The topic of sex education can be sensitive and controversial so participants were given assurance that their names would not be associated with the data from focus group interviews, and that was ensured before the research began. Information was stored on the researcher's private computer and an external hard drive. All informed consent information was given in writing or electronically to participants in advance.

After focus group interviews were completed, participants had the chance to debrief as a group. The researcher again explained the purpose of the research and allowed participants to

ask questions or raise any concerns that they had. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic, participants also had the opportunity to privately debrief with the researcher after the group portion was complete. Participants had the opportunity to debrief either right after the focus group when other participants had left or through a separate meeting later. Once the transcripts were put together, the researcher followed the practice of member checking and allowed the participants the opportunity to read over the transcript for accuracy.

The third principle of the Belmont Report is justice, which was carefully considered in selecting participants for the research. As previously stated in the sampling section, the goal was to have a wide representation of gender, age, racial and ethnic background, and experience participating in each focus group. One focus group was made up of students who were 18 years of age or older. All participants in the study were volunteers. The researcher worked through the Institutional Review Board at Bethel University for guidance on all ethical considerations. The researcher also selected sites for research where there were no personal connections or vested interests (Creswell & Creswell, 2014).

Summary

This study followed a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore how sex education was approached and experienced by students, staff, and parents at selected Evangelical Christian schools. Focus groups provided the opportunity to collect data from each stakeholder group for careful analysis. In Chapter Four, the findings are presented and analyzed through an extensive review of the transcripts and coding for themes.

Chapter Four: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and experiences of students, staff, and parents as it relates to sex education at different Evangelical Christian secondary schools and learn about how different sex education topics are approached in those schools. Focus groups were put together at two different Evangelical Christian secondary schools that were a part of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). ACSI schools agree on a core Statement of Faith that outlines basic Evangelical Christian beliefs. Focus groups at each school were formed of students, staff, and parents for a total of six different focus groups. All focus groups were conducted on-site and audio-recorded for transcription purposes.

Discussion of the Sample

The two schools in the study were in two different metropolitan areas in the United States and had no relation to each other. Both schools were large Christian schools that belong to the Association of Christian Schools International and share similar values and beliefs. The focus groups varied in size and composition, but the goal of each group was to gain a diversity of backgrounds, thoughts, and experiences. The focus groups were all conducted in April and May of 2022. The focus groups ranged in time from 52 minutes to 68 minutes in length.

Student focus groups were limited to seniors in high school and all students interviewed were 18 years old. The student groups were groups of six and nine students for a total of 15 students. Of those students, five were male and ten were female. The students came from many different denominational backgrounds and attended their current schools for 3 to 13 years. Almost all of the students in the focus groups reported growing up in Christian homes and the majority were in Christian schools for most of their academic careers.

Staff focus groups consisted of a group of seven and a group of six for a total of 13 staff members. The staff groups were represented by 8 males and 5 females. Staff members ranged from 4 to 24 years of experience at their current school. The age range for staff in the focus groups was from 33-61 years old. The staff groups were made up of teachers from multiple subjects, school administrators, and other staff positions such as guidance counselors. Out of the 13 staff members in the focus groups, 11 grew up in Christian homes, and most attended public schools from grades K-12.

Parent focus groups consisted of a group of four and a group of seven for a total of 11 parents. The parent focus groups were the most challenging to put together with last-minute cancellations and obtaining diversity. The parent groups were represented by 3 males and 8 females. The age range of the parents interviewed was 42-57 years old. All parents had students in the school for at least five years and many had served in different volunteer roles at the school. Most parents interviewed attended public school for their own K-12 education and grew up in homes they identified as “Christian”.

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined in this study:

RQ1: How are Evangelical Christian schools in the United States educating their students about sex and issues of human sexuality?

RQ2: What are the attitudes and lived experiences of different stakeholders as they relate to sex education at Evangelical Christian secondary schools?

RQ3: What are the similarities and differences in the views and approaches of different stakeholders on the topic of sex education at an Evangelical Christian school?

Introduction to Themes

The research questions were linked to the focus group questions as indicated by Table 2 in Chapter 3. After reading through the complete transcription several times, the focus group question responses that linked to each research question were read for emerging themes. Responses were highlighted that recurred across multiple groups and between both schools. Two to three themes were identified under each research question that were present in both schools that were researched. The identified themes were also present across student, parent, and staff focus groups.

Research Question #1

How are Evangelical Christian schools in the United States educating their students about sex and issues of human sexuality?

Theme 1.1: Evangelical Christian schools articulate clear beliefs and statements on sex and sexuality. Students, parents, and staff in both schools were all aware of the official policies that each school had published on issues involving sex and sexuality. All groups identified that the schools had an abstinence-only-until-marriage approach to sex education. All groups also were aware that their schools defined biblical marriage to be between one man and one woman in a covenant relationship. Positions on issues of sex and sexuality were published by both schools and in one school those positions were recently updated and included a parent meeting and chapel presentation. The understanding of students, parents, and staff on the schools' positions on sex and sexuality lined up with what was published in their core documents.

One student described her school's approach to sex education by saying, "The Bible says not to have sex prior to marriage and that's what the school really put its stance on and that's

what we're educated to do." Staff were clear on the position of their school. As an example, one staff member remarked, "We have a human sexuality position statement that would inform sex education...I think our position on human sexuality is one of distinction and one draw for families to come here..." Parents remembered signing forms "saying that we respect sexual relations and that they need to be within marriage and therefore there is an expectation of a code of conduct." Parents were able to reference published school positions, such as "marriage being between a man and a woman, you're born with your gender--your God-given gender--and, again, sex within the context of marriage."

