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## Skirting the Issue: Teachers' Experiences "Addressing Sexuality in Middle School Language Arts"

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### Abstract

The goal of this study was to examine perceptions, attitudes, and reported practices of a group of middle level Language Arts teachers concerning sexuality-related issues. Through interviews with 15 teachers, the study found that sexuality was in one sense pervasive, as it came up frequently in the teachers' practice. Yet at the same time the teachers worked hard to avoid the topic of sexuality, even if they believed discussion of sexuality issues could be beneficial. We found a benefit-risk tension that some of the teachers faced on a regular basis, as they struggled with the question of whether directly addressing sexuality was worth the risk. The teachers' testimonies illustrate the extent to which they repress discussion of sexuality. However, because many of the teachers believed in a more direct approach with students, the findings indicate that small changes, such as breaking the silence around sexuality in teacher education and among school faculty and staff, might make a significant positive difference.

### Introduction

You have to judge the moment and whether that teaching moment is really valuable enough to cross the line and to put yourself in a position as a teacher to be scrutinized and is it really worth it sometimes; so it's really a split-second decision many times. And sometimes I'll go for it, and sometimes I won't.

—Sawyer, a seventh grade language arts teacher  
*on discussing sexuality in the classroom*

This description by a seventh grade language arts teacher exemplifies the spur-of-the-moment analysis that teachers in this study often performed in deciding what to talk about (and what not to talk about) when sexuality topics arose in everyday classroom teaching. Through interviews with Sawyer and 14 other teachers, we illuminate how the teachers addressed issues of sexuality in middle school language arts. We found that sexuality was in one sense pervasive, as it came up frequently, yet, at the same time teachers worked hard to avoid it, even as they believed it

was beneficial. Indeed, themes of avoidance, fear, and perceived benefit coexisted in what can best be described as a benefit-risk tension that most teachers faced on a regular basis.

### ***Sexuality Education and Schools***

Sexuality is an important part of adolescence, and although sexual images and messages abound in the media, there is controversy in the United States about how much and what kinds of exposure to formal sexuality information teens and preteens should have (Bruess & Greenberg, 2009). Although the means to achieve the end are often disagreed upon, the essential, common goal is for adolescents to grow into sexually healthy adults (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [SIECUS], 2004). The Ford Foundation (2005) defines sexual health as the ability to have a pleasurable, disease-free, discrimination-free, safe, mutually respectful sexual life. The values upon which the U.S. National Guidelines Task Force (SIECUS) based the Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education include the following:

1. Sexuality is natural and healthy; all persons are sexual.
2. Individuals, families, and societies benefit when children are able to discuss sexuality with their parents and/or other trusted adults.
3. Young people explore their sexuality as a natural process of achieving sexual maturity.
4. Young people who are involved in sexual relationships need access to information about health care services (p. 15).

Although the U.S. National Middle School Association (NMSA) Initial Level Teacher Preparation Standards specifically address the need for teachers to “understand issues of young adolescent health and sexuality” (NMSA, 2005, p. 4), school sexuality education tends to be framed and defined as purely biological, with a focus on disease and pregnancy prevention. Schools and much of the American public treat sexuality as dangerous, especially if it involves anything other than heterosexual white married couples (Allen, 2006). Sexuality is seen as a distraction to real academics (Ashcraft, 2008); as such, it is relegated to the sidelines as part of formal sexuality education, usually a small part of the health education curriculum. When sexuality education does occur, issues of power, desire, and emotions are ignored (Allen, 2006).

Ironically, while the official message in schools is that no-one should talk about or enact sexuality outside of sexual education class, schools are actually highly sexual places (Allen, 2006). Students and teachers constantly try to and succeed at expressing their sexual identity, and unproductive and even harmful informal messages about sexuality abound (Allen, 2006; Johnson, 2004; Reiss, 1998). For example, sexualized bullying of girls by boys and homophobic bullying are problems among adolescents in schools (Chambers, van Loon, & Tincknell, 2004; Dupper & Meyer-Adams, 2002; Meyer, 2009). Often, teachers do not intervene in such harassment, which teaches boys and girls that it is normal for such interactions to take place (Meyer, 2009).

Further, students are bombarded by media messages related to sexuality (Lamb & Brown, 2006). The relegation of sexuality education to biological discussions in health or science class means that sexuality education ignores popular culture, and this absence is unfortunate for three reasons. First, like the informal sexuality messages children get in school, many of the sexuality messages in media can encourage unsafe behavior, and when there is nothing to counteract these messages they remain unchallenged lessons to children and teenagers (Brown, Lamb, & Tappan, 2009; Lamb & Brown, 2006). Second, although many hegemonic sexuality messages exist in popular culture, there are also counter-hegemonic messages (Ashcraft, 2006), and examining these is a good avenue for discussing both biological and non-biological aspects of sexuality with students. Third, parents who tend to be resistant to sexuality education may be more amenable if it occurs within the context of analysis of media their children are already encountering (Ashcraft, 2008).

Instead of viewing sexuality as a distraction to academics, it can be viewed as a vehicle for increasing both academic achievement and democracy in schools if it is extended across the entire school curriculum (Ashcraft, 2006; 2008). Ashcraft (2008) argues that since sexuality links well to many academic subjects (e.g., language arts, social studies, science), students’ high interest in the topic can be used to make those topics more relevant and interesting to students. In addition to increasing student interest in academic subjects, it is useful for promoting democracy because sexuality is so closely entwined in issues of racial oppression, gender oppression, class oppression, and sexuality oppression (Ashcraft, 2008).

