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Black Males Accessing and Usage of Sex Education in Mississippi

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

BLACK MALES AND SEX EDUCATION IN MISSISSIPPI: HOW BLACK MALES ACCESS AND USE SEX EDUCATION

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL POLICY STUDIES

BY

DEVIN D. MOSS
CHICAGO, IL
MAY 2020
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I began my doctorate experience at a broken stage in my life, but I am ending it with hope and determination. As the Director of the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center at a university in Chicago, I worked endlessly to provide an equitable learning environment for all students. That position was my dream job within my dream career. However, a serious of unfortunate events drove my decision to end my time within that capacity. In preparing for my exit, I recalled speaking to Leslie-Ann who deemed it necessary to provide me an exit ceremony on my own terms; she felt it would give me closure. I had met so many students and worked with many colleagues; they motivated me to be the best at achieving our mission on a national level. It hurt to leave my role and begin this process, but the farewell dinner was the closure I needed to have to make this transition.

My transition into the program was turbulent but it slowly progressed into the challenge I needed. There was a lifestyle shift that occurred as I moved from working professional to professional student, while life continued to unfold. During my first semester, my dad became ill and required immediate surgery. I do not like to use excuses to address challenges in my life, but I figured it would be worth sharing this experience with Dr. Sobe, my advisor at the time. We had an affirming conversation that allowed me to feel supported and empowered me to work through moments when school and life clash. I felt encouraged in that moment.

I was also serving as a graduate assistant during this time, but I had no clue what I was doing. I quickly learned what it meant to be a doctoral student and the amount of motivation required to be great. I watched as Dr. Jules worked tirelessly and endlessly as he taught, researched, wrote, and mentored. It was inspiring to observe his work ethic as I began to define my own work ethic.
My time with Dr. Phillippo has taught me how to conduct research from start to finish. She says this is her role, but she has encouraged me more than she may realize. Imposter syndrome impacted much of my experience, but I was able to chip away at this process bit-by-bit to overcome it. I never felt inferior or inadequate after our many conversations. It was the tender challenge and support that I needed to make it through this time as I learned new skills.

Dr. Newell and Dra. Chang served on my committee and invested their time and resources into my efforts. I appreciate the expertise and questions that you brought to this project. It allowed me to create a more inclusive project that speaks to an array of Black male experiences.

Many others have contributed to this moment. Rebecca, Aaron, and Rueben saved me in so many ways and gave me the confidence to stand in a moment of adversity and persist through it. I have implemented that lesson throughout this process.

Many other interactions influenced this moment. I once asked Rev. Dr. Talley how I could one day sit in a chair like hers. She had a high gloss, red leather chair with cushioned armrests and gold metal trim. She told me all of the things I needed to do, such as attend graduate school, secure internships, and network. I told her I would achieve all of those things, and her response was, “I know.” I appreciate the confidence she had in me and how she took me under her wing and mentored me throughout my undergraduate and graduate school experiences.

I am grateful for Bri and other doctoral students who shared their journeys and inspired me to achieve great things throughout this experience. I needed to experience a sense of community to feel purpose and connection, and you all helped me find what I needed to get through the coursework and research topic exploration phase.
Thank you to Alex, Tolu, Taylor/Troy, Zach, Molly, Tatum, Kat, Megan, Victoria, Jenny, Kelsey, Hannah, Will, Liam, and the entire residential staff at SUNY Geneseo who understood this moment in my life and allowed me to find the balance between work, school, and life.

As I explored research topics, I encountered a situation within my professional career that caused me to question Black males’ access to sex and relationship education. I served as an advisor for a student who was accused of sexual misconduct, and it was this experience that caused me to question how we provide sex education for students nationally and how the diversity of those experiences impacts our college campuses. It was through this experience that I was able to envision a research project that was meaningful for the benefit of others.

Thank you, Anthony, Walter, Autumn, Ricky, and Cedric, as well as the Loyola Graduate School for financially supporting my research, and a special thank you to Walter for being a supportive supervisor throughout this experience.

I always knew that I wanted to earn a doctorate degree. As an undergraduate, I became a Ronald E. McNair Scholar—a program aimed at supporting prospective doctoral students from first-generation, low socioeconomic backgrounds. I met two staff members who supported my dreams—Dr. Cole and Ms. Hereford. I hope my cohort of scholars made you all proud! Additionally, the IRB Board, Ms. Vinson, Dr. Foster, Dr. Upshaw, and Dr. Edney III were instrumental in helping me to achieve my research goals.

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This project could not have happened without the research participants. They are a group of motivated and talented young men who often thanked me for my research. This research
allowed their experiences—the struggles and triumphs—to be heard. They were happy to hear someone was concerned about their sexual identities. We had a series of mutually beneficial conversations that led to the results and conclusions of this research project, and I thank them for their contributions.

Last, but most importantly, I thank my parents who have been supportive of this experience in a number of ways. My mom helped me maintain my sanity when I wanted to figuratively walk away, and my dad helped me ground my thoughts about this research topic. Neither of my parents finished high school but were adamant about me completing my own education. I have surprised us all by completing this endeavor, and I thank them for the many sacrifices and encouraging conversations along the way.

It truly does take a village, and I am thankful for the village who got me to this point.
Dedicated to the men of Dark Corner.
You have to go the way your blood beats.
If you don't live the only life you have,
you won't live some other life,
you won't live any life at all.

— James Baldwin
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ABSTRACT

In the United States, sex education curricula sponsored by public school districts varies from state-to-state. Nationally, this arrangement provides students with varied levels of exposure to critical sex education information. Sex education is mandatory in Mississippi but is not required to be medically accurate, culturally unbiased, or include HIV prevention education. Mississippi’s sex education curriculum is, however, mandated to be age appropriate and can promote religion. The parameters of sex education in Mississippi have led to sex information gaps for youth. Black males in this study turned to other sources to fill in the resulting information gaps. Such resources often included other people and Internet sources. This self-selected information allowed youth to understand the logistics of sexual behaviors resulting in them becoming more sexually responsible in their activities. The sex education received in school—combined with their independent exploration—provided the foundation for developing their sexual identities.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Sex education should provide Black males with comprehensive and medically accurate information to make sexual decisions while also allowing them to explore their sexuality; however, such access is not afforded to all or even most students. Sex education in the United States is limited in that it provides a narrow view of sexuality (Hall, Jones, Witkemper, Collins, & Rodgers, 2019). Most state policies promote abstinence education over comprehensive sex education. Contraceptives and the prevention of pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are rarely included in state sex education curriculum policies. Approximately half of the states address relationships as part of the curriculum, but sexual consent is only covered by a small number of states. Sexual identity diversity is supported by some sex education curricula but scrutinized by others. Moreover, modern sex education curricula appear to omit important aspects of human sexuality that are needed to be an informed sexual being. Therefore, reimagining comprehensive and medically accurate sex education has the potential to provide a space for young Black men to explore and define their sexuality through gaining sexual knowledge.

Sex education has the potential to play a significant role in the development of young boys sexual identities, allowing them to shape the narratives around their masculinity. For some people, the concept of Black masculinity conjures up images that display domineering, gendered, and hypersexual behavior. This misinformed perspective of Black masculinity was developed through the systematic, forced breeding of slaves (e.g., Federal Writers' Project, 1936; Frazier, 1949; Foster, 2011; Orelus, 2010), has been criminalized in the court of community justice (e.g., Anderson, 2008; Pickens, 2013; Smiley & Fakunle, 2016), theorized in academia (e.g., Bowleg
et al., 2016; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003; Watkins, Patton, & Miller, 2016), and perpetuated throughout the existence of television and media (Ballagan, Parisot, Trainum, & Cruz-Rodriguez, 2016; Barnett & Flynn, 2014; Opportunity Agenda, 2011). White nationalists and white nationalist narratives have framed Black masculinity, inclusive of sexuality, as a threat to White supremacy (Dow, 2016; Cooper, 2006; Ferber, 2007; Noguera, 2008). Furthermore, the myth of the hypersexual and dangerous Black male has led to sexualized microaggressions toward Black males such as the fetishization of Black male bodies, penis envying and stereotyping, and popularized fantasies of Black male thug sexual dominance (Andrews, Mower, & Silk, 2011; Farley, 1997; Leverenz, 2014). Although the hyper-sexualization of perceived Black manhood and masculinity exists within society, sex education provided by schools has not provided a space for Black males to learn about, explore, and express their sexuality (Lamb, Roberts, & Plocha, 2016). Sex education often has and continues to aim at scaring chaste youth while positing sex as a taboo experience reserved for married adults (Frieh & Smith, 2017; Trudell, 1993). Public misconception of the goals and possibilities of sex education continues to interfere with youth having agency over their sexuality via sex education.

The intersections between gender and race have historically impacted and currently impact the sexual behavior of Black males through the social norm of Black masculine posturing—subverting racial oppression with gendered hegemony. That is, Black males rely on their status as males to create environments in which their masculinity is praised and rewarded in an effort to overcome the harsh realities of racial oppression. Furthermore, a plethora of researchers discuss Black male experiences, but discuss their intersectionality as raced and gendered individuals to a far lesser degree (Wright, 2011). According to Davis (2005), “Black males…are too often disadvantaged by this perplexing and misunderstood intersection of race
and gender” (p. 131). However, they must be understood within this dual context to gain genuine insight into their lived experiences as Black men.

Crenshaw (1991) asserts that intersectionality allows the interchange between power and oppression to be explored. Intersectionality emerged when Black feminists objected to the classist, whitewashing of feminism in the mainstream feminist movement. Black women felt they could not relate to the lived experiences of White women. Most of the Black women were working class and also endured sexism in the civil rights movement. The racism, classism, and sexism experienced between the feminist and civil rights movements caused Black women to seek intersectional feminist practices that centered their lived experiences. Intersectionality theory has evolved in scope and encompasses the experiences of many social identities today. Furthermore, intersectionality theory proclaims that “race, gender, sexuality, and other identities cannot be examined in isolation as they intersect and influence each other” (Allen, 2013, p. 6).

Intersectionality sets the stage for an interpretation of Black male masculinity, including their sexuality. In the case of Black males, “intersectionality allows researchers to make sense of students’ experiences as Blacks, as males, and most importantly as Black males” (McGuire, Berhanu, Davis, & Harper, 2014, p. 265). Intersectionality, in this current project, allowed the researcher to explore the connections between race, gender, sexuality, and the Black male body. Intersectionality allows us to understand how the Black body is often scrutinized, fetishized, and punished due to fear of its sexual dominance. However, exploring Black males’ sexuality through the lens of intersectionality also provides a counternarrative and an opportunity to understand what Black males want to learn and how they might incorporate this knowledge into their sexual identities.