Theme 1.2: Sex education is often informal and teacher-dependent. Students, staff, and parents indicated various points during school where some sex education topics were covered, but formal education was limited. Discussions about sex-related topics occurred in classrooms, small groups, and chapels. Students made comments such as "I think that we kind of go over what the Bible has to say about sex, but I don't think that we go into depth often—we just kind of skim over it." Another student said, "I feel like all of the information that we've gotten has been just like teachers slipping it in. It's not like formal at all." In one school, the male and female students had different staff members talk about some basic sex education topics in 7th grade. Some of the boys recalled having a positive experience because of the staff member leading the discussion, while the girls had a very negative experience and felt that they did not learn anything because of the staff member leading their discussion. A female student said, "One of the girls in our class asked the teacher what a condom was, and the teacher told her you don't need to know that."

Staff and parents had similar comments about sex education in their schools. When asked about the school's approach to sex education, one staff member responded, "I'm not sure

the school has an approach to it...” Another staff member said, “...sexuality comes up. I don’t know about curriculum-wise but definitely, it’s a topic that’s addressed.” Staff members at both schools indicated they were open to answering questions about sexuality, but those conversations were largely based on students bringing them up. A Bible teacher noted that the school’s position on human sexuality at the school was clear and “How that trickles to classroom instruction is largely dependent on good instructors.” Parents were largely unaware of their schools’ approaches to sex education with comments, such as “I honestly don’t know” and “I have no idea”. Parents trusted their schools, making comments like “I trust that they are not teaching something different than what we believe.” At one of the schools, health is a component of PE and a parent said, “I think it is up to the teacher, the PE teacher, as to how much they actually spend covering health versus games.”

Theme 1.3: Sex education resources and coverage of topics lack depth and cohesion.

Both schools that were researched had different courses that touched on topics of sex and sexuality. Both schools had a health/science class that covered basic human biology and included some materials and conversations on sex in 7th or 9th grade. Conversations on sexuality were also referenced in connection to Bible classes, chapel experiences, and small groups in high school. Students, staff, and parents were able to identify various books, PowerPoints, and projects that were used in their classes. Students made remarks like, “In our health unit, the sex ed unit was one day,” and “The only thing they really told you about sex was not to have it. They never really talked about safe sex or ways to prevent STDs and pregnancies and all that.” As seniors, students also said, “I feel like the unit we had freshman year was really short and, to be honest, I barely remember that class.” Referring to Bible class, one student said, “I think that we kind of go over what the Bible has to say about sex, but I don’t think that we go into depth

often—we just kind of skim over it.” Students frequently described their conversations and education on sex and sexuality as “basic” and “random”. Discussing the schools’ sex-education curriculum, a student said, “If you walked into that sex-ed class not knowing what sex was, you still wouldn’t know when you left. I think it’s more that teachers have been giving their opinions about it rather than education.”

Staff in both schools provided more information about the resources and materials that were used in teaching topics related to sex and sexuality. When asked about what sex education topics were covered, staff were more confident about topics being covered than the students were. Staff referenced specific lessons, readings, and conversations that happened over the years. Staff realized that there was a lack of cohesion in looking at those topics. No big-picture plans existed for addressing these topics and teachers were able to cover these topics to the extent they wanted. A Bible teacher said the school’s approach to sex education was “...a bit idiosyncratic, teacher to teacher, grade to grade...The degree to which we all actually do it, I don’t know.” Another teacher said, “Do our students leave with enough real-world knowledge of human sexuality and sexual design and purpose and a right fear of please wait for marriage? I don’t know if I can say yes.”

Parents were limited in their knowledge of the resources and discussions on sex education in both schools. Parents gave vague answers about projects, packets, and experiences they thought they remembered. Comments on curriculum and resources included, “I think there is an anatomy book” and “There were a handful of pages that came home that explained childbirth.” Parents understood well the position of the schools on issues of sex and sexuality but did not articulate an understanding of the schools’ approaches to teaching on those topics. When asked about different sex education topics being covered, parents for the most part

assumed that those conversations were going on but did not know. One parent said, “I kind of thought that it was the school’s policy to not talk about it.” Multiple parents made comments like “I don’t think there is an active informing of us, but I don’t think that it is being hidden intentionally either.”

Research Question #2

What are the attitudes and lived experiences of different stakeholders as they relate to sex education at Evangelical Christian secondary schools?

Theme 2.1: Sex education at Evangelical Christian schools is basic with limited meaning and impact. The word that was used repeatedly by students to describe the sex education they received was “basic”. For example, one student said, “Basically all it was, was the teacher told us that sex was bad and showed us all of the diseases that could come out of it.” Several students also felt that their school was avoiding the topic of sex: “It can often feel like we tiptoe around the idea of it, and we tiptoe around the definition of it.” Multiple students indicated a concern that they were well behind their peers in public schools in their knowledge of sex education topics. In both Christian schools, students believed that adults did not want to talk about anything except for abstinence because they did not want to believe that kids in the school are having sex. One student said:

I think there are a lot of students who aren’t going to be abstinent, and I think it would be better to teach it and teach them how to have sex safely and about the emotional side of it and not try to avoid the topic as much.