### ***Middle School Language Arts and Sexuality***

Middle school is an appropriate time for discussion of sexuality for two reasons: children begin to experience sexual attraction around age ten (Steinberg, 2008), and media messages about sexuality affect children from a very young age (Brown, Lamb, & Tappan, 2009; Lamb & Brown, 2006). Additionally, language arts is a highly relevant space for exploring the topic, given that a good language arts curriculum should act as a mediator between the teacher and the social world of the student (Silin, 2003). Also, although some might see it as difficult to attempt to insert sexuality into language arts, especially in our current standards-based culture in which many teachers no longer control their own curricula, it is, in fact, a natural part of the subject matter. For example, it is already in many, if not most, young adult books, including texts dictated by school districts (Klein, Markowitz, Puchner, & Anderson, 2011). Therefore, when teachers do not talk about it, they are actually actively avoiding engagement with specific parts of the texts. Also, language arts is supposed to provide an “experience-based pedagogy”—a task that cannot be accomplished in middle school without having students read, discuss, or write about sexuality (Moje & MuQaribu, 2003, p. 205). Finally, as previously indicated, since sexuality is of interest to students and of high relevance, integrating discussion of sexuality into language arts could be an important means of enhancing student engagement and interest in any subject matter (Ashcraft, 2008). Enhanced engagement is likely to increase, rather than decrease, student mastery of any subject’s standards. Despite these arguments, and consistent with the culture of silence previously described, prior research indicates that sexuality is rarely addressed in language arts teaching (Johnson, 2004; Moje & MuQaribu, 2003).

### ***Sexuality as a Controversial Topic***

Teachers’ reluctance to talk about sexuality is understandable. Agee (1999) and Freedman and Johnson (2000) discussed teacher “self-censorship,” which occurs when teachers decide to restrict texts, discussion, and writing due to previous external censorship or prior difficulties with parents or administrators regarding controversial content. Even teachers assigned to teach sexuality often have no training in the area, and, in addition to worrying about others’ reactions, they often have difficulty comfortably navigating the topic due to “deeply embedded cultural values about sexuality, intimacy, sex role appropriateness, and religiosity”

(Walters & Hayes, 2007, p. 31). In some respects, the dilemma for teachers about whether and how to include sexuality in middle school language arts shares characteristics with teacher dilemmas over teaching controversial issues in other areas, such as science and social studies. Definitions of a “controversial” issue vary, but most include notions of causing public disagreement involving large groups of people and competing premises, beliefs, and/or values (Hess, 2002; Levinson, 2006). Such definitions apply to sexuality topics, socioscientific issues like stem-cell research, cloning, environmental problems, and genetic engineering and to controversial social science issues such as racial and gender discrimination (Cotton, 2006; Hess, 2002; Levinson, 2006; Sadler, Amirshokoohi, Kazempour, & Allspaw, 2006). However, sexuality is somewhat different, since arguably the question of whether or not sexuality should be talked about at all in middle school Language arts is even more controversial than the question of whether issues such as stem-cell research should be discussed in science and whether race issues should be included in social studies. Also, because sexuality is of such high interest and such an important part of adolescence, it likely comes up incidentally more than issues such as stem-cells, for example, making it even harder to avoid than some controversial topics in other areas.

### ***The Current Study***

Sexuality is of high interest and of high relevance to young adolescents, and language arts is supposed to link to students’ lives, yet the topic of sexuality is, in practice, taboo, and teachers receive little or no training in sexuality development of teenagers (Cozzens, 2006). Knowing this, we wondered how middle level language arts teachers perceive and navigate these competing forces. Prior research discusses language arts teachers’ negotiations over controversial texts in general (Agee, 1999; Freedman & Johnson, 2000; Noll, 1994), but research on middle grades language arts and on sexuality issues that arise within and outside texts is lacking.

The researchers’ goal in this study was to examine perceptions, attitudes, and reported practices of a group of middle grades language arts teachers concerning sexuality-related issues. Specifically, we asked the following research questions: (a) What are the stated practices and attitudes of a group of middle level language arts teachers from eight different school districts in one region of the Midwest when addressing sexuality? (b) How comfortable are the

teachers when it comes to addressing issues about sexuality and sexual orientation that are encountered with students both formally and informally? and (c) How do the teachers see their role as it relates to sexuality? For the purposes of this study, we defined sexuality in an inclusive manner, selecting topics from the broad range of recommended sexuality education topics recommended by SIECUS while focusing on topics that are more directly rather than indirectly related to sexuality (see Appendix A).

## **Method**

The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger study of middle grades language arts teacher practices and teaching opportunities related to sexuality. Data collection for the larger study occurred in two phases, beginning with an analysis of the sexuality content in 12 novels commonly used in seventh and eighth grade language arts and reading classes and followed by the interviews. Data for this paper come from the interviews only, and this paper reports teacher practices and perceptions related to sexuality in general; a detailed analysis of the teachers' responses related to sexual minority (gay, lesbian, bisexual students) issues has been reported elsewhere (Puchner & Klein, 2011).

### ***Sampling and Participants***

We selected participants using purposeful sampling, initially seeking individuals whom we knew could provide us with information relevant to our topic and later asking those participants to recommend others ("snowball sampling") (Creswell, 2008, p. 215). Our initial goal in terms of sampling was to find people who would help us understand and describe what teachers tend to do, which Creswell (2008) calls "typical sampling" (p. 215). Specifically, we first recruited participants by e-mailing a group of middle grades teachers who had prior connections to the university. At the end of each of the initial interviews, we asked interviewees for names of other teachers who might be interested. In all of these cases, we explained the purpose of the study, described the types of questions, explained how sexuality was defined for the study, and informed participants that we would pay \$50 for an interview.

The participants were one male and 14 female teachers from nine different public schools in one large geographic region in the Midwest. One was a sixth grade teacher, and the rest taught seventh and/or eighth grade. One teacher taught fifth grade in a private school in a different region at the time of the

study. However, she had previously taught a combined sixth, seventh, and eighth grade class in a charter school, and the interview focused on her experience at that school. The teachers were relatively experienced, having taught from three to 26 years (mean was 13 years). Teachers' ages ranged from 29 to 57 years old, with a mean age of 44. All of the teachers were white, as were 94% to 100% of the teachers in eight of the schools. One exception was a charter school with 15% African American teachers. For reasons of anonymity, we use the pronoun "she" to refer to all teachers in the study, including the male teacher.