**Background of the Problem**
The government has sought to control and manage society’s sexual behaviors by managing sex education and social sex trends throughout history. This management has contributed to creating a gap between what sex education is offered by the government and what specific populations need to know about sex, especially Black boys. In earlier centuries, government agencies acknowledged the need to manage growing populations. This stance required officials to account for mortality rates, romantic relationships, and birth control mechanisms in order to understand “‘population’ as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labor capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded” (Foucault, 1990, p. 25). Sexual behavior was at the heart of governmental efforts to police populations and has remained a core factor in population control today.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, a shift occurred from managing the sex lives of married couples to the governing of sexual freedom in terms of the sexuality of children, women, queer individuals, and those deemed less fit for procreation (Huber & Firmin, 2014). As these individuals came under scrutiny, they began to confess the truths about their sexual preferences, orientations, and habits. The rules of sex also started to fray as the “individual [became] driven, in spite of himself, by the somber madness of sex” (Foucault, 1990, p. 39). The outing and labeling of homosexuals and mentally ill individuals as perverts gave them and those studying them power to liberate themselves from the repressive shackles that policed married couples. Sex was reserved for couples who society approved of, which excluded the sexuality of youth. The sexuality of youth was taboo and did not warrant consideration for a sex education curriculum that allowed for the exploration and celebration of teen sexuality.
In contrast, an ongoing debate developed regarding which types of sex education programs should be made available to the public, such as abstinence-only or comprehensive sex education (Kendall, 2013). President Obama’s administration made their own mark on this debate by cutting funding from the national abstinence-only program after research proved that abstinence-only programs were ineffective (Greslé-Favier, 2010).

One reason abstinence-only programs have been noted as largely ineffective is because they reach students at a time when many seek exploration of their sexual power and want to learn more about their desires (Illes, 2012). A key aspect of tapping into their desires is acknowledging that sexuality is not binary (Illes, 2012; Mayo, 2016). In fact, sex education must be as fluid as actual gender and sexuality. Illes (2012) sees sex as a fundamental “social activity…composed of…eroticized images, socially learned courses of action, or ‘sexual scripts’ and physical/sensual activities” (p. 617). The form of sex Illes (2012) references is a physical act created from sexual desires. Illes (2012) goes on to state, “Sexuality, like gender, is a product of social interaction” (p. 617). This allows for multiple interpretations of both and highlights the importance of sex education.

The Call for Sex Education

Sexual risk-taking among men provides an opportunity to explore and expand male sexual health education needs. Men are more likely than women to engage in risky sexual behavior based on how they are socialized (Buston & Wight, 2006). Black men from economically and socially marginalized communities are more likely to experience a lack of proper healthcare treatment due to structural racism that impacts schools, employment, and healthcare (Aronson et al., 2013). Black boys prove to be an exceptional challenge for sexual healthcare providers in that “they are much less likely to access sexual health services; have
lower levels of factual knowledge about sexual health and have a much higher incidence of risk-taking behavior” (p. 515). To address this disparity, sexual health educators must understand how and why gender and hegemonic masculinity is formulated through “avoiding feminine behaviors, displaying dominance and power, portraying independence and stoicism, and demonstrating fearlessness, bravery, and competitiveness” (p. 378). Moreover, Haste (2013) believes that sex education has failed to meet the needs of males. To succeed at doing so, sex educators must learn to speak to multiple masculinities by removing pressure for men to conform to the hegemonic standards of masculinity.

Two areas of contention affect students, especially Black males, in regard to comprehensive sex education. First, Illes (2012) states that students need a space where they are free to ask questions about their desires. To help them avoid risky behavior, they should be encouraged, from an early age, to understand themselves as sexual citizens who make responsible choices. Regarding desire, boys have been proven to seek information on ‘how to do sex’ (Buston & Wight, 2006; Haste, 2013). They often gather information about sex through the media, friends, and pornography. While often resourceful in terms sex’s physical nature, these mediums do not sufficiently teach sexual responsibility.

Secondly, some researchers have advocated for expanding the boundaries of sexual citizenship through granting sexual rights to those labeled as perverts (i.e., gays, the mentally ill, children, etc.) by society (Haste, 2013; Illes, 2012). This would increase sex education’s accessibility to multiple social identities. Furthermore, Haste (2013) asserts that boys need sex education that allows them to emote in front of others without “losing face”. Therefore, educators should create environments where males are safe to explore their emotions as it relates to their diverse identities.
Sex Education Instruction

Few states have policies obligating school districts to provide comprehensive and accurate sex education. For instance, Guttmacher Institute (2017), the leading research and policy organization for sexual and reproductive health rights, found that only 24 states and the District of Columbia mandate some form of sex education and just 34 states mandate HIV education. Only 27 states mandate specified requirements for sex and HIV education programs—13 of which require medically accurate instructional materials with just eight states requiring that instructional materials be unbiased on race, ethnicity, and gender. Yet, 37 states require that abstinence education be covered or stressed.

Topics included in sex education curricula vary from state-to-state. Fear tactics are often utilized to discourage teens from engaging in sexual activity in many states (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). Nineteen states emphasize that sexual activity should only take place after marriage. Of the 12 states that require classroom discussions on sexual orientation, three mandate that only negative information regarding sexual orientation is a part of the curriculum. Thirteen states require the inclusion of information on the negative outcomes of teen sex and pregnancy. Only 28 states and the District of Columbia mandate that sex education include information on making healthy decisions around sexuality.

Mississippi has over 20 years of documented history of proposed sex education policy bills with few garnering enough support to become law. House Bill (HB) 1304 was approved by the governor in 1998 and required courses that taught sex education to include abstinence education. A total of 14 bills were proposed between 2002 and 2010 that sought to implement such policies as comprehensive sex education, sex education programs, and requiring the
teaching of sex education in kindergarten through 12th grades. However, all of the policies died in committee.

In 2011, HB 999 was approved by the governor, and for the first time all Mississippi public school districts were mandated to provide either “abstinence-only” or “abstinence-plus” sex education. HB 999 proposed a sex education curriculum that taught abstinence education, enforced the separation of boys and girls into different classes when sex related materials are taught, and did not discuss proabortion resources. Mississippi’s state government has constructed their sex education law to stress abstinence, no pre-marital sex, the negative outcomes of teen sexual activity, and how to avoid sexual coercion (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). Furthermore, the Mississippi sex education curriculum omits contraceptive and sexual orientation information and presents medically inaccurate—and even racially bias and classist—information regarding STIs, HIV, and abortions in order to help teens avoid sexual contact until marriage (Advocates for Youth, n.d.).

Since the implementation of HB 999, policymakers have continuously sought to enhance the curriculum by progressing from an abstinence based curriculum to a comprehensive sex education curriculum. There have been more attempts at expanding the window of curriculum delivery to include access to sex education information from kindergarten through 12th grade. Policymakers’ advocacy for sex education in Mississippi continue to push the state forward in addressing the sex education information needs of youth.

**Teen Sexual Behavior**

Teens in the United States are engaging in sexually risky behaviors that may impact their sexual wellness and overall health. In fact, teen sexuality has been deemed a problem (Illes, 2012). Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that in 2015, 41% of
teens engaged in sexual intercourse with 30% stating that they had a sexual encounter within the last three months (Kann et al., 2017). Of those who engaged in sexual intercourse, 43% did not use a condom the last time they had sex, 14% used no method to prevent pregnancy, and 21% drank alcohol or used drugs before their last episode of intercourse. Only 10% of all students who had engaged in sexual activity were tested for HIV. Sexually risky behaviors place youth at higher risks of exposure to STIs and teen pregnancies. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016), young people—ages 13 to 24—accounted for an estimated 22% of all new 2015 HIV diagnoses in the United States and half of the nearly 20 million new STIs reported each year were among young people between the ages of 15 and 24. Additionally, nearly 230,000 babies were born to teen girls aged 15 to 19 in 2015 (Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Driscoll, & Mathews, 2017).

Nationally, Black youth between the ages of 15 and 21 report their first experience of sexual intercourse at earlier ages than their White, Hispanic/Latino, or Asian counterparts (McCabe, Brewster, & Tillman, 2011). In 2009, 72% of Black males reported having sexual intercourse—a higher rate than Black females (58%), Hispanic males (53%) and females (45%), and White females (45%) and males (40%) (Kann et al., 2009). In 2016, 52.7% of Black males in 9th through 12th grade reported having had sexual intercourse within their lifetime—with 12.8% noting that they had sexual intercourse before the age of 13 (Kann et al., 2017). Additionally, 23.2% of Black males also reported having had sexual intercourse with four or more persons. However, only 57.9% reported the use of a condom during sexual intercourse.

Black youth often decide to have their first initial sexual experience due to unmonitored opportunities to engage in sex, personal readiness, external pressures, or having a trusted sexual partner (Lanier, Stewart, Schensul, & Guthrie, 2018). Unmonitored opportunities often took
place when adults were not present or when they were engaged in other activities such as sleeping. Personal readiness was most likely to correlate with having a positive first experience. The individuals studied reported often had a high degree of sexual agency and expressed personal desire and readiness for sex with their partner (Lanier et al., 2018; Corneille et al., 2008). However, students who expressed negative first experiences exhibited lower sexual agency and only participated due to external pressures. Youth who reported negative first experiences often participated in sexual activities due to their partner’s request. Moreover, female youth noted higher rates of dissatisfaction with their first experience when pressured for sex. Individuals who felt pressured often followed through with the sex act based on a desired outcome or goal, such as receiving their partner’s love or the prospect of entering into a relationship with their partner (Lanier et al., 2018; Trinh & Ward, 2016). However, external pressures to have sex were often linked to initiation into manhood and shared stories of experiences in order to gain status (Lanier et al., 2018; Trinh & Ward, 2016). Finally, positive first sexual experiences were associated with partner trust. Girls developed trust for their sexual partner(s) based on the sexual experiences and feedback they received from peers who they also trusted. For boys, on the other hand, trust stemmed from their sexual partner(s) allowing them to ask questions during the sexual experience or making a mistake without the fear of being chastised or publicly ridiculed.

**Statement of the Problem**

Many state policies limit sex education to abstinence-plus programs in which students are only exposed to messages such as abstinence until marriage and the negative outcomes of teen sex (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). In practice, the sex education curriculum in Mississippi has consisted of youth being instructed to unwrap a chocolate bar, pass it from person to person, and note the increasing, visible damage of the chocolate as more people touch it (Klein, 2014). This
exercise is aimed at promoting abstinence by illustrating how soiled the chocolate became. This form of sex education denies what students have reported they want: access to resources that comprehensively and accurately answer their questions regarding sex (Limmer, 2010). Furthermore, cool pose theory posits that sexuality as a developmental characteristic of Black masculine identity (Seal & Erhardt, 2004), exhibited by boys openly seeking sexual health information (Oosterhoff, Gilder, & Mueller, 2016; Forrest, 2000). To provide Black males with more resources, including the information boys seek, research must determine where these youth acquire knowledge of sex, what social factors influence their sexual behaviors, and how might we—researchers, educators, and policymakers—support their sexual well-being by providing access to comprehensive, race-gender affirming sex education in spaces that answer their questions. This research project, therefore, contributes to sex education research by exploring two factors: how young Black males living in minimal-sex education states gain access to sex education information, and how their use of this knowledge impacts their sexual behavior.

**Significance of the Study**

Black males providing insight into their sex education experiences affords educators, policymakers, and public health officials an opportunity to inform the design of culturally relevant sex education programs that respond to the needs of Black males. Scholars have provided opportunities for males to discuss their experiences with sex education. Sykes (2005) and King (2010) both focused their research on college students’ perceptions of their sex education. Wilkerson (2007) focused his research on how queer college men formulated sociosexual identities, and specifically considered the impact of state-sponsored sexual health education programs. These studies focused on college students. However, students gain knowledge of sex and develop some sense of sexuality during their adolescent years (Sanderson
Additional, previous studies on college students have focused on the internalization of sex education and sexuality development but did not highlight the experiences of Black males in a state with school-based abstinence-based sex education. Additionally, research has explored how sex education is provided through community resources (Bennett, Harden, & Anstey, 2018; Hood, Hall, Dixon, Jolly, & Linnan, 2018; Powell et al., 2017) and through online resources (Dolcini, Catania, Harper, Boyer, & Richards, 2012; Dolcini et al., 2018). Therefore, this research project sought to provide Black males with agency garnered through reflection and discussion of how they have accessed and experienced sex education from their teenage years to their current age. The resulting knowledge provides an opportunity for public health educators, teachers, and policymakers to create accessible sex education that equips Black males to develop a healthy sexuality throughout the teen and young adult years. This contribution’s significance is further delineated into theory, practice, and public health policy.