Several students had similar comments about their schools, avoiding important conversations.

Staff shared concerns about the impact of sex education in their schools, questioning whether students left “with enough real-world knowledge of human sexuality and sexual design

and purpose...” Staff expressed varying comfort levels with leading student conversations on sex-related topics. Some staff members had an “ask me anything” approach, while others questioned how comfortable most staff would be in sex education-type discussions. One teacher said, “So I think in our school, topics aren’t hidden. I mean if a kid wants to ask a question, they feel at ease to ask it whether it’s in Bible, or English or wherever it is.”

Parents were unable to articulate an approach to sex education for either school in the study. When discussing different topics that might have come up in school, a typical response from parents was “I am sure there are conversations going on, I just don’t know.” Parents trusted that the school was not teaching against their beliefs but noted a disconnect in communication from the school and their students on sex education topics. Parents knew that the school had messaging on abstinence-until-marriage, but expressed concern that there was quite a bit of misinformation circulating among the students due to not talking about all the issues. The same group of parents said the students need to know all of the information about sex since “These kids don’t live in a bubble—they live in the world.”

Theme 2.2: Students, staff, and parents want more conversations in school on sex and sexuality but are concerned about how sex education can be delivered effectively.

Students expressed a strong desire for more conversations in the school about sex and sexuality, but articulated concerns about how adults might respond or deliver those conversations. One student said, “It almost seems like a fear that if you like talk about (sex) and educate people about it, it’s going to lead them to do it...” Many students also shared that having some conversations on sex and sexuality could be “awkward” or “uncomfortable” for teachers at their schools. Students had an understanding that discussion about sensitive topics around sex education can cause concerns from adults about bad publicity or angry parents. Students stated

that using the term “safe sex” could cause “backlash from parents” since it goes against the message of not having sex. Most student concerns centered on how adults would respond to difficult conversations.

Staff and parents also discussed concerns about the effective delivery of sex education, while expressing a desire for more conversations on sex education topics. Several staff members had experienced sex education done poorly as both students and staff members themselves. One teacher said that after a poor sex education experience “you might have a setback of many years trying to regain trust and/or the ability to talk to students and have them be receptive...”

Another teacher shared a concern about educating students without “fueling their curiosity”. Mirroring the staff, parents shared many negative personal experiences in sex education as students. Parents recognized challenges with delivering effective sex education and understood the hesitation of schools to talk about sex education topics. One parent said, “I think the school would be reluctant, worried about losing families and how much you teach, and it’s easier and safer not to teach it.” Parents felt more sex education was needed and that how that was done was the most important thing.

Research Question #3

What are the similarities and differences in the views and approaches of different stakeholders on the topic of sex education at an Evangelical Christian school?

Theme 3.1: All stakeholder groups agree that sex education should be taught in Christian schools. Strong consensus existed across all groups on the importance of sex education in Christian schools, although students, staff, and parents had varying reasons as to why it was important. All students in both focus groups agreed that sex education was essential in any school. One student said, “I think it’s really, really important that students know basically

all aspects of sex education, whether that's in terms of safe sex or being taught about things in that area." Students expressed an understanding that a biblical point of view or abstinence-based stance was important but didn't see why that would change the information they were taught. A student said:

Simply because we understand what the school's stance on sex is—they made that very clear—but to not inform us of basic safety measures, it seems like in a way we're being deprived of something that should be deemed as essential. Just because something is bad doesn't mean we don't deserve to be educated in it.

From the student perspective, it was better to have all the information than to be left to fend for themselves. Broad agreement existed from students that "...if you're not being taught at home and you're not being taught at school, you're going to find out other ways...that are a lot more harmful than having a real talk with an adult." Students viewed the Christian school as a place for education and information on all topics, including sex education with the understanding that the school would still have a biblical perspective on what was taught. Concerns were expressed that public school students had more knowledge than Christian school students.

Staff members all believed that sex education should be taught in Christian schools. Staff expressed recognition of the formational period of their lives and the need to understand "God's purpose for sexuality; the loving reasons for His boundaries regarding sexuality." Multiple staff members talked about God's design for sexuality and the importance of teaching it. One staff member said, "We're teaching real kids in a real world. We do our kids a disservice if we pretend that they don't have questions and they are growing up in a world that's telling them everything opposite." At one school, the focus group discussed the varying abilities of parents to communicate on these topics which made the role of the Christian educator even more important.

Every parent in both focus groups believed that sex education should be taught in their Christian school. Similar to students and staff, there was a recognition that if sex education was not covered in school, there would be a gap in learning. One parent said:

You need to explain to children sex education from a biblical worldview because if they don't hear from here—us—then they're going to get it from their friends or randomly online and that's not coming from a biblical worldview, so we need to teach them or they're going to learn on their own.

Parents in both groups also made comments about covering sex education with a biblical worldview but making sure to give practical information. Students are going to graduate, and one parent said:

You want them to be able to navigate these tough topics, and I think supporting it biblically but, in addition to that, supporting it with real practical consequences to things—practical and scientific consequences—to why God laid out a plan for us.

In the other parent group, a parent said, “[Sex education] does need to be taught but everything needs to be taught.” Parents also talked about the need for students to be properly educated as they go off to the real world and a recognition that there are students who do not wait to have sex until marriage and might be put at a disadvantage without complete sex education.