### ***Context***

The teachers we interviewed were from nine different schools located within the metropolitan area of a Midwestern city adjacent to the religious and socially conservative "Bible Belt," encompassing a total population of almost three million. The schools were in eight different school districts, with three in districts/communities of more than 20,000 residents, two with 10,000 to 20,000 residents, and with fewer than 10,000 residents. Six communities were suburban areas ranging in size, and two were rural communities. In three of the schools more than half the students were considered low-income, with the percentage for the rest of the schools ranging from 14% to 40%. All the schools had a majority of white students, ranging between 52% and 94%; four schools had between 14% and 46% black students; and one school had 11% Hispanic/Latino students.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

We conducted individual semi-structured interviews with the 15 teachers either at their schools or, in one case, in the first author's office. Our semi-structured format used a set of interview questions as a guide but allowed the teachers' interests and responses to influence the flow. Teacher responses also shaped the kinds of follow-up questions asked by the interviewers. The first author conducted eight interviews, and the second author conducted seven. We audiotaped the interviews; each generally lasted 30 to 60 minutes.

### ***Interview Protocol***

Because we used a broader definition of sexuality than is often used, we began each interview by either showing or reading the list of topics included in our definition (Appendix A). The interview protocol itself contained 11 open-ended questions, beginning with a question about the young adult novels used by the language arts teachers. The purpose of this first question was to allow us to later ask how the teachers

discussed specific scenes in books that were part of their curriculum. Other questions included in the protocol were: (a) what kinds of sexuality issues came up as they were teaching; (b) how they dealt with sexuality issues that did come up; (c) what sexuality issues, if any, they purposefully incorporated into their teaching; (d) what they did when sexual orientation came up; (e) how they saw their role in regard to sexuality and sexual orientation; (f) whether the school had a separate health teacher and, if not, who taught health; and (g) how prepared and comfortable they felt discussing or addressing sexuality. As part of the interview, we also read or referred the teachers to a specific scene in young adult literature involving sexuality and asked the teacher either how they addressed that scene (if they used that book) or would address the scene. Because the interviews were semi-structured, we did not follow the protocol identically with each individual, and follow-up questions varied.

### **Data Analysis**

We analyzed the data qualitatively (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), with the aid of the qualitative data analysis software NVivo. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, with both authors, graduate assistants, and a student worker contributing to that process. We used analytic techniques associated with grounded theory methodology, involving constructing a story from the data by first deriving concepts from the data, developing and verifying those concepts, and, finally, relating the concepts to each other in a manner that explains the phenomenon (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The first step in analysis was open coding and memoing, which the two authors did separately in the initial stages. Open coding is a brainstorming process, looking for all concepts that emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and in our case, these initial codes included the following:

- Parents
- Avoidance
- Sex content as good for students
- Fear of negative consequences
- Fear of loss of control
- Student sexual misbehavior
- Need for training
- Safety
- Sexuality in the media
- Sexuality belonging in health versus language arts
- Race
- Role of teacher

- Language arts connecting to student lives
- Different levels of student knowledge about sexuality
- Gender
- Discomfort
- Dealing with difficult topics

As is clear from this list, initial codes included both lower and higher levels of abstraction (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Once the open coding process was complete, the two authors met to discuss codes and emerging concepts. Following the discussion, we moved into axial coding, which is the process of determining how the codes fit together and the development of key themes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2008). It also allowed us to figure out which codes were most important and which should be dropped, collapsed, or subsumed under other codes. Again, the two authors conducted this process separately and then discussed the findings. Consistent with recommendations by Corbin and Strauss, we asked ourselves multiple questions as we analyzed. It was clear early on that anxiety, perceived benefit, avoidance, and parents were important concepts in the data, and once our initial set of codes and themes was developed, we checked and rechecked these themes with regard to all the interview data and held final discussions to finalize the themes. We also undertook a process of integration, in which we identified how the minor categories were related to the key themes (2008).

Although we followed a set of procedures for data collection and analysis, as qualitative researchers we were aware of the role of the *researcher as instrument* in the data collection, organization and recording, and analysis process (Barrett, 2007). In terms of our interviews (data collection), the researcher was not passively collecting data that were out there in the world but, as interviewer, was actively shaping the data (Graue & Walsh, 1998). This active shaping of data continued in the organizing process of notes and interviews. And then, perhaps most obviously, the analysis involved a further level of interpretation, insight, and logic that fully placed the researcher as an important research instrument (Barrett, 2007).

### **Trustworthiness**

The sample was not random and was by no means representative. Further, the sensitivity of the topic of sexuality meant that some teachers were likely very careful about what they revealed. For obvious reasons, we did not disclose our personal views

during the interview, and this left teachers to guess at our beliefs, our agenda, and our trustworthiness in the area of confidentiality. However, as shown below, many teachers did provide interesting and helpful details about their perspectives and practices related to sexuality issues. Also, since we used teachers who agreed to be studied and who had been recommended by previous interviewees, it is very possible that the teachers in the study were more open and held more liberal views than the average teacher for the geographical area studied. Hence, to the extent that we uncovered problems with the way sexuality is addressed, we are more likely to be underestimating rather than overestimating the extent of the problem.

To check the validity of our interpretations, we sent an earlier draft of this paper via e-mail to all participants, along with four questions, and asked them to respond if they had any comments or suggestions. The three questions were:

- Does this fairly represent the situation as you see it?
- Does it look like we have misinterpreted anything?
- Having seen this, what would you like to add?

Four teachers responded, and their responses were very positive. No teachers provided any suggestions or additions.

## Findings

As we will show below, sexuality came up frequently in the teaching practices of the language arts teachers, and many of the teachers believed that frank discussion of sexuality issues would be beneficial for their students. However, even with this belief, all the teachers reported using avoidance strategies. The avoidance was not surprising in light of the anxiety surrounding the discussion of sexuality that was expressed by many. Indeed, the teachers appeared to frequently experience a benefit-risk tension as they made decisions about what to say and what not to say.

The outline of findings below begins with the theme of the *ubiquity* of sexuality then moves on to perceived *benefits*. Different types of *avoidance* strategies are described next, followed by expressions of *anxiety and fear*, discussion of the *benefit-risk tension* revealed upon closer examination, and, finally, the different ways that teachers described their *roles* in terms of sexuality.

### *Sexuality is Ubiquitous*

Sexuality topics were pervasive in the teachers' teaching experiences, both during and outside class.