**Significance to Theory and Practice**

In order to provide sexual education for Black males, we must understand and envision a model for culturally relevant curricula. Culturally relevant theory asserts that students’ cultural context is utilized to generate engaging learning connections (Ladson-Billings, 1995). In addition to Mississippi lawmakers only providing abstinence-plus sex education, the state’s current programs often neglect cultural inclusion except for gender segregation during sex education sessions (McKee, Ragsdale, & Southward, 2014). Providing culturally relevant, comprehensive sex education of empowering design (e.g., Freire, 1996) may prove to be engaging (Goodman, 1998; Peters, Johnson, Meshack, & Savage, 2010; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988). Understanding how Black males internalize sex education offers providers insight into
how to improve the general health of students (Advocates for Youth, 2009; Alford, 2008; Kirby & Answers, 2007).

Significance to Policy and Public Health

Mississippi’s limited sex education programs do not address the reality of teen sexual behavior. In 2011, state lawmakers passed the Mississippi Sex Education Law (Miss. Code Ann. Section 37-13-171), which mandated that Mississippi school districts adopt a sex education policy—either abstinence-plus or abstinence-only—and implement a sex education curriculum approved by the Mississippi Department of Education. Although the law has been in effect since 2011, Mississippi has maintained one of the highest teen birth rates in the United States (Guttmacher Institute, 2017) as researchers and policymakers have proclaimed abstinence programs unsuccessful (Santelli et al., 2017; Smith, Panisch, Malespin, & Pereira, 2017). The 2015 Mississippi Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 54% of high school students stated they had sexual intercourse, 39% of high school students did not use a condom the last time they had sex, and that the state had the highest rates of both chlamydia and gonorrhea in the nation, with adolescents and young adults 15 to 24 years old being responsible for over half of cases for both diseases (Vargas & Zhang, 2017). The state’s teen birthrate makes the reality of teen sexual behavior evident. Mississippi’s birthrate among teens aged 15 to 19 was more than one and a half times the national average in 2015—34.8 Mississippi births per 1,000 teens verses 22.0 per 1,000 for the U.S.—which ranked the state as the third highest in U.S. teen birthrate (Vargas & Zhang, 2017). Thus, this research also expands the scope of sexual education programs to address teen pregnancy and STI rates.

Summary
The true narrative of Black male sexuality is rooted in sexual curiosity, rather than sexual deviance. Sexuality plays a role in the exploration of Black manhood, yet access to comprehensive sex education is limited due to the intersections of race and gender. This limitation highlights the lack of access to sexual health resources for Black male youth. This project aims to center Black males’ experiences with sex education, allowing their voices to be heard. Their experiences provide researchers, policy-makers, and educators an opportunity to improve the comprehensiveness and accessibility of sex education to Black boys and men.

In this study, the researcher used phenomenology to explore how Black male accessed and used sex education. Twelve individuals participated in this study. The researcher discovered that many Black males, as youth, accessed sex education materials on their own through such resources as the Internet as a supplement to education they received in school and from family members. Black males ultimately used this information to help cultivate their sense of sexual identity. Their experiences suggested the importance of developing culturally relevant sex education that speaks to their holistic development as a sexual being.
Sex education has been a highly contentious topic throughout history, and has led to social and political moments of progression and conservatism. Sex education has also managed to disengage young men in general by providing inadequate education that fails to address or acknowledges their sexual health information needs and desires. American sex education policies have historically displayed the cultural and moral values of conservative gatekeepers in regard to sexuality and instruction. Little is known about sex education prior to the 1900s; however, the limited information available contextualizes how sex education became a nationally debated subject throughout modern America. Events in the 20th century have challenged conservative views on sexuality and provided access to sexual exploration and liberation for some youth through school and community resources.

**The Implementation and Evolution of Sex Education in Public Schools**

The United States experienced a sexual progressive era that lasted from 1880 to 1920, during which views on sex, morality, and sex education for young people changed (Moran, 1996). During this time, a number of unrelated events cast sexuality into the national spotlight. At the time independent, “socialists, anarchists, purists, muckrakers, hygienists, eugenics, and social workers” simultaneous worked to reshape the lived experiences of Americans (Mook, 2007, p. 26). Via the nexus to their work, individuals within society came to assert a series of progressive beliefs: the concept of immorality damaged humanity and created negative
consequences for innocent people, the purpose and use of sex extended beyond procreation, the population birth rate should be controlled, the government should address social issues, and that schools could become the panacea for societal problems (Tiles, 1999). Although in stark contrast at times, social reformers’ agendas moved society toward producing school and community-based sex education for children.

During this progressive era, sex was primarily viewed as an activity that should occur within a marriage for the purpose of procreation. Views did not begin to shift until Maurice Parmelee, a sociologist, nudist, and future member of the F. D. Roosevelt administration, began to proclaim that sex could be an enjoyable activity (Woodall, 2002). Parmelee advocated for children being taught all aspects of sexual play and stressed the importance of sexual play prior to couples conceiving children. He believed that by teaching children these important lessons about sex, they would become responsible citizens in the future.

Schools became an arena for social activism and change experimentation under the John Dewey and the Progressive Education Association movement (Huber & Firmin, 2014). Reformers sought to nurture students rather than relying on nature as the eugenicists had in prior decades. The progressive reformers specifically considered education an important mechanism that could benefit all sectors of society. This ideology paved the way for sex education in schools. Progressives and social hygienists recognized open discussion of sex as a need because “mystery and silence” were insufficient in preventing young people from engaging in sexual activities (Huber & Firmin, 2014). The social consensus of the time was that young people needed to control their sexual urges and that adequate information could assist them (Pivar, 2002).
The National Education Association passed resolutions to implement sex education in schools in 1912 and 1914 (Huber & Firmin, 2014). Proponents of the policy knew that it would require collaboration among young people’s homes, churches, schools, and community organizations for the policy to succeed. Moran (1996) noted that Chicago was the first test city for this policy. Ella Flagg Young, the first female superintendent of a major urban school system and the first female president of the National Education Association, was behind the policy experiment (Webb & McCarthy, 1998). As a pragmatist, Young found that most literature ignored the sexuality of young people (Moran, 1996). She sought to leverage her position to change this as she believed ignorance of sex education ultimately led to sexual vice.

Chicago was the ideal location to initially implement the new sex education policy due to the city’s rampant prostitution, and a well-established community-based hygienist movement (Huber & Firmin, 2014). At the time, the general ideology asserted that social ills could be better prevented by education rather than reactive treatment of those already engaged in problematic behaviors. The goal was to impact youths’ decision-making before they became adults, resulting in more desirable (socially acceptable) behaviors. The Vice Commission of Chicago (VCC) endorsed moral and scientifically accurate sex education for youth who had reached puberty. It also encouraged parents to teach their children sex education or allow a doctor to do so if the parents were too embarrassed. The VCC also acknowledged that while sex education in school was still experimental, there were many potential benefits if the right educators taught the subject matter. However, Young knew the implementation of the policy would fail if it did not have a moral and religious foundation (Jensen, 2007).

During the 1913-1914 school year, Young proposed a three-part series of sex education lectures that would be presented to over 20,000 high school students (Moran, 1996). Medical
experts served as sex educators with male physicians presenting lectures to the boys and female physicians presenting lectures to the girls. This was the first time that sex education had been presented in public schools by medical professionals. The first lecture covered physical facts of sexual behaviors; the subsequent two lectures covered venereal diseases and the need to abstain from sexual behavior until marriage. Given that only 20% of youth continued their education into post-primary years, Young also insisted that the younger children receive more general presentations about sexual purity.

Opponents of Young claimed that presenting young people with sex education would have an adverse effect and cause them to develop unhealthy curiosities that would destroy their natural innocence (Jensen, 2007). Illinois’s governor felt that young people would not come to know sexual immorality if they were never taught sexual facts in schools. However, most opponents did not believe that school-based sex education would lead to immorality. The contention was that the schools were allowing sex educators to act in the place of parents as young people’s source of information about sex. Additionally, parents were upset with hygienists and pragmatists over the notion that schools could provide better sex education for young people than they could. Although scientists were in support of sex education in schools, they felt the need for a campaign to bring opponents of the policy on board. However, parents were still not convinced for three main reasons. First, they believed that their children would access inaccurate information elsewhere, so there was no need for schools to “correct” such misinformation. Second, sexual experimentation was just a part of growing up, so efforts to curb such activity were useless; third, girls should remain pure, and boys should “sow their wild oats” during their youth, so the messages to both genders should not be uniform (Huber & Firmin, 2014, p. 32).
Young went on to resign after receiving a vote of no confidence from the school board, ending the controversy that had lasted for one semester. However, proponents of sex education took the loss in stride and used Young’s experience to enact progress for sex education in other cities. Many schools implemented social hygienist practices in their classrooms without the fanfare and approval of the school boards. Some aspects of sex education were implemented in biology and home economics courses. Although widespread sex education in schools had failed, by 1920, approximately 40% of schools had implemented some form of sex education (Carter, 2001).

**Young People’s Sexual Agency and Sex Education**

The new morality expressed during the 1920s set the stage for society’s changing attitude towards sexual morality. Sex and other vices had become more and more common within society, especially among young people. However, the clash between attitudes towards the sexual morality of young people versus older members of society foreshadowed the continued battle over sex education in schools.

At the end of the 1920s, a survey revealed that many young people were engaging in sexual activities—including oral sex—without any formal sex education. Efforts to quietly implement sex education in schools continued during the intermediate era (Wheeler, 2000). Between the 1920s and 1950s, sex education in public schools evolved to encourage premarital abstinence and faithfulness within marriage (Carter, 2001). Sex education taught young people that sex within marriage would be more fulfilling than promiscuity while single. This argument changed the narrative of sex from being a tool of procreation to one of potential pleasure (Kett, 2002).
Sex education later became a part of character-building education. In 1922, the Public Health Service published a high school manual citing sex education as holistic and part of a “phase of character formation” (Gruenberg, 1922, p. 2). To avoid issues of the failed programs in Chicago, advocates were keen on repackaging sex education as character-building and implemented it into curricula for biology, physical education, English, and social sciences courses. By 1927, 45% of schools, unbeknownst to parents, were teaching some form of sex education (Carter, 2001).

Public school sex education programs quickly became intertwined with the sociological and psychological aspects of sex education (Huber & Firmin, 2014). Family life education—character-building, relationships, money management, marriage, and childbearing—was added to home economics classes between the 1940s and 1950s. The institution of marriage had also evolved to include companionship and in addition to legitimizing procreation. However, marriage was still considered the safest situation for bearing children; therefore, abstinence before marriage was still encouraged. Family life education drove this point home to young people.

Changing societal perceptions of sex education was instrumental in administering it throughout schools. The evolving narrative made it more palatable to the public (Carter, 2001). Instead of directly teaching sex education, the subject matter was labeled as family life education (Rotskoff, 2001). Many believed that schools should avoid sex education, so most schools continued to discreetly embed it within their curriculum. Sex educators had succeeded in bringing forth sex education in public schools.