Theme 3.2: Parents have the primary responsibility in the sex education of their children, but the Christian school is a valued and trusted partner. Students, staff, and parents all recognized the burden of responsibility on parents when it comes to sex education. All three groups also pointed out the important role of the Christian school in partnering with parents. Students and parents expressed a high level of trust in their schools. None of the stakeholder groups mentioned churches as having a primary responsibility in sex education.

For students, parents had the primary responsibility to at least begin a discussion on the topic of sex and sexuality. Several students mentioned that they would rather hear about sex from their parents before hearing about it at school for the first time. One student said, “Parents are usually a familiar and comfortable place so I think that parents should bring it up and probably be the ones to initially break it to you.” The student groups also understood that not all parents were comfortable or doing enough to educate their kids, making education at school essential: “I think it should be a shared responsibility between the parents and the school...I think it is very reasonable to expect the school to do the educational part, like go more in-depth...” Both student groups pointed out the harm that could be done if both schools and parents don’t cover sex education topics, assuming that the other group is doing it. The majority of the students in the focus groups believed that their parents were capable of discussing sex education topics with them effectively.

Staff members strongly and unanimously believed that parents had the primary responsibility to teach students about sex. Staff recognized the importance of partnership, but emphasized the role of the school in supporting parents with comments like, “...our role when it comes to [sex education] and other topics is to help out mom and dad shepherd their kids’ hearts.” The Christian school was seen as a supporting role for parents. The staff groups also recognized that there were many parents who were not well equipped to have sex education conversations with their kids based on their bad personal experiences. One staff member said, “I think a lot of parents are just...they, probably like us, came from a public school where it was not handled well, or their parents didn’t want to talk about it.” The staff groups had the strongest opinions about parents having the primary responsibility to discuss sex with their kids.

Parents articulated an understanding that they have the most important role in talking about sex with their children but were looking to the Christian school for partnership. One parent said, “For me, I have these conversations with my kids but I think it needs to come from someone other than me ‘cuz sometimes, you know, you’re the parent.” Some parents admitted that they were not equipped to face all of the questions that come up. Several parents expressed a desire to know more about what was going on at school so they could partner better with comments like, “[The school] needs to partner a little bit better with the parents so the parents know what’s being taught, and when, and not just the science class,” and “I think there is a responsibility with the school if [sex education topics] are not going to be taught in school to let the parents know that.” Parents had suggestions about teachers sending more follow-up emails or the school sending follow-up discussion questions home when discussions on sex and sexuality are held at school. The comments from parents indicated a desire for a stronger partnership, along with guidance from the school on navigating difficult topics at home.

Theme 3.3: All stakeholder groups agree that more time needs to be spent on sex education spread out across multiple years. Students, staff, and parents were asked what an ideal sex education program would look like at their school. Each group brought forward unique thoughts and ideas on everything from the curriculum to the structure of courses. The common thread found throughout those conversations was a recognition that doing sex education well required more time spread across multiple years.

Students wanted everything from several days in a row to a full semester just for sex education. The student groups agreed that more time was needed but had varying lengths of time they thought would be best. Unanimously, the students thought sex education should be covered more than once in their school experience. One of the students shared, “I honestly don’t

remember much from what was said when I was in 7th grade so I think as we get older, I think they should go almost more in-depth about certain things when it comes to sex education.”

Students felt that as seniors in high school, there was more information they needed to hear about in preparation for college and as young adults.

Staff members discussed many different ideas about what an ideal sex education program would look like. The common thought was that more conversations were needed. One teacher said, “More just open, real types of conversations. [Students] want authenticity.” A Bible teacher suggested, “A greater shared familiarity with multiple dimensions of human sexuality. Maybe a bit of an emphasis, grade-appropriate, in keeping with their own psycho-physiological development.” Instead of an isolated approach to teaching issues of sex and sexuality, the teacher saw sex education as a whole staff issue that needed to be addressed in different ways across multiple grade levels. Staff members also discussed the development of apologetics in the area of sex education that could be developed over multiple grades to cover what the Bible says about sexuality “in a structured format”.

Parents discussed the importance of having more opportunities for sex education in the Christian school and shared several ideas for how to structure more discussions. One parent said, “I think the biggest thing would be starting with the youngest kids on campus and it would build and not be just one week in 7th grade...” A second parent shared that sex education “should definitely be emphasized every year in high school and going back to middle school even if it’s just a week long—I think a full semester is too much—but it should be emphasized 6th grade through 12th grade.” Parents desired more sex education conversations across the grade levels that were developmentally appropriate. The parent groups were open to all sorts of

different topics being discussed and had diverse opinions on the types of conversations they believed should happen and who should be delivering the message.

Differences in the views and approaches of different stakeholders on sex education topics. The third research question asked about similarities and differences in the views and approaches of different stakeholders, but no patterns of difference emerged in focus group responses. While different individual ideas and thoughts existed within stakeholder groups, there were no significant themes that emerged between groups. The results of this study showed a high level of agreement and consensus within each focus group. The same high level of consensus was found when comparing the conversations across each stakeholder group.