Although teachers differed in terms of how much they felt it was their role to deal with sexuality, the abundance of examples they provided clearly indicated that, to a certain degree, the issue was unavoidable. Some of these examples pertained to sexual bullying on the part of students. One teacher had dealt with a boy giving a girl a "titty twister," another said that a boy in her class had whispered to the girl next to him that a new boy in the class was going to rape her, and several mentioned homophobic bullying. In addition to the misconduct cases, teachers described a variety of experiences such as having to show a student how to use a tampon (the nurse was male, and the only feminine hygiene product available was a tampon) and helping a pregnant eighth grader weigh her options. While the above examples could be seen as unrelated to the actual teaching of language arts, per se, others were directly related to the language arts teaching process. Here is one such example. (Many other such examples are provided later in the findings.)

Dickens: [O]ne of the boys was having an action sequence in his book, and he wanted to use the word "douche."... And he was reading this aloud, and, at that point, I'm cringing, and the girls are laughing, and he doesn't know what he's done wrong, and so I said we'll talk about it after class. And I had to explain this.

Interviewer: What was the context? Was he trying to call someone a douche bag?

Dickens: No, no, no! I don't know. I don't think so. People were fighting. It was, like, the action—like duking it out. They were in water and, you know, just, instead of "blam!" it was "douche!" [makes punching motion with fist]. I don't know where he heard it; I don't know why this was the word that he chose, because he honestly had no idea, and the girls were giggling, and he was, you know, he didn't know why.

Although sexuality themes often came up in more predictable ways (as we show later), the somewhat humorous example above shows the unpredictable way in which the topic sometimes inserted itself into the language arts arena.

### *Benefits of Discussing Sexuality*

Many of the teachers felt that it was good for their students to talk about and learn about sexuality within the classroom. One rationale, evident in the quote below, indicated a desire to scare students away from sexual behavior.

I think [the sexuality education program] should be more the HIV/AIDS, more of the sexually transmitted diseases. We have a student who has a sexually transmitted disease at this age. . . . I think the abstinence girl did show pictures, actual pictures of stuff, and I think that needs to be really thrown at their face. (Channing)

Other teachers simply felt that sexuality information was useful for the students' well-being. One teacher described how she used any example of violence in the reading to expose the students to information about sexual abuse and harassment, while another mentioned the possible need for teachers to make sure there is a teen pregnancy story "so that you could talk about options that are out there and can we expect abstinence." The latter teacher, Baker, also provided an example of a student's writing assignment that revealed his misunderstanding of HIV/AIDS.

I had a weird journal entry two days ago about AIDS. The kid, brand new kid, just moved here from Arizona, and the question, the prompt was "What disease scares you?" And he wrote about AIDS, but it was so misinformed. It was like a kid had written it in the 70s. . . . It was all about how you can catch it in the bathroom, if they breathe on you, on and on and on, and I thought "Good night!" We're getting ready to do our term paper on diseases, so I told the science teacher, when you assign diseases, you give Paul AIDS, because he doesn't know what's going on. He needs to know more about it, because he is so misinformed.

While the example above shows a teacher's concern over accurate sexuality information, others emphasized the need to be open in discussions about sexuality to increase student safety. James worried that without such openness, students wouldn't tell teachers about personal dangers they might be experiencing:

I would think my role is to be up front. . . . If anything's going on with them, if they've got questions, or if something's going on, you know . . . they have to have a respected adult. And if you're acting like everything sexual . . . if you're acting like those things are all dirty and we can't talk about them, that kid's not going to open up, and that kid's not going to get the help that they [*sic*] need.

Another reported benefit of some sexuality-related content was that it helped relate language arts to

students' lives. Larrabee's words reflected a desire to connect with her students through the readings:

For example, we read a book in our reading classes that dealt with a single-parent home and a child born out of wedlock, that sort of thing. A lot of these issues we see in our school district, where you have such a diverse student population. Aa lot of times we can discuss what these things mean within the class in such a way that it helps to relate to the students.

### **Avoidance**

While the interviews with teachers revealed that discussions of sexuality are present and, in many cases, considered beneficial in the arts classroom, teachers provided many examples of how they limited sexuality information and discussion. Their responses revealed consistent use of a variety of avoidance strategies related to sexuality topics and sexuality issues, independent of their beliefs about whether sexuality content was beneficial or not. One common means of avoidance was to restrict books assigned in language arts or reading to those without or with rare or mild sexuality content. This approach, common throughout U.S. schools (Agee, 1999; Freedman & Johnson, 2000; Noll, 1994), was sometimes used by individual teachers: "It depends on my group, if I think they are mature enough, whether I will even do that novel that year" (Dawkins). Others were subjected to this approach, willingly or unwillingly, by schools whose novels and other literature were prescribed by committees who made decisions for each grade level, "The district is very, very careful about choosing literature that is age and topic appropriate" (Larrabee).

Regarding the issue of books containing scenes with sexuality, a common reported avoidance strategy was to allow the students to read or see a scene (in the case of a film based on a book) but to purposely not talk about it. Baker, who was in charge of the reading curriculum at her school, illustrated this approach as she explained how she handled parts of *The Diary of Anne Frank*:

There were issues in there about breast development and menstruation that I didn't think the men teachers would feel comfortable reading out loud, so I suggested that, while they might read most of the book to the students, they could maybe have quiet reading during those parts. . . . That's the way I handled it . . . and I didn't really address it in the study questions either for those

situations with girls' development. I thought it was still an appropriate book to read because it was handled in a good way in the book, and I thought maybe even in the Anne Frank book where Anne talks about having her period, the kids did read that part out loud, but it was handled in such a way that I wasn't sure if the guys would even know what it was, and it was handled in a way that Anne was proud of this, and I thought that the girls might identify with that aspect.

In the above quote, Baker admits purposely not discussing a topic, even though she knew some students had not understood the scene or scenes in question. Several other teachers said they only talked about a sexuality scene if students asked a question, and some said that even if students did ask they gave them "only little bits" of information. Dawkins stated:

*Of Mice and Men* obviously has some sexual references. . . . The main character wears a glove on his hand all the time to keep his hand soft for his wife and on occasion the kids will question, well what does that mean and I said well, I try to give them information but only little bits, having had two children of my own, I only try to answer the question that they ask as briefly as possible. So I said, "Well you know he is a ranch hand, he does hard labor and if you've ever seen anybody's hands that have done hard labor, they have lots of calluses and whatever, and he is married and he loves his wife and he doesn't want to scratch her skin if he touches her," and then I leave it at that. And always in eighth grade you have kids who are a little more mature that kind of snicker and, like, "yeah, OK," and then you have other kids going "oh, OK," and then so it is a very mixed bag of the understanding that they bring to class.