Traditional views that advocated abstinence until marriage continued to be upheld by most Americans, but a growing younger and more vocal minority began to challenge the norms.
Alfred Kinsey’s sexual liberation research inspired young people to become sexually adventurous. Additionally, the introduction of the birth control pill in the 1960s allowed individuals to engage in sex without the complication of an unplanned pregnancy. In the 1970s, swinger clubs, nudism, gay bathhouses, and pornographic films stunned some Americans while enticing others to join in the activities (Allyn, 2000). Although these behaviors existed prior to the sexual revolution period, this was the first time that such activities and communities were more visible and tolerable within society. Hippies believed in the concept of free love and that sex was a natural part of life. Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Foundation would partially fund creation of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), a values-neutral sex education organization (Reisman, 2000).

In 1966, Joseph Fletcher published Situation Ethics: The New Morality in which he advanced the notion that all decisions were relative to a given situation. Fletcher (1966) promoted a more flexible morality: “What is sometimes good may at other times be evil, and what is sometimes wrong may sometimes be right when it serves a good enough end—depending on the situation” (p. 123). Proponents of sex education saw this as giving young people autonomy over their sexual lives. Sex education proponents wanted students to self-define the prudence of a given sexual activity based on their individual circumstances. In 1969, using this philosophy, SIECUS (1969) produced a booklet in which students were encouraged to believe their intuition over social norms: “If you feel good about it, it’s right; if you feel bad, it’s wrong” (p. 22). Local school boards approved this concept of values-free sex education.

**Accepting Teen Sexual Behavior and Providing Access to Sex Education**

Generational shifts began to allow young people to embrace their sexual agency while policy-makers and social groups began the search for long-term solutions to providing sex
education. In the 1980s, counterrevolution groups aimed their goals at reversing the perceived damage of the sexual revolution era. These groups advocated that contraceptive information be replaced with abstinence education (SIECUS, 2003). New organizations evolved and lobbied for political leadership to take control of culture wars in favor of traditional values (Irvine, 2002). This was the first time that abstinence education programs were federally funded (Pear, 1986). STIs continued to plague society and gave abstinence education proponents cause to emphasize abstinence to young people. The impact of the HIV virus caused pandemonium because the ailment—then deemed a death sentence—had no apparent origin and little was known about how to stop the virus (Balanko, 2002). However, in 1996, bipartisan leadership passed new welfare reform policy that created new debates regarding sex, specifically child poverty-related issues and escalated welfare controversies (Haskins & Bevan, 1997).

Each side advocated for different teen sex issues. Sex education proponents of the 1960s pushed for safe sex via comprehensive sex education so that teens could maintain sexual freedom as long as they used contraceptives. However, abstinence education proponents advocated for teaching teens the necessary skills to avoid sexual behavior risk-taking (Rector & Kim, 2007). Oppositional factors became increasingly volatile during the modern era, given the increase in funding for abstinence programs and the growth of pro-sex organizations.

In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration licensed the use of the birth control pill—often referred to as “the pill” (Tolson, 1999). Over one million women were using the pill by 1962 (Allyn, 2000). One in four married women under the age of 45 were using the pill by 1965 (Planned Parenthood, 2009). The pill became a sexual revolution symbol. Penicillin removed the threat of some STIs, while the pill removed the danger of potential pregnancy for those engaging in premarital and extramarital affairs. Considering it controversial, opponents fought access to
the pill because it seemed to endorse casual sex. However, women’s rights organizations proclaimed that the pill evened the double standard debates for women and men. In 1965, the Supreme Court ruled that contraceptive use was a constitutional right (Galvin, 1998), though few schools included contraceptive information in sex education classes (Huber & Firmin, 2014).

President Lyndon Johnson’s administration earmarked at least six percent of maternal and child health funding for family planning services (Planned Parenthood, 2009). President Nixon went on to sign Title X into law, the first national program aimed exclusively at family planning education and services. As a result of this funding, the percentage of teens receiving contraceptive education and services increased by 600% between 1969 and 1976. In 1978, President Carter amended Title X to mandate that partial funding for unmarried teens. This policy provided the first funding for community-based sex education programs designed to prevent pregnancy through risk reduction actions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1970).

Pre-marital parenthood was often stigmatized prior to the 1970s, but the sexual revolution ended many barriers to premarital sex—especially for young people (Akerlof, 1996). The issue of teen pregnancy persisted and as a result, the U.S. government funded 645 community organizations and tasked them with developing sex education programs in 1966. SIECUS was offered grant funds to create a sex education teacher’s manual (Larson, 2002). Although comprehensive sex education varied in public schools, the inclusion of contraceptives and the pill remained a highly contested topic (Balanko, 2002). Two Gallup polls conducted between 1969 and 1971 indicated that support for sex education in schools had fallen from 71% to 65%. However, Americans still accepted sex education being taught in schools (Scales, 1981).
At the 1971 White House Conference on Youth, President Nixon’s administration supported a requirement for all primary and secondary schools to implement sex education programs into their curriculum (Engel, 1989). The goal of sex education opponents changed from preventing teenage sexual activity to preventing teen pregnancies that occurred as a result of teens’ sexual behaviors (Rotskoff, 2001). Balanko (2002) noted that the 1970s brought about “an emphasis on pleasure and sex equity” (p. 18) in sex education. STIs and morality were quickly becoming less prevalent motivators for youth to abstain from sexual activity. The sex education debates created social change that allowed individuals to focus on themselves.

Some social groups began to organize and counter the effects of the sexual revolution with the specific mission of opposing sex education in public schools (Kline, 2005). In 1977, a survey found that Americans who favored traditional family structures and abstinence until marriage disapproved of sex education programs in schools (Mahoney, 1979). By the late 1970s, 35% of public and private schools provided some type of sex education program. However, the content varied among these schools because of local community expectations (Scales, 1981).

Only six states required public schools to provide sex education in 1980, but by 1989, 17 states and the District of Columbia mandated sex education (Donovan, 1989). National surveys showed that sex education courses included topics such as puberty, STIs, pregnancy prevention and at least the mention of abstinence (Landry, 1999). Topics such as birth control, abortion, and homosexual sex and identity were loosely covered in some public schools. Nationally, the sex education curricula varied due to the decentralized nature of education.

Today, exact sex education content varies widely due to local school board control. However, a 2002 survey found that 68% of school leaders described their sex education curriculum as comprehensive rather than abstinence based. Nine out of 10 students
acknowledged having received sex education information during their middle or high school experiences (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002).

Title X caused abstinence education proponents to seek funding for instruction on teen abstinence. In 1981, President Reagan signed the Adolescent Family Life program into law. It was designed “to promote self-discipline and other prudent approaches to the problem of adolescent premarital sexual relations” (Pear, 1984, p. 2). The ACLU (n.d.) filed a lawsuit against the program, accusing them of being religiously motivated and violating the nature of Title X. In the 1987 *Bowen v. Kendrick* case, the Supreme Court decided that the Adolescent Family Life program had a valid non-religious purpose that focused on reducing teen STI and pregnancy rates (Huber & Firmin, 2014).

Although abstinence education had gained popularity, contraceptive-based sex education continued to receive more funding than abstinence programs (Pardue, Rector, & Martin, 2004). Most states actually mandated that school districts teach HIV/AIDS prevention following the scare of the 1980s pandemic (Stein, 1998). The virus created a platform for contraceptive-based sex education proponents to advocate for more information on contraceptives and same-gender sexual expressions. The implied message behind the contraceptive-based sex education was that teens would not abstain from sex and must know how to use contraceptives to remain healthy (St. Lawrence, 1998).

Comprehensive sex education advocates continued to insist that teens have access to confidential testing and counseling. The belief was that teens would not seek testing or counseling if their parents were aware of them doing so. This prompted many advocates to also propose more school-based clinics, which would provide student access to contraceptives, STI and pregnancy testing, and other health-related resources. The school-based clinics movement
started in the 1970s but did not grow in popularity until the 1980s (Card, 1999). There were only 12 school clinics in the United States in 1984, but that number had grown to 500 by 1993 (School-Based Clinics, 1993). In 1993, the Clinton administration attempted to include school-based clinics in a bill for healthcare reform, but the bill failed. School-based clinics would take a back seat until the Obama administration brought them into the 2009 healthcare debate (Obama for America, 2008).

President Obama’s election significantly influenced the sex education debate in the United States. Obama had been chided for his support of the SIECUS-based sex education model during his presidential campaign (Davis & Ellerson, 2007) while he was a state legislator in Illinois (Illinois General Assembly, 2005). However, he reiterated his support for comprehensive sex education during his presidential campaign and followed up on his promise to enhance sex education once he became president by proposing to defund abstinence education programs. In order to create stable funding for comprehensive programs that gain support by pro-sex organizations, he ultimately opted to fund a pregnancy prevention program in place of abstinence programs (White House, 2009).

The Center for Disease Control reports that more than 95% of all teenagers receive some type of formal sex education prior to turning 18 through schools, churches, community centers, or other resources (Martinez, Abma, & Copen, 2010). However, an analysis of data from the National Survey of Family Growth showed a decline in the number of teens who received sex education from 2006 through 2013, especially among youth in non-urban communities. During this time period, female teens received less information about birth control (70% to 60%), saying no to sex (89% to 82%), STIs (94% to 90%), and HIV/AIDS (89% to 86%). Males reported a significant decline in receiving information about birth control (61% to 55%). A total of 21% of
girls and 35% of boys reported receiving no birth control information from a formal source or from parents (Lindberg, Maddow-Zimet, & Boonstra, 2016). Fewer than half of girls and only a third of boys received information about birth control prior to engaging in sexual activity (Guttmacher Institute, 2016), which illustrates the concerning lack of sex education information youth have had access to.

In 2016, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a report supporting the importance of medically accurate, comprehensive sex education. The report offered resources for physicians on how to deliver sex education information to young patients while acknowledging that their conversations should be supplemental to the sex education offered in schools. At the time, the pediatricians’ guild asserted, “school-based comprehensive sexuality education that emphasizes the prevention of unintended pregnancy and STIs should be encouraged” (Breuner & Mattson, 2016, p. 7).

**Black Churches, Barbershops, Families and Sex Education**

Sex education resources in the Black community have also followed patterns of progression and conservatism. Black churches are important community resources. In an effort to identify alternatives to school-based sex education programs, churches provided health education for African American youth (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000; Powell et al., 2017). Many churches were reported as open to inclusion of sexual wellness resources in their health education sessions, such as HIV/AIDS and pregnancy prevention, but 30% avoided topics such as anal sex, sexual orientation, masturbation, and oral sex (Coyne-Beasley & Schoenbach, 2000). Barriers to discussing these and other topics included “perceived resistance from congregants, discomfort among youth, lack of financial resources, and competing messages at home about sexual health” (Powell et al., 2017, p. 169). Additionally, uncertainty on how to navigate these
topics without undermining religious teachings has proven a challenge for religious leaders (Adimora et al., 2017). Instead, pastors agree that sermons should reflect on marriage, abstinence, monogamy, dating, and infidelity—behaviors that impact sexual networks and HIV transmission. The overall goal of churches has been to delay teen sexual activity (Powell et al., 2017; Torrence & Guidry, 2007). However, “abstinence-only interventions exclusively promote sexual abstinence as the only means of preventing STIs and pregnancy; these interventions do not promote safer-sex strategies, such as condom and contraceptive use” (Breunig, 2017, p. E46).