Summary

Multiple themes emerged to describe the attitudes and experiences of students, staff, and parents as it relates to sex education in two Evangelical Christian schools. The themes that emerged from the six different focus group interviews gave valuable insights that will be explored more in Chapter Five. Chapter Five will discuss the conclusions that came from the results of this study, the implications of the results for practice, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the attitudes and experiences of students, staff, and parents as they relate to sex education at different Evangelical Christian secondary schools and learn about how different sex education topics are approached in those schools. Focus groups of students, staff, and parents were interviewed at two different Evangelical Christian schools. The focus groups consisted of four to nine individuals who were interviewed. Responses were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed for themes. Two to three themes were identified under each research question.

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined in this study:

RQ1: How are Evangelical Christian schools in the United States educating their students about sex and issues of human sexuality?

RQ2: What are the attitudes and lived experiences of different stakeholders as they relate to sex education at Evangelical Christian secondary schools?

RQ3: What are the similarities and differences in the views and approaches of different stakeholders on the topic of sex education at an Evangelical Christian school?

Themes

Themes were identified for each research question:

RQ1: The two Evangelical Christian schools in this study articulated clear beliefs and statements on sex and sexuality; Sex education was often informal and teacher-dependent; Sex education resources and coverage of topics lacked depth and cohesion.

RQ2: Sex education at the two Evangelical Christian schools was basic with limited meaning and impact; Students, staff, and parents wanted more conversations in school on sex and sexuality but were concerned about how sex education could be delivered effectively.

RQ3: All stakeholder groups agreed that sex education should be taught in Christian schools; Parents have the primary responsibility in the sex education of their children, but the Christian school is a valued and trusted partner; All stakeholder groups agreed that more time needs to be spent on sex education spread out across multiple years.

Conclusions

The Evangelical Christian schools in this study were in different parts of the United States and had many differences in their structure and makeup. Sex education conversations occurred in different grades and each school had its own unique stories and experiences. The discussions about sex education in each school were remarkably similar and general alignment existed in the concerns and experiences that were brought up. Evangelical Christian school communities are trying to figure out the best way to educate their students and talk about complicated topics in sex and sexuality.

Students, staff, and parents agreed that more intentional sex education needs to be done on a regular basis. Statistics strongly suggest that Evangelical Christian schools have students who are sexually active or will be sexually active shortly after leaving their schools (Ayers, 2019). Students, staff, and parents all recognized that the abstinence-until-marriage messaging was important but did not reflect the reality of what was happening in the school community. Students reported feeling like their schools wanted to ignore the realities of student behavior and feared that talking about contraception and other topics would encourage student sexual activity. Several students also felt disadvantaged because they believed their

public school peers had more knowledge on topics of sex and sexuality. All stakeholder groups wanted more sex education on a much more frequent basis than one short experience over a couple of days in seventh or ninth grade. The needs of a seventh-grade student were seen as very different from the needs of a twelfth-grade student and what students needed to know before heading off to college or the workforce. Any sex education that was given at both schools had strong abstinence-only-until-marriage messaging, in agreement with the ACSI Statement of Faith and Evangelical Christianity.

The ideas and realities shared in focus groups were also found in recent research. Students are having sex, even in conservative Christian settings. In one study of Southern Baptist churches in Texas, 70% of young married couples had premarital sex and abstinence was only common in one of nine churches (Rosenbaum & Weathersbee, 2013). Schools with abstinence-only-until-marriage programs often lack discussion on important topics. One well-documented weakness of abstinence-based sex education programs is a lack of discussion on contraception (Hall et al., 2019; Manlove et al., 2015; Shepherd, Sly, & Girard, 2017). Abstinence-based sex education is also ineffective with teens who are sexually active or already sexually experienced (Pound et al., 2016; Shepherd, Sly, & Girard, 2017). The concerns expressed in the research show the potential limitations of sex education programs in Christian schools where students are still having sex despite strong abstinence-only-until-marriage messaging.

Parents and students trusted the Christian school to talk about sex and were willing and open to engaging with the school. Staff understood that there were students who were not following the abstinence-only-until-marriage messaging that was given and expressed a desire to do more sex education with students. In a recent study, 98% of teachers surveyed

believed that sex education should be taught in schools (Cummings, Fisher, & Reilly-Chammat, 2021). Staff were concerned about how to communicate well and did not want any messaging to pique student curiosity or anger parents. These concerns are expressed by teachers in other schools as well (Cummings, Fisher, & Reilly-Chammat, 2021). The parent conversations in the focus groups showed a surprising openness to having more discussions in the Christian school about sex and sexuality. Parents felt like other trusted voices were needed to help them influence their students towards a biblical worldview of sex and sexuality. Several parents commented on the real-world knowledge needed by students. Parents wanted their students to wait for marriage but also wanted them to be informed in case they made other choices. Parents and students said that if they didn't get the information at home or at school, they would get the information from friends. The Christian school was seen as an important place for students to receive information on how to deal with topics like same-sex attraction and contraception.

None of the parents used the term "comprehensive sex education", but they were open to discussion on many topics typically covered in a comprehensive sex education program if the messaging was delivered with biblical values at the center. Comprehensive sex education programs are broadly supported in the United States across political parties, religions, races, and socioeconomic classes (Huber & Firmin, 2014; Kantor & Levitz, 2017). Dent and Maloney (2017) found that conservative Christian parents were supportive of a more comprehensive sex education approach in public schools if the approach was not normative. The parents in this study were in a Christian school and did not have the same concerns about normative teaching but shared the same openness to covering more information in the areas of sex and sexuality.