Avoidance of sexuality extended beyond texts to both language arts-related movies shown in class and to writing activities. In terms of video, two teachers said they didn't talk about the racy scenes in movies they show, and Dawkins said, in reference to a particular scene in *Much Ado About Nothing*, that she "just walk[s] in front of the television until that's over to just kind of do my own censoring. . . ." In the case of writing, one teacher described her decision to stop assigning free writing to decrease the possibility of students revealing information that she was uncomfortable with:

Dickens: I used journals about the first four or five years that I taught. And I did see a little bit of things that I probably didn't need to read. Do you understand what I'm saying? I saw some things, and they were talking about some things that, you know what, I don't want to read this. I'm sure that's the way you're feeling, and that's what I told you to do, but you know what, that's not for me, that's for you. That's for you to keep on your own. I don't, I didn't feel comfortable with a lot of the things that were going on. Now I've done different journal entries where they've been more guided and things like that.

Most teachers said they always addressed questions that were asked of them relating to sexuality, but some said that they sometimes referred students to their parents or to the health teacher when they felt they were not equipped to answer a question or when they felt it would be inappropriate for them to answer it. Gerhart provided one example:

Whenever they do research on the computer there is some very sketchy things that they come up with, even with our [Internet] blocks. I mean, one time a girl asked me what intercourse was because she was researching, you know, and this is an eighth grade student, and she didn't know what intercourse was. She was researching and that word came up, and I tell them when we start that unit, "You have to be mature. You are going to run across things that you know are not necessarily school appropriate, but if you do, you can ask me or tell me; but let's move on, because that is not really what we are studying."

Interviewer: What did you do?

Gerhart: Well, I believe when she asked me that I said, I believe I worded it like "That's not really something we should talk about in class, but I will let you know that it has to do with sex." And I may have answered her or told her, and sometimes I say "Ask your mom," because what if their parents are not ready for them to know these things? You just never know who you are going to offend or not offend.

Larrabee also illustrated this strategy of referring the students to health class and/or parents.

I don't ever want to tell a kid "We can't discuss that in class," I don't want to cut them off from information, so I try to redirect them by telling them "You know, health class would be an



appropriate place for that, your parents would be an appropriate place for that,” something along those lines.

The Larrabee and Gerhart examples illustrate teachers avoiding providing direct answers to questions. They appear to be attempting to redirect the students’ inquiries, as opposed to actually silencing the students. However, a fine line exists between avoidance (skirting), which we think accurately describes what Larrabee and Gerhart report above, and active silencing. Some examples of silencing did seem to come up, most commonly in the case of student writing. One teacher told a story about a girl who, when assigned to write about a time when she was surprised, had written about her first menstrual period. The teacher reported being shocked by the paper and told the interviewer that she had not wanted to read about it. In her comment on the paper, she gave the student some positive feedback but also made it clear that she felt it was inappropriate: “I said ‘Wow, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to read about this but thank you, I am glad that you felt comfortable enough to share it with me,’ you know, and then I questioned, ‘You know, are there other things that have been surprising in your life?’” (Dawkins). This teacher also described how she had talked another student out of self-selecting the topic of her own bisexuality for an assigned speech.

Although most of the avoidance was discussed in reference to topics that are considered more controversial than dating and romance, one teacher reported that, at her school, teachers avoided talking about relationships in general, even though they were aware that some students were having relationships:

Interviewer: So let’s see, um, with a book like *Outsiders*, for example, there is a lot of talk about dating and stuff. Was that part of the class discussion?

Campbell: Well, I will be honest, at the sixth, seventh, eighth level, as a school, we try to downplay that sixth, seventh, eighth should date. ... Because we did have, we did have a number of students, we knew we had some sixth grade girls who were sexually active, and we knew that we had some seventh and eighth grade girls and boys who were sexually active, so we, as a school, tried to say you are too young. However, you know, of course, by ninth grade, one of our eighth grade girls was pregnant and

giving birth. ... So we as a school at the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade level, we tried to say you’re too young to know about relationships of this intimate level. Sure be friends, but we, as a school, also had to be aware that we might have, in fact, it happened—we had two seventh graders, well seventh grade girls, sixth grade boy dating, and they were doing things in the hallway that were inappropriate for school, so that was our take on shutting it down. Just shut it down, you know this is not appropriate for school.

Interviewer: Sure, so did that, did you discuss that explicitly in class, or did you just try not to discuss it?

Campbell: Uh, tried to not discuss it, really, because there was also the impetus of there [are] standards to meet ... we don’t really have time to get into sexual behavior. That’s not to say we didn’t have the Red Cross come, and there [were] science classes that dealt with some issues, but in language arts, specifically, it was not part of the curriculum...

In the previous quote, Campbell makes it clear that the school’s response to sexually active students was to prohibit discussion of dating and relationships in an attempt to send the message that no romantic relationships were acceptable in middle school.

### **Fear**

Sexuality topics in the classroom can inspire fear and anxiety for a variety of reasons, resulting in teachers’ attempts to avoid, limit, or redirect discussion. The most prominent source of anxiety reported by teachers was potentially negative reactions from parents, which sometimes extended to a fear of being reprimanded or fired by the school administration because of the parental reaction. Channing, Keaton, and Baylor expressed their concerns:

Interviewer: Sounds like you’re sort of conflicted. ... [Y]ou knew the issue needed to be addressed, but there was a lot of anxiety. What do you think is the source of your anxiety?

Channing: My source is that they’re going to go home and say something that I didn’t say, and then parents are going to call the principal, and I’m going to get in trouble.

Keaton: A couple parents that I had this year, I would feel very nervous [about addressing

sexuality issues with the class]. And I've not had that in the past. But there's just a couple that are a lot more outspoken and conservative, and I think you get to know those parents pretty quick.