Located in urban, suburban, and rural Black communities, barbershops are ideal locations for providing Black males with health resources (Hood et al., 2018; Jemmott, Jemmott, Lanier, Thompson, & Baker, 2016). These communities boast an equally diverse population of Black males with different social identities, occupations, and life experiences. Black barbershops have clientele that visits frequently, often returning to the same trusted barber. The Black barbershop is dubbed as the “Black man’s country club,” where Black men are able to socialize with one in an exclusively or predominant Black male space setting. Additionally, barbers are respected community members (Randolph, Pleasants, & Gonzalez-Guarda, 2017). They are often willing to provide sex education to youth because they see it as a way to give back to the community. Previous barbershop-based health education programming has focused on providing sex education to young, heterosexual Black males (Johnson, Speck, Bowdre, & Porter, 2015), with an emphasis on HIV prevention (Jemmott et al., 2016; Nathan, 2013; Wilson et al., 2014).

Families have also remained a source of sex education. Pariera and Brody (2017) found that youth wanted their parents to talk to them about a wide variety of sexual topics frequently and early. The key is for parents to be open, honest, and realistic about their children’s curiosities and desires. However, fathers have been unable to break down gendered barriers that position
them to provide sex education in ways that youth would prefer. According to Bennett et al. (2018), “Care appeared to be a deeply gendered concept for the fathers and despite their aspirations for an intimate relationship with their children, gendered norms for motherhood and fatherhood prevailed resulting in passivity in their role as sexuality educators” (p. 74). Although fathers desire to formulate open, democratic relationships around sex education, their thoughts do not manifest into effective action. In the study conducted by Bennett et al. (2018), fathers controlled the quantity and quality of communication about bodies, sex and relationships and used what could be termed as ‘quiet coercion’ to shape their children’s behaviors, in the form of avoidance behaviors and partial explanations, to maintain their authority over sexuality-related communication. (p. 82).

Parents have often shared indirect and direct messages about delaying sexual activity, while also ignoring the reality of teens’ questions regarding sex. Teens felt awkward talking to their parents about sex and feared negative reactions because parents were seen as authoritarian figures (Grossman, Richer, Charmaraman, Ceder, & Erkut, 2018). Instead, teens were more open to speaking with extended family members, especially grandparents, because they were deemed to be easier to talk to and they shared life experiences (Grossman et al., 2018). Black family dynamics are changing, as more grandparents become the primary caregivers of their grandchildren. Though this has inherent disadvantages, grandparents were reportedly more open to talking about sex with their grandchildren, compared to parents who opted to promote sexual abstinence and provided limited communications about sex education (Cornelius & Xiong, 2015). Grandparents were trusted information sources for youth and were often seen as knowledgeable when giving advice. However, grandparents felt that they lacked modern language to have beneficial conversations with their grandchildren. Cornelius, LeGrand, and
Jemmott (2009) conclude that, “Grandparents, as well as their adolescent grandchildren, desired open communication about sexuality issues, said that societal pressure makes sexual encounters hard to resist, and felt that they needed assistance with the sexuality communication process” (p. 133). Family members stand to have a gendered and generational impact of youth accessing familial sex education.

**Masculinity and Sex Education**

Although societal and community progression and conservatism have ebbed and flowed throughout time, acknowledging what concepts resonate with males is key to understanding male engagement with sex education and what boys want from it. Masculinity is a fragile construct that boys perform through “behaviors, actions, and appearance” (Scully, 2001). According to Limmer (2010), “The interplay between three factors – schools as a site of masculinity construction, existing and preferred sources of information, and the meaning of sex and risk” create barriers to receiving sex education (p. 351). Schools allow boys to construct masculinity through achievement, with social group status, and via sports and other extra-curricular programs. Schools become the stepping-stone in attaining a masculine hegemonic sense of “wealth, status, and power” (Scully, 2001). Scully acknowledges that,

> Different groups define masculinity differently, and as a result, a boy's understanding of what it means to be a man may in part depend upon his peer group affiliation and will certainly be affected by the way masculinity is constructed within these peer groups. (p. 38)

The focus of sex education programs has begun to turn from a focus on girls and their behavior to a focus on changing the behaviors of boys while acknowledging the fragility of masculinity. Boys are consciously aware of the social pressures to perform specific masculine identities (Haste, 2013). Therefore, boys consciously and unconsciously develop a ‘double
world’ or twoness, to internally and externally manage masculinity. Educating boys requires providing them with support and allowance to express their emotions without being placed in vulnerable positions. Scully (2001) contended that,

Boys will not speak up and participate in class discussions if the social costs to them are too great. If there is a chance that by speaking up and sharing their thoughts or feelings, they will lose status or respect, many would prefer to remain quiet and possibly unengaged. (p. 39)

However, young men reported that they were intentionally disruptive in sex education classes as a means to mask their anxiety and embarrassment (Pound, Langford, & Campbell, 2016; Forrest, 2000). Male youth feel that they should be sexually competent and knowledgeable, but in reality, boys have questions about sex that they feel unable to ask due to this pressure. Consequently, they pretend to know everything about sex but want their teachers to recognize that they cannot ask serious questions due to the pressure of losing face in front of their peers. Boys have consistently shown that they do not want their sexual insecurities exposed (Biddulph, 2007; Claussen, 2018; Pound et al., 2016; Scully, 2001). Overall, boys want sex education but want to participate in private as a means of saving face in public.

A significant number of parents and students feel that schools should provide adequate sex education programming; however, current practices are seen as poor and insufficient (Limmer, 2010). Youth have desired less traditional sex education that veers from biology, extracting scientific logic from sex to allow for broader topics to become included (Chambers, Tincknell, & Loon, 2004). Sex education has often been perceived as boring and limiting because it was and continues to be “over-concerned with facts, delivered by staff who have no credibility, focused too much on condom use and bears little relevance to the lives that they lead” (Limmer, 2010, p. 351). Desire and sexual diversity are topics that students want to discuss and
normalize. Specifically, sex education defines sexuality in heteronormative ways that do not accurately represent current youth culture. Additionally, sex education does not cover the full range of sexual activities that youth engage in with their sexual partners. For instance, Pound et al. (2016) has stated that, “Young people wanted sex education to reflect their emotional and sexual maturity, their autonomy, and for some, the fact of their sexual activity” (p. 7).

Boys have specific needs in regard to what they want to know. Forrest (2000) found that the questions boys would ask fit into five prominent categories. In the first category, boys reported being overwhelmingly curious about penis size and erections and if they ‘measure[d] up’ to their peers. The second category detailed boys’ desire to understand the physicality of sex. They specifically want to know about intercourse, oral sex, and masturbation. The third category illustrated that boys have questions about puberty and if they are developing physically (i.e., body hair, deeper voice). The fourth category focused on contraceptives and when boys could legally buy condoms. In the fifth category, boys were concerned with legal issues such as the age of consent. Therefore, the sex education of boys should aim to address their concerns as males seeking sexual engagement.

The objectives of sex education are often in opposition to males’ goals, resulting in differing views of sexual risk. Teens now exist within a “hook-up” culture, and for boys, it is directly linked to the performance of masculinity. According to Scully (2001), “’Hooking up’ was broadly defined and could include kissing as well as more intimate behaviors such as oral sex, and, in some cases, sexual intercourse” (p. 41). Boys often feel more social pressure to see how far they can go sexually compared to girls. Hooking-up with a girl often allows males to affirm and reinforce their heterosexual masculinity within their social group. Hooking up can also cause boys to miss out on intimacy, impacting future relationships.
Heterosexual manhood requires men to be sexually competent and skilled at sexual intercourse with women (Forrest, 2000). Boys see acquisition of sexual knowledge as status enhancing, yet sex educators want boys to become responsible sexual partners. This mismatch in expectations may result in the boys acting out during sex education courses because they feel threatened by the messages of being a responsible sexual partner. Boys are often in competition with other boys and messaging that advocates responsible sexual partnership fails to resonate because it does not affirm boys in the sexual conquest of women’s bodies and other males’ egos.

Schools that provide sex education programs have generally neglected to address the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. The lack of sex education for LGBTQ+ youth impacts their health and well-being (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Formby, 2016; Roberts et al., 2019). Comprehensive and medically accurate sex education is linked to safer sex and a decrease in teen pregnancies and STIs (Carlton, Hopkins, Boyd, & Hill, 2016; Roberts et al., 2019). LGBTQ+ youth of color acknowledged receiving inadequate sex education in school due to feeling unrepresented, unsupported, stigmatized, and bullied because of their identities; they express a need for sex education that covers topics such as consent, mental health, pronouns, culture, religion, and race/ethnicity (Roberts et al., 2019). The lack of information specifically impacts Black men who have sex with men because of the statistically high risk of contracting HIV (Carlton et al., 2016). Due to the lack of LGBTQ+ inclusion within sex education, most men who have sex with men learn about same-gender sexual activity through sexually explicit materials where condom usage is not prioritized (Arrington-Sanders et al., 2015; Nelson, Eaton, & Gamarel, 2017). HIV and STI education and prevention activities have targeted men who have sex with men, particularly Black men (Jenkins Hall et al., 2017). However, this information is often not provided in schools due to fears that the information will cause or encourage youth to
engage in sexual activities, especially those inclusive of same-gender sexual behaviors (Carlton et al., 2016; Gegenfurtner & Gebhardt, 2017). The lack of education provided forces LGBTQ+ youth who want information to seek out other sources (Roberts et al., 2019).

Sex education is often situated within risk, such as the “risk of infection, risk of pregnancy and the risk that young men pose in terms of exploitation and coercion” (Limmer, 2010, p. 353). However, young men oppose this view of risk—while acknowledging that there are risks—because it does not resonate with their experiences. For young men, sexuality is performed in masculine ways; deviation from this script is the actual risk. Sexual behavior becomes the space for some males with limited social audiences to display their masculinity because other forms of masculinity are less obtainable. This is critical because sex education often posits preventative risk-taking through condom use. However, condom use undermines the notions of masculinity that exist, such as ejaculation, expertise in performance, and the number of potential partners—condom use means risk of losing an erection, implying that partners are not healthy, and having to become selective in taking on partners. Therefore, sex education risk reduction becomes risk enhancement for sexually engaged males.

Source credibility provides young men the opportunity to learn information and determine how it resonates with their own experiences. Young men gather information about sex from various sources, typically accepting the sources that share messages most compatible with their worldview of themselves and their peers (Limmer, 2010). Source credibility is important to young men. Teachers are often not seen as credible because of their age or authoritative potential to restrict males’ manhood status while also positioning them as threats to women. Parents are also seen as unreliable sources because they lack knowledge of sex in the way that young men experience it. However, parents are viewed as a well-intentioned source. Peers and pornography
were seen as the most credible sources for sex education. Young men who lack close family ties or are less engaged in school often credit peers and pornography as their primary sources of sex education. Young men with close family ties and more school engagement still credit peers and pornography as reliable sources, but their understanding of these sources is situated within a wider context of sex education. The two groups experience pornography differently, with those with more access to information seeing pornography as a source of pleasure, and young men with less access viewing it as a source of information while simultaneously seeing it as unrealistic. For the latter group of men, pornography has demonstrated “what they were meant to do, showed them how to arouse and satisfy a woman and which was presented in a context that resonated with them – a context of pleasure” (Limmer, 2010, p. 353).