Students trusted both their Christian schools and their parents to go deeper into conversation on topics in sex education. Students had a much higher opinion of their parents' abilities to navigate talks on sex than parents did of their own abilities. Several of the students interviewed in the focus groups talked about the importance of getting the right information at school that was reinforced at home with the values of their parents. Unfortunately, many parents are not sharing medically accurate information with their students (Astle, McAllister, Emanuels, Rogers, Toews, & Yazedjian, 2022). The desire for parent involvement expressed by students was clear. When parents discuss sexual topics with their students there are many benefits including delayed sexual activity, increased contraceptive use, and fewer sexual partners (Astle et al., 2022). The discussions in all six of the focus groups suggested opportunities and a need for parents and schools to partner together to tackle the complex topics of sex and sexuality.

Christian schools need to develop a formal and structured approach to sex education. Both schools in this study had clear positions on issues of sex and sexuality that were published and well-known by students, parents, and staff. Sexual relations were only okay within the context of marriage between one man and one woman, as outlined in the Bible. Both schools also affirmed a belief in two biological sexes. The belief statements for both schools were detailed and supported with Bible passages. The education students are receiving on those topics needs more clarity and structure.

Students, staff, and parents all agreed that the amount of time spent on sex education topics was limited in scope and depth. Concerns about limited time and depth for sex education are not unique to Christian schools. Recent studies found limited topic coverage and less than six hours of instruction in sex education to be the norm in public schools (Benton,

Nason, Lewis, Vinklarek, & Santana, 2022; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; Harris, Shields, & DeMaria, 2022). When asked about what the ideal sex education program would look like, there was discussion in all six focus groups about the need for more coverage on a more frequent basis. Covering sex education for a couple of days in seventh grade was not going to be enough to help students understand Christian beliefs. Several students stated that the needs of a high school senior are much different from those of a seventh-grade student. Students and parents also commented frequently about the informal nature of sex education conversations. Curricula were largely teacher created and conversations started in classes from math to Bible to science. No formal strategy or approach existed.

Abstinence-only-until-marriage programs are limited in their discussions and do not cover topics like “safe sex” and contraception. Rosenbaum and Weathersbee (2013) studied 9 Southern Baptist Churches in Texas and found that 70% of young married couples in those churches had premarital sex. Abstinence was only common in 1 out of 9 churches. Paik et al. (2016) studied abstinence pledge breakers and found that those who made pledges often delayed sex, but ultimately broke their pledges and were much less likely than their peers to use condoms and had a higher risk of nonmarital pregnancy and HPV. Christian schools have clear beliefs on sex and sexuality but need to make sure that more information is covered and understood by their students. The reality is that many Christian students will not end up waiting to have sex until marriage. More information with the biblical message on sexuality at the center is needed. Yu and Lee (2018) called for comprehensive Christian sex education. Christian schools can better match the realities and needs of their students with a more extensive sex education program that covers multiple years and prepares students for life beyond high school.

Students in Christian schools need access to important information that is typically taught in biology or health classes, so they have an understanding of the human body and sexual development. Students should also understand common issues faced by adolescents when it comes to making choices about sex. Schools together with their parent communities can decide on the ages when this information should be covered. Many schools cover these topics in middle school about 7th grade, but there needs to be more building on those conversations throughout high school as the issues around sex and sexuality become more nuanced and prevalent.

More importantly, Christian schools need to lay out a theological framework from an early age for the whole area of human sexuality that provides biblical understanding and a context for all other conversations. For elementary students, that might mean talking about how God created all people in His image as male and female and emphasizing the amazing design God made. As students get older, they need to understand how sex and sexuality fit into God's design for humanity. The content of Christopher Yuan's book *Holy Sexuality and the Gospel* (2018) provides an example of how this framework could be covered through Bible or health classes. Yuan begins by creating a theological framework from the Bible to clearly articulate what the Bible says about sex and sexuality from Genesis forward. Topics discussed after laying the groundwork include how identity is found in the image of God and not in sexuality, how sin distorted sex and sexuality, God's plan for holy sexuality, and a biblical approach to answering questions about same-sex attraction and sexual identity. As with looking at biological and health issues, the age for these discussions could involve the parent community and there should be different discussions happening in late high school than what is covered in middle school, although the foundational content is the same.

Staff at Christian schools need more training and support to handle sex education topics effectively. While the parent and student focus groups suggested an openness and willingness to cover more sex education topics at school, staff members shared several concerns. Concerns ranged from a lack of experience or knowledge talking about these topics to saying something that might pique the curiosity of students. For Christian schools to expand the discussion, clearly more training and support are needed for staff. High-quality professional development allows teachers to be reflective and develop the proficiency and comfort level to deliver sex education (Cummings, Fisher, & Reilly-Chammat, 2021). In the absence of complete curricula, training might include the whole staff reading some excellent books and online media tools that have come out recently or having faculty discussions led by school leaders on topics that are coming up from students with key talking points for the whole staff. Staff meetings might need to focus more on professional development in these areas so that the staff is comfortable and equipped for hard conversations. Most of the staff in the focus groups had negative personal experiences with sex education. Discussions about sex can be awkward and personal. Sex education cannot be contained with just one science or health teacher. Students and staff reported that sex and sexuality discussions can happen in any class. The Christian schools in this study also had discussion groups, chapels, and other avenues for conversations led by teachers.