Baylor: There is a handful of parents right now that there is no way that I would even attempt to address anything with their child, just because they freak out over something silly. They yell over silly stuff, and it's not necessarily that that's come down from the administration for me to "Don't talk about this, don't"—it's me, personally, who made that choice.

For all three of these teachers, their assessment of the potential reactions of the parents of the students in the class was a major factor in determining their handling of student questions and sexuality topics.

Interestingly, fear of parent reaction was not related to whether the teacher actually had parents complain in the past. Some teachers, when pressed, admitted no parent had ever complained about a sexuality issue, yet the possibility influenced their decision making—a phenomenon that has been described in other research (Agee, 1999; Freedman & Johnson, 2000; Noll, 1994). Conversely, others were not afraid of parental reaction, even though they had experienced complaints from parents in the past.

Baker: I have had parents complain about the weirdest stuff. ... So no, I feel like I could defend any book that—I'm the new reading department head, so it's only been a year, and we spend so much time going through novels with the English department, picking which ones, and we know there is controversial stuff. We like a little of that.

Baker, above, seemed confident in her ability to strike a good balance between benefiting students and avoiding too much controversy. Dickens, below, went further to say that she had fewer problems after she began being more direct about controversial issues.

Dickens: [When I was a beginning teacher], I was more fearful of them [parents] than anything, and I found that I had more trouble, me personally, where there was some avoidance. What I'm referring to is, I usually would get phone calls, "What are you guys reading in class? This is what they said happened." Then I'd have to explain to the parents. And usually they were fine, usually it blew over. But I found that the more you do confront it head on, the less likely you are to get a call. And it really surprised me because I

expected—the first time I did it, I expected, you know what—let it come, because this is exactly how I explained it and ... nothing happened. I don't suggest it, but it has worked for me for eight or nine years.

One means of dealing with anxiety over parents was to allow parents to opt out of using certain books with their children. Baker is one of several teachers who described using this strategy: "But really, if a parent was completely, mortally offended by it, we would give them a plan B, you know, we don't want to tick anybody off." While Baker appeared to allow parents to opt out if they lodged a complaint, Dawkins described the more cautious strategy of warning parents ahead of time about a potentially controversial book.

I do that novel just with my advanced kids. It has a lot of cursing, as well, which sets them all on a dither, and I generally, with that book I have to send a note home. I just send a note home and say we are going to read *Of Mice and Men* beginning April 23rd, there is an alternate book if you are interested, and that's all I say. ... Um, I did have a parent write a letter to me and said "I can't believe you would teach this book in the eighth grade, this is terrible. My mother is an English teacher, and she says the topic is far too mature for blah, blah, blah," and I said, "Well you chose the alternate, so you're fine, it's fine."

Another source of anxiety was that sexuality discussion would cause students to get out of hand due to their immaturity. Larrabee provided an example of this fear of students getting off topic: "I often find, too, with my seventh graders, if I stop long enough to let them start asking questions that are way out of line or not necessarily in keeping ... then that is exactly what will occur." Gerhart provided another example:

It brings discussion, and, at this age, they're just so giggly about it all, you know, they're just, I mean, you can be talking about the most serious topic, like the Holocaust, and they somehow, and, you know, it's—part of it is wanting to impress their peers and just being, and everything is a joke, and so they can try to turn things; and so that can be why a lot of us don't talk about these things in middle school, because we know that, you know, they are just immature.

The possibility of losing control of the educational direction during classroom discussions due to student discomfort or immaturity caused several teachers to limit opportunities for discussion.

### ***Benefit-risk Tension***

For most of these teachers, what, how, and even if sexuality topics should be addressed in the middle grades language arts classroom was a delicate decisional balance that was sometimes made in an instant and sometimes deliberately planned. How do we reconcile the perceived need for sexuality information on the part of many teachers with the avoidance that they practiced? Perceived benefit combined with anxiety, or at least knowledge of risk, appears to have created a benefit-risk tension. As indicated by the opening quote, many of the teachers were faced with decisions on a regular basis about whether the benefit was worth the risk. One of the teachers clearly articulated an experience in which she weighed both the benefits and risks of allowing a student to publish a controversial topic in the school newspaper.

Corwin: So I had this little cherub of a sixth grader, boy, come up to me a couple weeks ago, and he said, “Can I still submit something to the [newspaper]?” and I said “Sure.” He said “I have something I wanna do.” And I said, “Bring it to me Friday, and we’ll look over it and see if it needs any editing or anything like that.” And he did come to me, very sincere, and my jaw about hit the floor when I saw the article. . . . He wrote an article about how to be sexually safe over the summer. . . . [I]t’s a shame because he did consider his audience, and in his article he said that, you know, there are a lot of kids that are sexually active, but you may not be ready to do this, and so you should make sure that you keep yourself safe and use a condom, and he went all through this, and then his last line was “Have a sexually safe summer.” And I’m going gosh I don’t wanna squelch this, because he was sincere, he wasn’t trying to get a rise out of me. He was sincere about it, he’d considered his audience, he’d thought about what he was writing, and I said, “Can I just ask you what prompted you to choose this subject to write about,” and he said, “Well we’ve been talking about it in health, and the kids my age talk about this all the time,” and I said, “Okay.” And, unfortunately, I had to tell him that I couldn’t publish it, and he understood, actually. Because he told me when he brought it to me, he said that we may not get to run this, or I may have to edit a lot of it. And I just hated it, but I knew, and I’m supposed to be tenured next year, and my job is on the line. . . .

For another teacher, Sawyer, one part of the benefit-risk tension revolved around the value of the

literature. “I wouldn’t choose something for a sexual message, or I wouldn’t *not* choose something for a sexual message—it would be more the quality of the literature. . . .” The following excerpt shows how she had recently applied this to her teaching:

Interviewer: Can you think of any specific examples of times you decided to go for it, things that you have talked about where you were a little worried.