**Black Male Sexuality**

There is a lack of literature on the intersectional development of Black male racial identity and sexuality (Crook, Thomas, & Cobia, 2009). However, what we do know is that Black males have a tougher time progressing from adolescence to adulthood, inclusive of sexuality, due to racism, prejudice, and stereotype threat (Pass, Younge, Geter, Al-Bayan, & Wade, 2016). Furthermore, Black men in America have historically lacked ownership of their bodies, sexual identities, and sexual expressions, yet they need this ownership to achieve mental and physical wellness (Grant, 2016). Black men are restricted to the gaze of others while they strive to define their own destinies as Black male sexual beings.

Black males exist in a world where is it impossible to live up to societal norms of masculinity and sexuality due to racism (Butler-Barnes et al., 2020; Slatton & Spates, 2016; hooks, 2004). Black sexuality is often reduced to hypersexuality (Hargons et al., 2018; Weatherspoon, 2014). Hypersexuality and hypermasculinity are defined as “controlling, socially-
constructed identities” (Slatton & Spates, 2016, p. 4). Perceptions of hypersexuality present a problematic and dangerous view of Black sexuality because it erases the importance of pleasure and sexual health. Southern stereotypes of Black males suggest that they are seen as hypersexual by their peers due to racism (Miller, 2019). Black males are seen as hypersexual, hypermasculine, and generally dangerous to other people in society (Slatton & Spates, 2016). Non-Black males often see hypersexuality as being culturally embedded within their lived experiences and a part of Black men’s true nature. Therefore, a part of Black male racial and sexual identities is formulated based on attempts to counter negative notions of Black masculinity.

Media and entertainment continuously promote images of Black men as hypersexual and hypermasculine without providing a diverse expression of Black masculinity. Black males are often portrayed as asexual—“stripped of the seemingly dangerous parts of Blackness” (Collins, 2004, p. 168) or as players “who use their sexual prowess to exploit women” (Collins, 2004, p. 162) in the media. The music entertainment community equally provides problematic perceptions of Black male sexuality. Rap and Hip-Hop, specifically, perpetuate stereotypes of hypermasculinity and hypersexuality through materialism, involvement with drugs, and the objectification of women (Williams, 2020). However, the ability to display emotions provides a counternarrative to the images often presented. For instance, Black men express their sensitivity through crying in Hip-Hop and R&B music (Chaney, 2016). This portrays Black men in ways that they are not traditionally represented due to perceptions of hypersexuality and racism.

Romantic intimacy provides one avenue to achieving masculinity for some black males. Some Black men engage in casual sexual and romantic relationships to avoid emotional intimacy (Dogan et al., 2018). Some Black men have been historically conditioned to be detached from
love and romantic intimacy as part of their attempt to be cool (Dogan et al., 2018; hooks, 2004). However, Black men do desire to be emotionally available and provide emotional intimacy for their partner(s) (Dogan et al., 2018). Although some research assumes that Black men are sexually detached from intimacy, Black men may associate their ability to engage sexually to their ability to achieve their manhood. In a study about the sexual behaviors of Black men at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) Younge et al. (2014) uncovered a theme of sexual decision-making noting that pre-college socialization had an impact on their sexual decision-making (e.g., whether to have sex and whom to have sex with). Most of the participants from that study saw having a family and being a leader as prerequisites to developing masculinity and being a man. This notion rings true because Black sexuality and gender roles have historic connections to Black philosophical ideas of racial uplift (Grundy, 2012). The college experience allowed participants to gain “new information, experiences, and attitudes” (Younge et al., 2014) about sex and relationships. This caused participants to abstain from intercourse, get tested for HIV/STIs, to seek long-term relationships, and to use condoms more frequently.

Condom usage if often a source of safety and comfort for Black men but has varying degrees of impact on sexual decision-making. One study found that Black youth used condoms more frequently with casual partners than older Black males use of condoms (Carlton et al., 2016; Pass, Younge, Geter, Al-Bayan, & Wade, 2016). Black males, compared to White males, used condoms more frequently with oral, vaginal, and anal sex, as well as they participated in HIV testing opportunities more often (Pass et al., 2016). However, Black males tested positive for STIs more frequently than their White counterparts because of their decision to use condoms with select partners. Black bisexual men use condoms with their steady partners more frequently
than heterosexual males. Men who have sex with men compensated for their risky sexual behaviors by getting tested for STIs more frequently. Furthermore, substances were often involved with sexual encounters. Black males used alcohol at lower rates than White males but used other drugs—primarily marijuana—more frequently than White males. Substance use is not the independent cause for Black men engaging in risky sexual behaviors. Whether under the influence of a substance or sober, participants noted that they would most likely make the same sexual decisions.

**Summary**

There are few studies that capture the intersectional experiences Black males have with sex education; however, a historical overview of sex education provides an essential foundation for understanding how modern sex education came to exist in America. Sex education in schools was virtually non-existent prior to the 1900s, but the progressive era challenged societal norms regarding sexual activity. Although abstinence education has grown in popularity, it has not kept pace with funding for comprehensive sex education because policy-makers have begun to accept that teens are sexually curious and active. Access to sex education has proven to be a challenge for Black males, prompting some researchers to consider churches, barbershops, and extended family members as potential sources of sex education. Although potential information sources, researchers have illustrated that the education these institutions and people provide does not match males’ curiosities. Males often have questions that abstinence and comprehensive sex education programs are also unable to satisfy. Males specifically want sex education to help them address their questions about affirming their manhood through sexual performance.

**Conceptual Framework: Information Seeking Behavior**
Curiosity and knowledge gaps lead to information seeking behavior (ISB), which refers to how individuals seek and use information. ISB theory has been applied to social issues such as health and wellness (Davies, 2007; Gray, Klein, Noyce, Sesselberg, & Cantrill, 2005; Leydon et al., 2000; Morris & Roberto, 2016) and academia (George et al., 2006; Nicholas, Rowlands, & Jamali, 2010; Weber, Becker, & Hillmert, 2018). ISB has been specifically applied to sex education due to the emphasis on information needs (Farih, Freeth, Khan, & Meads, 2015; Oosterhoff, Shephard, Peeters, Igonya, & Honderdos, 2016; Shifren et al., 2009; Spink, Ozmutlu, & Lorence, 2004). Additionally, ISB incorporates information use as a means for satisfying needs (Wilson, 1997; 2000). Therefore, ISB provides a useful framework for exploring information access and use by Black males who seek realistic sex education information.

Wilson (1981) asserted that information seeking behavior is the intentional pursuit of information motivated by the need to satisfy a goal. Wilson (1997) found that motives support information seeking behaviors by providing the individual with the intent to gain information that will lead to goal satisfaction. Needs emerge from three types of motives: physiological (e.g., hunger and thirst), unlearned (e.g., including curiosity and sensory stimulation), and social (e.g., the desire for affiliation, approval or status, or aggression) (Wilson, 1997). Needs are subjective and manifest in the minds individuals in need (Wilson, 1997). An information need is not defined as fundamental, such as food, shelter, or clothing, but is rather a secondary need that arises to satisfy a primary need (Wilson, 2000).

In the course of seeking information, the individual may interact with manual information systems (e.g., newspapers or a library) or with computer-based systems (e.g., the Internet) (Wilson, 1997; 1981). Alternatively, individuals may seek information from other people through an information exchange. Wilson’s (1997) later model went on to describe three
interferring barriers to information seeking. These barriers include personal (e.g., emotional, educational, demographic variables), social (e.g., interpersonal information sources), and environmental barriers (e.g., economic variables, source characteristics). Additionally, Wilson (1997; 2000) categorized ISB into four activities: (a) passive attention, known as the acquisition of information without intentionally seeking it; (b) passive search, which results in the acquisition of unintended information that becomes relevant to the individual; (c) active search, which occurs when an individual actively seeks out information; and (d) ongoing search, which occurs when a basic framework of knowledge, ideas, beliefs, or values has been established, but occasional information seeking is carried out to update or expand one's framework. ISB is a diversified process leading to information acquisition.

The demands placed on information systems and information exchange may result in success or failure to locate relevant information that satisfies the need (Wilson, 1999). When successful, the individual will use the information to satisfy the need. If the seeking of the information is a failure, the individual may continue to seek information if the need persists. Wilson (1997) stressed the impact of information processing and use in the continuous loop of information seeking and learning, which ties into cognitive learning (Bandura, 1986) and sense/meaning-making (Dervin, 1983). Relevant information may be shared with other people via information exchange or used to achieve or satisfy goals through actions. However, information use is not always observable because it lives within the mind of the individual who sought or continues to seek the knowledge.

Wilson (1981; 1997; 1999; 2000) found that ISB allows a person to explore information sources to find answers that fulfill a goal. An information need arises from motives to address a goal-connected issue and leads the individual to seek information from information sources. The
information obtained may or may not be used, but it enhances cognitive learning. If used, the information goes toward satisfying goals. Black males’ ability to gain information, while overcoming information barriers, is key to obtaining information that may be used in their sexual lives such as the categories Limmer (2010) identified.

It is important to note the difference between information and knowledge, as the researcher is not seeking to explore learning and knowledge development. However, the acquisition and use of information and knowledge are at the heart of this research. Earlier conversations did little to differentiate between information and knowledge with assertions that information was “knowledge...transmitted without loss of integrity” (Kogut & Zander, 1992, p. 20). This positions information as a form of knowledge, which Stenmark (2001) described as being a careless declaration of the two. Although this criticism has existed, Nonaka (1994) explained that the two are similar because they both reflect meaning and are context-specific and relational. Stenmark (2001) acknowledges this connection, but posits that information is factual while knowledge is created from analyzing information and developing beliefs associated with that information. Bloom's taxonomy (revised by Krathwohl and Anderson, 2009) demonstrates this process of cognitively taking in information, or learning, and turning it into knowledge. Krathwohl and Anderson suggest that information is transformed into knowledge through the progressive steps of remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating new knowledge. Although these steps are not at the core of this project, the researcher is concerned with how Black males supplement their school-issued sex education and how they then use this information—essentially bypassing the steps of creating knowledge.

As in previous health studies, ISB provides a framework for understanding how individuals address knowledge gaps. Research has illustrated males’ desire for sex education
information beyond typical biological aspects. ISB allows individuals to obtain information that satisfies their need for information. By acknowledging barriers, ISB works as a framework that allows individuals agency to seek, analyze, and implement information in their actions.

Multiple theories were selected as the lens for this research project that will allow the research to critically analyze and understand the sex education experiences of Black males. Gaps in information, such as the one created by repressing the sexuality of youth, leads to creating knowledge through seeking information that will fill the void. Foucault’s (1990) theory of sexual repression within society has also been well documented by historians. The discourse around sexuality shaped the ideologies of modern society and caused society to repress the sexuality of children. For Foucault, the sexuality of children “posed physical and moral, individual and collective dangers; children were defined as ‘preliminary’ sexual beings, on this side of sex, astride a dangerous dividing line” (p. 104). This meant that children needed to be shielded and redirected from the perils of sex to better fit and adhere to the order of standard of social order. The repression amid natural curiosity creates an information gap or need that Wilson (1997) suggestions leads to information seeking behaviors.