Teachers have varying levels of comfort and ability with conversations on sexual topics. In the absence of a formal approach or curriculum, students will often get whatever the teacher is comfortable sharing or discussing. In one focus group, male and female students from the same class talked about an experience in middle school where the boys and girls were split for some sex education. The boys had positive memories of the experience because the

staff member leading was engaging and open. The girls had a very negative experience because the discussion was limited, and the staff member was not comfortable. If Christian school teachers are going to cover these topics, they need to be well-trained and comfortable leading students through complex and personal conversations. Even in public schools with a more set curriculum, students rarely get standardized information and there is a gap between the intentions of the teacher and what students actually learn (Carrion & Jenson, 2014). Ultimately, what gets taught in sex education is up to individual teachers and often with little accountability (Wilson & Wiley, 2009). Christian schools will need to find ways to give their teachers the support and confidence to have conversations on sex and sexuality. Teachers can build the confidence of parents and students by having a formal and structured approach to those topics based on a biblical worldview.

Implications for Practice

The current way of doing sex education and discussing sexuality in the two Evangelical Christian schools studied was not impactful. Continuing to approach sex education without a clarity of purpose and design will lead to uneven experiences and results. Public schools and private Christian schools face many of the same issues and concerns when it comes to sex education. Christian schools, however, are in a unique position because of their distinctive beliefs on sex and sexuality that parents know about when they bring their children to school. Christian schools have an opportunity in front of them to shape conversations on sex and sexuality from a biblical worldview that is broadly supported by their parent communities.

The parents and students interviewed in focus groups for this study acknowledged a desire for their schools to do more in the area of sex education. Parents expressed a high level of trust in their Christian schools and wanted the school's input on sex and sexuality with their

students. Christian schools can capitalize on that high level of trust by developing a consistent and structured approach to sex education. Parents can be a powerful ally for Christian schools in connecting the messaging between school and home.

Christian schools should make sure they have the right people and the right curriculum for teaching about sex and sexuality. The person leading discussions and teaching about sex has a strong influence over the reception of information by students. Teachers often develop their own materials and have a high degree of independence in selecting what gets taught (Wilson & Wiley, 2009). The Christian schools in this study used a variety of materials when talking about sex education, but there was no formal curriculum. Christian schools would benefit from having more updated Christian sex education curriculum options designed for the classroom.

In both Christian schools in this study, teachers across different subjects led small groups and had informal conversations about sex-related topics in those small groups and in their classrooms. Christian schools must invest in professional learning opportunities for their teachers so that they can communicate clearly and comfortably with students on topics of sex and sexuality. Students are asking questions about sex, but staff focus groups noted that many staff members fear handling those questions wrong and aren't comfortable with those types of conversations. A formal curriculum or approach on the part of the school would be just as helpful for staff as it would be for students.

Yu and Lee (2018) called for comprehensive Christian sex education based on their research. The focus groups in this study showed an openness to a more comprehensive approach couched in Christian values. Christian apologetics in the area of sex and sexuality are essential to any more comprehensive approach. Christian schools should look at their

approach to sex education across the grades they teach and ask important questions with the input of staff, students, and parents. What conversations need to happen at school? At what ages and in what order should different topics be discussed? Who should teach sex and in what classes should those topics be covered? Each school community might have some different answers to those questions, but a much more formal approach needs to be taken to serve the students and families of Christian schools.

Recommendations for Future Research

The purpose of this study was to look at the lived experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of students, staff, and parents when it comes to sex education in Christian schools. Numerous studies exist analyzing the impact of sex education programs in public schools, but there remains very little data on sex education in Christian schools. A large-scale quantitative study of sex education practices in Christian schools would be beneficial to gain a broader perspective of what is happening across the country. Valuable information could be gathered on the different resources and materials being used and in what years and at what frequency sex education is occurring. The schools examined in this study were both in metropolitan areas. Looking at smaller schools in rural areas and their attitudes and practices would add to understanding if the same openness seen in the focus groups of this study is found in other contexts. In-depth one-on-one interviews with Christian school leaders would also be beneficial in providing more detail and insight into attitudes and practices in the area of sex education from a leadership perspective.

Concluding Comments

In the United States, views on sex and sexuality have changed rapidly over the past couple of decades. Evangelical Christian schools have responded with clear statements and

positions on those topics that help to guide policy. While policies may be understood and clearly stated, when it comes to teaching students about sex and sexuality, Christian schools are trying to figure out the best way forward. Sex education in all schools is challenging, but Christian schools can create a structured approach from a biblical worldview perspective that is beneficial to students and families. Students and parents are open and willing to engage more on sex education topics and recognize the important role the Christian school can play in helping shape the sexual ethics of the next generation. Christian schools face questions and concerns as they approach sex education, but there appears to be a growing openness to engage and learn within their communities.

This study was meant to help start conversations in Christian schools on how to best meet the needs of students in sex education. Better curricula and formal structuring of sex education programs from grades six to twelve are needed. Christian schools would benefit from professional development opportunities and collaboration on best practices. The high level of agreement between students, staff, and parents in this study was encouraging and points towards hope that important conversations can and will be held between stakeholders in the future.

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Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

I would like to start by thanking you all for participating in this research and giving your perspectives and experiences on how issues around sex and sex education are discussed and handled at your school. I will be recording our conversation and taking notes on our conversation. After we are done, I will leave some time for us to debrief, where you can ask any questions or concerns that you have. If you would like to talk individually after we are done, I am also available for that purpose. Are there any questions before we begin?