Sawyer: Maya Angelou—teaching poetry right now—and there is a poem . . . and she talks about “If I walk like I had diamonds at the meeting of my thighs,” and so there’ll be some giggles, and I just very matter of factly talk about how sexuality is portrayed in the media and that sometimes women are treated as sexual figures in rap music and in all different forms of advertising—Hardee’s hamburgers. Just recently, I saw one the other night—a commercial—where the girl is scantily clad and eating a cheeseburger, and it was going down everywhere and had her legs poised in just the right way to be attractive to men . . . and how our society uses sexuality to sell products. And so I told them I didn’t really understand why they would be uncomfortable with a line in a poem, when they’re not uncomfortable with watching a commercial on TV. And so we usually, you can kind of rationalize through things if it’s, if the literary value supersedes the risk.

As we have seen in some of the prior quotes, teachers often had to make spur-of-the-moment decisions related to the benefit or risk of talking about sexuality. Sometimes, however, teachers made thoughtful, calculated decisions about how to handle sexuality issues in the classroom prior to the event. One example of this type of planning came from Baker, who actively managed sexuality so that students were exposed to it but in a manner controllable by teachers, and in a manner that would likely avoid trouble. When asked, Baker said her role regarding sexuality was to “Try not to ignore [it],” exemplifying how she experienced the benefit-risk struggle. When working with the teachers she was in charge of as head of the reading program, she helped them *expose* the students to sexuality in the literature without actually *addressing* it with the students:

In the book that we are reading right now, as the English teacher, I have teachers on my team all teach one reading class, so the four of us plan our reading classes together so that the 120 kids are all reading

the same book at the same time. And I gave them a list of which chapters in *Perfect* they probably wouldn't feel comfortable reading out loud.

In her own class discussions, Baker appeared to skirt the issue of sexuality by dancing around the actual sex part when addressing certain sexuality scenes. Specifically, in Elie Wiesel's *Night*, there is a scene in which the teenage protagonist (Elie, a concentration camp prisoner) inadvertently witnesses a guard having sex with a woman he had arranged to meet. Elie laughs and is brutally beaten. In *The Skin I'm In*, there is a scene during which the female protagonist is sexually assaulted on the street. In both cases, Baker said she dealt with those scenes by asking her students what they would have done if they were the protagonist in those situations. Such a question reveals the validity of her description of her role to "try not to ignore," as she doesn't exactly ignore the sexuality and, in fact, uses a pedagogically sound language arts teaching strategy of asking the students to stand in the shoes of the protagonist; yet she still avoids directly talking about sexuality, per se.

### ***Role of the Language Arts Teacher in Terms of Sexuality***

One factor that likely contributed to teacher uncertainty and variation in dealing with the issue of sexuality is that there are no clear rules about whether and how one should include sexuality in language arts, nor about what teachers can and cannot talk about regarding sexuality without negative consequences (Agee, 1999; Noll, 1994). Even when guidelines do exist, such as an objective of relating language arts to students' lives, the extent to which that goal means including discussions of sexuality is very open to interpretation. Further, training in adolescent sexuality issues is virtually nonexistent (Cozzens, 2006), so teachers likely had little knowledge of the topic. The lack of guidelines and training means that teachers' perceived roles in terms of sexuality varied quite a bit from individual to individual.

Many of the teachers interviewed felt that sexuality was within the purview of language arts. In this first example, Corwin talks about how natural it was for sexuality to come up in language arts.

I'm just glad that you're doing this study, because I think, a lot of times, teachers and parents and even kids think it's reserved for science or health, and that in this little curriculum or this little box, and when it does come up in literature, they're, like, unprepared or it's confusing. They don't

know what to do with that because it doesn't seem like it should—for some reason people associate literature and language arts, all fiction, and even fiction can have nonfiction issues with it. So I'm glad you're doing that. I hope you'll let us know how it turns out.

Sawyer took a slightly different tack, suggesting that if you delve as deeply into the literature as you should, controversial issues embedded in the literature will come up:

My role as a literature teacher, I think, is to provide opportunities for literature to be discussed at different levels—at the literal level, on a personal level—and to teach them that, in order to appreciate literature, you really do have to go deeper, and you really do have to respond. And, a lot of times, that's when those questions will come out.

Dickens' perception of her role seemed very similar to Sawyer's, as she perceived it as her responsibility to explain to students issues they don't understand, and in that the texts themselves cannot be fully understood without dealing with sexuality-related topics.

Interviewer: How do you see your role as a language arts teacher in regard to sexuality in general?

Dickens: I wouldn't define it, necessarily, as part of my responsibility ... I wouldn't do that, but I also do think that if your job requires it at that time, that's something that I think is a certain responsibility. You have that responsibility to give them something they don't understand—and clear things up. And I think not only does it add to the meaning of the story, it helps them understand that more...

Later she provided a specific example: "I know how important the theme of, going back to *To Kill A Mockingbird*, how important the theme of a rape is. I know that you have to talk about that."

For these teachers, the inclusion of students' experiences and explorations, including inquiries about sexuality, were assumed to be part of the language arts classroom environment. Because of the demands of discussion and analysis of various writing and literature assignments, they found themselves addressing a variety of topics, including, but not limited to, sexuality and did not feel it was appropriate to compartmentalize these topics to health or science classes.

Other teachers, while more hesitant to fully embrace the idea of sexuality as a part of language arts as a subject, felt these discussions were important for helping students deal with life issues. Gibbons reported:

I feel like, a lot of times, my job for some students is to help them learn to deal with life better. They can get through without knowing what a noun is, but some of them just need a little more help dealing with other issues, and hopefully, I can help them deal with that, because that is way more important.

Still others seemed to feel ambivalent about whether they should include sexuality topics. Campbell said, "It's not in the standards, so I don't see a role. However, that being said, as a language arts teacher ... I tell them to bring in personal experiences to their writing and their reading." Similarly, when asked whether it was part of her role to discuss sexuality, Channing stated: "I guess, maybe as a facilitator, a little bit. I feel that it really should come from the parents. I don't want to overstep my boundaries or the parents, 'cause you don't know what they're telling their kids." Not surprisingly, those who did not perceive discussion of sexuality to be part of the language arts teacher role were also more likely to describe limiting discussion of sexuality by "shutting it down" (Campbell), avoiding topics, and referring questions to parents.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study found that sexuality-related topics did arise in a variety of ways in language arts and that many of the teachers interviewed felt it would be beneficial for their students to know about sexuality and for teachers to discuss sexuality more. However, because they were fearful of negative outcomes, the teachers tended to practice avoidance of the topic, using a variety of strategies. The simultaneous perceived benefit and fear led some of the teachers to deal with a constant benefit-risk tension. How they negotiated this tension was somewhat related to teachers' perceived role regarding sexuality, which varied quite a bit among teachers in the sample.