Exploring how Black males fill in these information gaps may prove to be critical to helping educators and policy makers provide educational tools and/or culturally responsive sex education that affirm and define Black male sexuality. Pledger (2018) asserts that culturally relevant pedagogy and curricula “help explain and analyze the intersectionality of backgrounds and beliefs” (p. 107) related to power, privilege, and oppression. Culturally relevant approaches to sex education may allow individuals to engage with sex education in ways that illustrate their cultural realities as Black males attempting to understand and assert their masculinity.
Research Questions

Theorists have suggested a link between Black masculinity and sexual prowess. Men, indeed, do have various sexual experiences at young ages (Brennan & Epp, 2015) and are influenced by many social factors (Lanier et al., 2017). However, boys have specific questions that the current state of sex education—comprehensive or abstinence-based—does not answer. Researchers have explored how youth gain knowledge of sex education outside of school (Dolcini et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2015). Conversely, specifically exploring how Black men develop and obtain a cognitive sense of sex education allows the researcher to understand how they compensate for limited access to such education. The questions that guided this research are as follows: (a) What has it been like for Black males aged 18 to 22 to seek information regarding sex education in a state that limits sex education in public schools?; and (b) How do Black males use the sex education information they obtained? The researcher was specifically concerned with the strategies Black males use to fill in information gaps in their knowledge of sex. As Wilson (1997) demonstrated, information gaps lead to information seeking behaviors, which ultimately result in the use of relevant information. Therefore, the researcher was also concerned with how sex education is used.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This section on research methodology describes the phenomenological approach to exploring the essence of obtaining and using knowledge of sex education in the research design, data collection, and data analysis for this study.

Research Design

This research project aimed to better understand the experiences of how Black males gather information about sex and use it in their experiences. Information acquisition is an essential part of sex education for youth (Arnab et al., 2013). Furthermore, sex education involves emotions, desires, and personal meaning (Simpson et al., 2017), and boys’ experiences with sex education are steeped in emotions and personal meanings (Limmer, 2010; Haste, 2013). Emotions and personal meaning specifically relate to notions of manhood and masculinity in this capacity. Phenomenology allowed participants and the researcher to co-construct meaning regarding their experiences with acquiring and using sex education.

Primarily, educational research is described as the formal, systemic application of the scientific method to the study of issues within education with the goal of explaining, predicting, and regulating educational phenomena (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2006). Research adds to existing information about a specific topic, allows practitioners access to new ideas and approaches, and enables policy reform (Creswell, 2005). Qualitative research allows complex issues to be studied
and understood from people’s personal experience and permits researchers to explore social or human problems (Creswell, 2005).

The essential goal of qualitative research is to find meaning using one of five methodological approaches. A descriptive phenomenological approach was used to understand the “basic structure of experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 26) of the Black males in this study, given that the researcher’s purpose was exploration and analyzation of individuals’ “everyday life and social actions” (Schram, 2003, p. 71). Descriptive phenomenology focuses on interpreting the essential meaning of personal experience (Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Willis, Sullivan-Bolyai, Knaf, & Cohn, 2016). Phenomenology explores commonalities among research participants (Creswell, 2005), and reduces individual experience into universal essence (van Manen, 1990). Comprehensive and rich descriptive phenomenological research is needed to understand the strategies utilized to seek information. The result of descriptive phenomenology is a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon that aids us in enhancing and adding clarity to our understanding of daily, lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Through descriptive phenomenology, the researcher explored the commonalities, or themes, that provided access to sex education, ultimately deciphering what this experience means for Black male sexuality.

Edmund Husserl contributed significantly to the development of phenomenology and is hailed as the founder of descriptive phenomenology. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology “emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). Furthermore, descriptive phenomenology seeks to explore the underlying characteristics, structure, and themes that formulate meaning (Laverty, 2003) to lived experiences. For Husserl, all individuals were considered meaningfully connected with everything else in the world (Vagle, 2014). Unlike other forms of phenomenology (e.g., hermeneutic, existential,
generative historicist, genetic, and realistic), descriptive phenomenology emphasizes describing human lived experiences (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007).

As a philosophical approach, phenomenology was enhanced by the addition of transcendentalism (van Manen, 1990). Husserl suggested that researchers adopt a transcendental subjectivity by bracketing the researcher's experiences to ensure the researcher captures “the phenomenon in its pure, universal sense” (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007, p. 173). Bracketing, or suspending preconceptions, plays an integral role in descriptive phenomenology (Willis et al., 2016). A defining feature of descriptive phenomenology acknowledges that the researcher comes to the research project with a wealth of information from lived experiences and is capable of capturing the essence of a moment. Furthermore, it requires the researcher to suspend their own personal biases to allow the phenomenon’s details to surface. In this study, the researcher had to bracket his own experience of being a Black youth experiencing sex education in Mississippi. The researcher will address this issue by following step one of Moustakas’ (1994) descriptive phenomenological analysis procedures that are discussed later in this section.

Setting

Mississippi promotes abstinence-based sex education while having a substantial number of annual teen pregnancies and soaring teen STI rates. These qualities caused the researcher to take interest in this circumstance. It was of interest to explore this issue as its potential to reshape sex education ideology and the lives of young people within the state. The researcher was curious about how the approved sex education program, Creating Healthy and Responsible Teens (CHART), impacted the lives of Black males. Mississippi—at a minimum—requires programming that features abstinence-based agendas that encourage students to wait until marriage or abstinence-plus programs that allow for limited teaching of contraceptive usage.
CHART, the only program approved by the Mississippi Department of Health for school districts, emphasizes abstinence-plus sex education (McCawley, 2019). CHART is not a comprehensive sex education program because it does not provide a holistic approach to educating youth on such topics as consent or sexual orientation.

The selection of Magnolia State University (MSU) as the research site provided the researcher with access to a significant number of potential research participants in an environment that provided sexual wellness resources. MSU is a prominent four-year comprehensive university located in Mississippi and is ranked as an R1: Doctoral University, which means the Carnegie Foundation categorizes it as the Highest Research Activity institution. As of the 2017-2018 academic year, MSU enrolled 21,000 undergraduate students. Students who identified as African American totaled 2,600 or 13% of the undergraduate population. During the 2017-2018 academic year, 1,718, or 64.5%, of the university’s African American population identified as male. MSU is located in Meredith County, and the 2017 Census estimate placed the population total at 23,639, with 20% of the population identified as Black/African American.

Students at MSU are provided with sexual wellness campus resources due to the prevalent hook-up culture present at college campuses (Snapp, Ryu, & Kerr, 2015). The Campus Sports Center hosts a webpage with sexual wellness information, statistics, and campus and community resources, including where to find contraceptives on campus and where students may go for STI testing. The website has a specific section addressing male sexual wellness with tips that include: shower daily, wash and change clothes regularly, shampoo and detangle hair regularly, clip your fingernails, brush and floss your teeth daily, and gently clean any facial hair regularly, as well as how to perform a testicular self-exam to screen for cancer (Campus Recreation, n.d.). Additionally, students are made aware of counseling services so that they may
make conscious decisions regarding engaging in safe sex. Although not comprehensive, these services and resources may be some students’ first exposure to professional sexual wellness information.

**Sample**

Participants for this study were chosen using purposive sampling, which included the purposeful selection of participants based on their specific characteristics at the time of selection (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Data was collected from 12 Black males on the campus of Magnolia State University. The researcher recruited participants by promoting the project through email, social media, and walking around the campus for approximately two weeks. Participants met with the researcher in confidential spaces such as conference rooms and vacant dining areas. Most of the interviews lasted between 45 to 60 minutes. A few interviews lasted 20 to 30 minutes and two lasted more than 60 minutes. Participants were mostly reserved and coy when delivering responses, which the researcher suspects is due to cultural norms regarding sex and social desirability. This issue is discussed further in Data Collection.

Demographics were consistent across the sample. The 12 males all identified as Black/African American with one acknowledging that he was bi-racial but identified as African American due to being raised within a predominantly African American community. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 22 at the time of their interview. All participants were raised as Christians. Lastly, all participants noted having received sex education between 5th and 12th grade; although, one participant could not recall the exact grade in which he received the sex education. Demographic profiles are presented in Table 1.

The participants had varying experiences with sex education. The majority of the participants received sex education through health related courses and youth programs between
5th and 12th grades. The courses were often facilitated by coaches, teachers, and health clinic staff. A few participants also acknowledged receiving sex education through their college experiences or youth programs. Sex education topics often focused on STIs, condoms and contraceptives, and teen pregnancy. Participants either found the lessons informative, or they found them lacking in substance due to their own experiences with sex education outside of school.
Table 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Racial Identity</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Sex Education Received</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brayton Johnson</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>5th and 10th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theodore Riley</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>9th, 10th, and 11th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant Sturgill</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua Odom</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos Baker</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milton Frazier</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>5th, 6th, and 7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damien Thomas</td>
<td>Biracial: Black/African American and White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>6th, 7th, and 8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaylen Smith</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley Rogers</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>3rd, 4th, or 5th (Do Not Recall)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karter James</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>12th and College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian Arnold</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>11th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nate Barksdale</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>5th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Phenomenological methodology involves scientific exercises that provide insight into a person’s lived experiences as they recall and reflect on them (Vagle, 2014; Willis et al., 2016), as well as how they understand them (Crotty, 1996). This research project is grounded in theoretical and practical qualitative methods (Creswell, 2005) using participant interviews in order to understand the phenomena of obtaining and using sex education. Furthermore, interviews are appropriate for this type of phenomenological research (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Post-IRB approval, the researcher coordinated with MSU to obtain an interview space. The researcher spent one to two weeks at the research site conducting interviews.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews allowed the interviewee and interviewer to work together to formulate meaning (Kara, 2015; Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Kahn and Cannell (1957) offered a precise definition of the research interview:

We use the term interview to refer to a specialized pattern of verbal interaction—initiated for a specific purpose, and focused on some specific content area, with consequent elimination of extraneous material. Moreover, the interview is a pattern of interactions in which the relationship between interviewer and respondent is highly specialized, its specific characteristics depending somewhat on the purpose and character of the interview. (p. 16)

The researcher and participant met face-to-face. Interviews focused on sex education knowledge acquisition and usage and were recorded using an audio recording device. Interviews consisted of approximately 15 standard questions but remained semi-structured to allow for flexibility as the researcher and participants worked toward creating meaning.

Social Desirability

Social desirability most likely was a factor in the literature reviewed and within the data collection process for this project. Participation in most research is voluntary and allows
participants to provide a narrative of their experiences. Participants have various motives for participating in research projects including the motivation to misrepresent their identities for some type of gain (Hydock, 2018). That is, participants are willing to provide desired information when it may benefit them. Perceived desirable information is often overly reported while perceived undesirable information is under reported (Krumpal, 2013). Brenner and DeLamater (2016) found that participants over report to capture their ideal selves because participants do not want to disclose embarrassing information. Furthermore, asking about sensitive matter such as sexual activity often generates inaccurate disclosures because of social desirability.

Social desirability provides a filter through which participants may allow researchers to view them. Social desirability is a threat to research that causes participants to provide prosocial responses that they feel the researcher wants to hear (Brenner & DeLamater, 2016; Rasinski, Visser, Zagatsky, & Rickett, 2005). This affects the validity of research because it does not provide accuracy (Nederhof, 1985). Selection of interviewers is one way to overcome social desirability. Ways to use interviewers to overcome social desirability include using interviewers who do not have any power over interviewees. Additionally, Rasmussen et al. (2018) found that religious and non-religious individuals tend to report consumption of pornography at equal rates with the influence of social desirability.

Participant honesty is desired by researchers but is at the discretion of the participant’s motivation to be honest. Researchers request data from participants with the assumption that participants understand that researchers want the participant to make honest declarations (Isoni et al., 2019). Providing a statement requesting the honest declaration of participants reminds the participant of the importance of their honesty to the research, as well as reminding the participant
of their morals. However, Isoni et al. (2019) found that these nudges to be honest did not work for highly sensitive information because they have been prone to social desirability bias. In contrast, Halevy, Shalvi, and Verschuere (2014) found that most people were motivated to be honest most of the time.