1. How old are you and how long have you been at this school?
2. What is your primary role as a stakeholder in this school?
3. Why did you choose to be at this school and what is your faith background?
4. What has been your personal experience with sex education in schools and did you feel like that experience was positive or helpful? Why or why not?
5. Suppose someone were to ask you what the school's approach to sex education is. What would you say to them?
6. To your knowledge, does the school have any type of sex education curriculum, books, or materials?
 - a. If there are curricula, books, or materials, what are they?
 - b. If there are no curricula, what is taught?
7. Are there any official policies or published positions on sex and sexuality? If yes, what are they and where can they be found?
8. Have there been any discussions about abstinence, same-sex attraction, sexual identity, abortion, STIs, safe sex, healthy relationships, or contraception at the school? (Go through slowly and count hands for how many have heard conversations on each topic).
 - a. If yes, what was the context of those conversations, and which topics are covered?
 - b. If no, why do you think those conversations have not taken place at school?

9. Who is involved in making decisions about what gets taught on sex or sexuality at the school?
10. Are parents informed about what gets taught about sexuality? If yes, how are they informed?
11. Do you believe that sex education should be taught in Christian schools? Why or why not?
12. In your opinion, who has the primary responsibility of teaching about sex and sexuality in a Christian school community?
13. What would the ideal sex education program look like at your school? What topics would you be sure to include?
14. What are the benefits of teaching sex education in a Christian school?
15. What are the potential negatives of teaching sex education in a Christian school?

Appendix B

Response Collection Form for Focus Group Question #8

Have there been any discussions about abstinence, same-sex attraction, sexual identity, abortion, STIs, safe sex, healthy relationships, or contraception at the school?

| | Yes | No |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Abstinence | Count: Context: | Count: Why not? |
| Same-Sex Attraction | Count: Context: | Count: Why not? |
| Sexual Identity | Count: Context: | Count: Why not? |
| Abortion | Count: Context: | Count: Why not? |
| STIs | Count: Context: | Count: Why not? |
| Safe Sex | Count: Context: | Count: Why not? |
| Healthy Relationships | Count: Context: | Count: Why not? |
| Contraception | Count: Context: | Count: Why not? |

Appendix C

Research Study Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a study about how Evangelical Christian secondary schools approach sex education. I hope to learn how Christian schools are approaching this topic and what discussions are taking place to address topics in the area of sexuality. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because of your role in the school community and your willingness to share your perspective. I am doing this research as part of my Doctor of Education degree program at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. The benefit of this study is that Christian school leaders will be able to learn from the experiences of other schools to best meet the needs of their students and community in the important area of sex education.

If you decide to participate, I will put you in a focus group with six to nine other participants and work through a set of questions about how sex education and topics in the area of sexuality are approached at the school. I expect the focus group to last between 60 and 90 minutes. Discussing sex education is a sensitive topic and there is the risk that you may experience some distress or discomfort because of hearing or sharing sensitive information as you respond to the questions. You have the option to not respond to any questions that you are uncomfortable answering or withdrawing from the focus group at any time. You will have the opportunity to debrief with the group afterward and to debrief with me individually if you have any questions or concerns. If you need any further support after debriefing, I can provide additional resources.

I will take several steps to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of your comments, including using codes to refer to participants in the transcripts. You will have the opportunity to check the transcripts for accuracy after the study. Because this study will utilize focus groups involving multiple people, there are limits to the confidentiality that can be guaranteed. I am requiring all participants to fill out a confidentiality agreement and requesting that all information is kept confidential, but I cannot guarantee that all participants will abide by this agreement.

Any information obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only aggregate data will be presented. I will be recording our conversation for the purpose of transcription and will delete the recording once all information has been transcribed and checked for accuracy.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with [REDACTED] School in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without affecting such relationships.

This research project has been reviewed and approved in accordance with Bethel's Levels of Review for Research with Humans. If you have any questions about the research and/or research participants' rights or wish to report a research-related injury, please call Ben Hummel at xxx-xxx-xxxx or Dr. Mike Lindstrom at xxx-xxx-xxxx and also email Dr. Peter Jankowski at pjankows@bethel.edu.

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided to participate. Student participants, you must be 18 years old to participate. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice after signing this form should you choose to discontinue participation in this study.

Signature

Date

Signature of Investigator

Appendix D
Focus Group Confidentiality Agreement

I realize that as a member of a focus group for this study about how Evangelical Christian secondary schools approach sex education, participants will share sensitive information.

I agree to keep the information shared during this focus group session confidential.

Signature

Date

Appendix E

School Permission Forms for Study

School #1

After reviewing Ben Hummel’s research proposal titled, “How Do Evangelical Christian Schools Approach Sex Education?”, [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] would like to move forward and allow Ben Hummel to conduct research with constituents at our school. Ben Hummel has discussed with us that our school will remain confidential in any reporting.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED], Head of School

School #2

After reviewing Ben Hummel’s research proposal titled, “How Do Evangelical Christian Schools Approach Sex Education?”, [REDACTED] in [REDACTED] would like to move forward and allow Ben Hummel to conduct research with constituents at our school. Ben Hummel has discussed with us that our school will remain confidential in any reporting.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED], Head of School