Reasons for avoidance of sexuality appear to have come from a variety of sources, depending on the teacher. While some seemed to hold conservative beliefs themselves, many expressed some degree of discomfort regardless of their personal views on the topic. For many, their knowledge of other teachers who

were disciplined (or in some cases, fired) for sexuality-related educational decisions might have exerted an influence on their own practice (Freedman & Johnson, 2000; Noll, 1994). Noll (1994) addressed the "ripple effect" (p. 59) of public cases of literature teachers accused of various acts (e.g., teaching Satanism, encouraging marijuana use and witchcraft, supporting Charles Manson, and violating obscenity standards) and how it influences other literature teachers' choices.

Parents figured prominently in the benefit-risk assessment. What teachers are willing to risk may depend on whose child they are teaching. Many teachers either assume that parents hold conservative views or that those who do are likely to make trouble for them if they discuss sexuality (Ashcraft, 2008). Teachers may be aware of earlier conflict with a student's previous teachers or with teachers of that student's older siblings. Unfortunately, parents who value discussion of sexuality in the classroom are often quietly supportive and can be overshadowed by those who are vocally opposed (Ashcraft, 2008). On the other hand, some teachers did not express fear of parents, and one said that being more direct decreased parental problems. This finding is consistent with Agee's (1999) finding that teachers who had been challenged before were confident about dealing with future complaints. Knowing that some conflict is likely may lead experienced teachers to have plans in place and, hence, less anxiety.

One important finding is that teachers' perceptions of their role in terms of sexuality issues varied quite a bit from teacher to teacher. In one sense, this variation is surprising, considering that they all shared the same subject matter and had somewhat similar school contexts. On the other hand, although we did not ask about the extent to which administrators and teachers talked to each other about the role of sexuality in language arts, our impression from the interviews is that these issues were not openly addressed in schools. Research indicates that teacher training tends to ignore the issue as well (Cozzens, 2006). The absence of discussion may leave the individual personal characteristics of the teacher very much at play in conceiving their role.

When it comes to addressing sexuality in a language arts setting, the teachers appeared uncertain about where the line was and what constituted crossing that line. Knowing you can get fired, and being physically very close to those who can fire you yet not knowing exactly what will get you fired, is a form of oppression. Under such conditions, teachers may fear that even

asking the question could lead those in power to question their suitability. Therefore, no matter what approach a school takes, as argued by Agee (1999), clarity about the issue would relieve some of the uncertainty and fear. In terms of the students' needs, breaking the silence at the faculty and staff level would decrease the extent to which decisions about the issues are entirely dependent on the individual characteristics of the teachers because there would be shared knowledge and explicit norms. Individual issues include teachers' political beliefs, levels of discomfort, and particular experience and knowledge.

Our data indicate that it is difficult for a teacher to accept it when the apparent risk of addressing sexuality in a language arts classroom is high. When the classroom atmosphere is considered to be high risk, students lose the chance to free-write. They are, subsequently, not exposed to important novels and are judged immature and discouraged from discussing sexuality issues. Students can then be left with unanswered questions and a sense that school is not a viable source of information about their own lived experiences. As Whelan (2009) pointed out in her article on self-censorship among librarians, "The truth is, no one ever really knows which books might end up changing a kid's life, helping him find comfort, or gaining a better understanding of a subject" (p. 30). When a teacher skirts discussion of sexuality, the students have lost a valuable resource.

Change is necessary in the way sexuality is approached in schools toward a democratic, developmentally appropriate, and open manner. Many have written about how to reform sexuality education by making it empowering for all students and more focused on the eventual goal of positive sexual experiences as opposed to disease and pregnancy avoidance (cf, Allen, 2006; Ashcraft, 2008; Hedgpeeth, 2000; Ingham, 2005; Spencer, Maxwell, & Aggleton, 2008). We fully endorse such approaches while recognizing the existing barriers. For the short term, a more incremental solution that begins with teacher and administrator training about sexuality and the curriculum might be effective and is certainly more immediately feasible in the context of communities like those in our study.

Sexuality development in children and teenagers needs to be a larger part of educator training. Teachers then need further training about sexuality and how it relates to the curriculum of their specific disciplines, and administrators need training in decision making and communicating about sexuality issues at the school and district levels. The hope is that school and district

personnel begin to talk to each other in an informed manner about sexuality and about the sexuality information needs of students, thus removing the silence that exists among adults in schools. Regular, informal conversations between teachers about how they have dealt with sexuality issues in the classroom would be helpful as well. Initially, regardless of the actual decisions that are made, simply discussing different possibilities, making decisions, and communicating those decisions to those who need to know them could make a big difference. Teachers need to know to what extent principals will support which actions, and principals need to know to what extent superintendents will support their actions. Some of the teachers in the study avoided sexuality in a very conscious manner, fully aware that the avoidance was not entirely beneficial. Others had not even really considered the extent to which they did or did not talk about sexuality until our interview. For both of these groups, increased transparency and discussion would help them to better meet the needs of their students.

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## **Appendix A: Topic list shown or given to teachers at the start of each interview**

### ***Topics included in the Study***

(These topics are a subset of the topics included in the Guidelines for Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Key Concepts and Topics from the Sexuality Education and Information Council of the United States (SIECUS) (found at <http://www.siecus.org>)

- Puberty
- Reproduction
- Body image
- Love
- Romantic relationships and dating
- Marriage and lifetime commitments
- Reproductive and sexual anatomy and physiology
- Sexual orientation
- Masturbation
- Shared sexual behavior
- Sexual abstinence
- Sexual fantasy
- Sexual dysfunction
- Contraception
- Pregnancy and prenatal care
- Abortion
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- HIV and AIDS
- Sexual abuse, assault, violence, and harassment
- Gender identity