Another option to curb social desirability is to use goal priming to orient participants toward a goal. Goal priming is a manipulation done to prepare the participant for what you will ask them to do in the study (Rasinski, Visser, Zagatsky, & Rickett, 2005). Goal priming increases the quality of self-reported data by inspiring participants to provide responses that are candid and more authentic. Goal priming helps to provide cognitive engagement which allows the participants to make an effort to provide more accurate responses. However, Dalal and Hakel (2016) found that goal-priming does not result in more accurate self-reporting. Instead, indirect questioning results in most honest declarations. Indirect questioning is based on asking participants hypothetical questions about ambiguous others.

Social desirability does impact the validity of research, and researchers are charged with being aware of this issue and creating methods that guard against social desirability. Researchers use and suggest various options for safeguarding the validity of data from social desirability such as the use of honesty clauses and goal priming. However, social desirability, especially when dealing with sensitive matter, is up to how a participant responds. Researchers are motivated to find the truth while participants may be motivated in various ways that may distort the truth. Therefore, researchers must remain vigilant of the influence of social desirability throughout the research.

In the current project, the researcher felt that many of the participants often began the interview guarded by their perceptions of the researcher which caused the researcher to feel that
participants were attempting to withhold information about their experiences. The researcher is in his mid-30’s with a full salt and pepper beard. The participants often addressed him as “Sir” throughout the conversations. The first three participants appeared to take strategic pauses in an effort to use language they considered more appropriate. Once the researcher noted that participants were attempting to change their language in an effort to not be disrespectful, the researcher made attempts to correct this behavior. First, the researcher changed his introduction script by reassuring participants that they can truly state how they feel without judgement. Then, in a few instances, the researcher would add comments that paraphrased participant’s thoughts. The use of phrases like “hooking-up”, or allowing participants to understand that the researcher understood cultural jargon such as what it means to be “mannish” encouraged participants to use language they were familiar and comfortable with during the interview. Ultimately, this allowed many of the participants to relax and laugh as they were surprised by the researcher’s knowledge of such terms. This resulted in most participants appearing to be less guarded with their language and the content that they shared. Although the research made attempts to prevent social desirability, it is possible participants were still guarded and guided by social desirability.

**Data Coding**

Two coding phases were used to identify themes in the data. The researcher began the coding process by transcribing the interviews. Combing through the transcripts multiple times allowed the researcher to identify 397 significant statements that were first coded using structural coding and then axial coding. Structural coding is based on conceptual phrases derived from the research question (Saldaña, 2015). Structural codes were (Black) manhood, information sources, barriers, sexual curiosity/behaviors, and information seeking behaviors. This is illustrated in Table 2.
### Table 2. Structural Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>Totals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black Manhood</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotions</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
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Participant Coding: 1-Brayton, 2-Theodore, 3-Grant, 4-Joshua, 5-Carlos, 6-Milton, 7-Damien, 8-Jaylen, 9-Bradley, 10-Karter, 11-Brian, and 12-Nate.

Axial coding ultimately allowed the researcher to group primary codes into broader thematic categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). After the first round of coding, the researcher
used axial coding to further identify themes. Structural codes were reexamined and placed into subcategories identified as the axial codes. Axial codes focused on the sex education topics participants were seeking, strategies Black males use to gain knowledge, and how they applied this information to their lived experiences. Themes emerged that detailed the participants’ experiences, highlighting the transformative moments of being exposed to sex education resources to developing values around sexual behavior. Themes were tested and confirmed through a follow-up conversation with two of the participants to determine the accuracy of the themes. The participants’ stories highlight these emerging themes of exploring their curiosities around sexuality, figuring out the logistics of sexual behaviors, and becoming a sexual being. These themes indicate the value participants placed on sex education and how the information informs their sexual attitudes and decisions.

**Analysis**

Phenomenological analysis procedures include epokhé, identifying common meanings and essences, horizontalization of data, and textual and structural analysis (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). Analysis in phenomenological inquiry requires the researcher to describe and analyze data to understand the essence of the phenomenon. Colaizzi (1978) created a seven-step descriptive phenomenological analysis process that was later simplified by Moustakas (1994) to include six steps. According to Moustakas, the researcher begins with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon in an attempt to set aside the researcher's personal experiences so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study. Then the researcher finds statements in the interviews about how individuals are experiencing the topic. Significant statements are then grouped into broader units of information, or themes, and provide the foundation for interpretation. Next, the researcher creates a description of “what” the participants
in the study experienced with the phenomenon and then a description of “how” the experience happened. Finally, the researcher writes a composite description of the phenomenon.

To achieve steps two through five of Moustakas’s (1994) descriptive phenomenological analysis process, the researcher in this study initially coded the interview transcripts. First, structural coding was used as the primary coding method within the phenomenological analysis process. Structural coding is derived from the research question and allows the researcher to quickly access the data by determining similarities and differences in the data based on conceptual phrases (Saldaña, 2015). Codes for this project included conceptual phrases, such as (Black) manhood, information sources, barriers, sexual curiosity/behaviors, and information seeking behaviors. Furthermore, studies that explore the perspective of multiple individuals benefit from structural coding because doing so allows themes to arise (Saldaña, 2015).

In step three, the researcher utilized axial coding as the secondary coding method of the data to sort structural codes into thematic categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Axial coding allowed the researcher to preserve the voice of the participants by creating patterns and themes from the meanings the participants assigned to their experiences. Axial coding “comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning” (Richards, 2015, p. 135). Specific themes the researcher sought to uncover through this process, which are influenced by Wilson (1981; 1997; 1999; 2000), include the strategies Black males use to gain knowledge, the topics they are seeking, and how they apply this information to their lived experiences. The researcher then proceeded with Moustakas’s (1994) steps four and five to complete the analysis process.

**Positionality**

The goal of this research project was to conduct qualitative research that explored fundamental philosophical truths about a group of young Black men's experiences with sex
education in Mississippi. As a Black man who grew up in Mississippi and experienced a sex education lesson in 7th grade, the researcher understands that policymakers go to great lengths to justify the limited content and delivery of sex education in Mississippi. Sex, in general, is a natural part of life for many people, yet it is extremely taboo and causes people to feel uncomfortable in addressing sex education in beneficial ways. The researcher was able to recruit a set of Black male participants who actively sought to provide a broader understanding of their experiences with sex education. Although the researcher experienced sex education in the Mississippi school district more than 20 years ago, reports indicate that the pedagogy of Mississippi's sex education curriculum has seen little change.

Black males have been the subject of academics discussing the achievement gap, but the connection that sex education has on educational attainment is an often overlooked conversation. The lack of adequate sex education plays a role in the cycle of poverty. Teen parents may have to leave school to care for their child, and the level of formal education a person completes is often connected to their socioeconomic status. It was the aim of the researcher to uncover how the research participants became sexually informed and how they used this information to become sexually savvy and responsible and thus prevent living lives illustrated by standard statistics of Black male experiences. The researcher hopes to use the results of this study to develop a research agenda that focuses on Black male sexuality inclusive of sexual behaviors, sexual values, sexual orientation, and sexual identity development.

Additionally, the researcher also acknowledges a number of assumptions, including participants’ exposure to sex education, regional attitudes on sexual behavior, and the social identities of the researcher. Participants are assumed to have participated in the state-sponsored CHART sex education program during their middle or high school experiences and are asked to
reflect on this experience, which may present issues with participants’ recollections and social desirability. Next, Magnolia State is located in the “Bible Belt,” which may have impacted views on sexual behavior given the Black community’s conservative relationship with religion (Battle & Barnes, 2009; Collins, 2004). Lastly, the researcher acknowledges his identity as a queer Black male, which may have been a potential barrier for participants and may have caused participants to become more reserved.

**Timeline**

This research occurred during the summer of 2019. The researcher applied for and received approval to conduct research at the host site. Once IRB approval was granted, the researcher visited MSU for approximately one to two weeks between May and June to gather data. The researcher transcribed the interviews and analyzed data between July and August 2019.

**Summary**

A qualitative-based phenomenological study provided the researcher with an opportunity to gain an understanding of how Black men obtain and use sex education. Understanding how allows us to understand the strategies Black men utilize to navigate their sexuality as it relates to their manhood. The phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to analyze the patterns and themes based on the ISB framework.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This study explored how Black males experienced and used sex education in Mississippi as they developed their identities as sexual beings. The gap between the lack of sex education programs targeting Black males and the mythical hyper-sexualization of Black males in literature and within policy prompted the researcher to investigate this phenomenon. Exploring how Black males gain access to and use sex education illustrates the importance Black males place on their sexual identity as they develop into young men. Sexual identity is often a topic related to sexual orientation in the LGBTQ+ community, but here sexual identity focuses on these young men’s identity development as they explore and resolve who they are as sexual beings—inclusive of sexual orientation. Phenomenology was chosen as the qualitative method to best explore this experience through complementary data collection and analysis procedures. The results are presented here as a culmination of the participants’ responses and are categorized into themes. This research was based on two research questions: (1) What has it been like for Black males, aged 18 to 22, to seek information regarding sex education in a state that limits sex education in public schools; and (2) How do Black males use the sex education information they obtained? These questions were the foundation for the interviews conducted by the researcher.

This chapter presents the thematic findings from 12 interviews with Black males from Mississippi. The interview process allowed the researcher to capture rich data that depicts Black males’ experiences of sex education. Analysis of the transcripts allowed the researcher to
conduct primary and secondary coding of the data. Although codes were pre-established and based on the nature of the research questions, specific themes in their stories emerged. These themes reflect their experiences and varied use of sex education.

Themes highlight the subjects’ progression from introduction to sexuality to establishing values around sexuality based on their acquired information. The first theme is sexual cognition—or introduction to sexuality. Sexuality entered the participants’ lives in various forms and at different points but was the catalyst for beginning their respective sexual identity development. The second theme was the resourceful exploration of sex education. Curiosity from exposure to sexuality compelled participants’ desire to explore information about sex. The third and final theme focused on defining values of Black male sexual identities. The traits were developed as a result of finding and analyzing sex education information and formulating values around how this information applied to their lives. The essence of their stories is captured below.

**Theme One: Sexual Ignition**

Coming of age and exposure to aspects of sexuality caused participants to become curious about exploring and defining sex. First exposure to sex caused sexual ignition, or the process by which participants were introduced to aspects of sexuality that fueled their own sexual interests. Observation of anatomical characteristics impacted their curiosity and prompted them to question and explore these differences. Grant recalls that he “noticed a difference in people having different body parts” (personal communication, June 4, 2019) and later wondered “why are women, women and men, men.” In noticing physical differences, Grant was “trying to attribute those to their behaviors. It was more so me wanting to figure out how to navigate socially, I guess” (personal communication, June 4, 2019). Likewise, physical characteristics
also initiated Brian’s curiosity, as it was stimulated by a video game that included nudity. Brian said,

I was sitting on my computer playing a game, and one of the main bad guys of this game had nothing on. I saw that he was anatomically correct; you could see it. So after that, for some reason, it kind of hit this switch. I wasn’t looking to go have sex, but I was definitely more open to researching what that was. (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

As to identifying that switch, Brian stated, “It was more so just a curiosity to see what the opposite sex looked like without clothes on. It would just be a simple matter of looking something up like specifics of what it is that I was imagining” (personal communication, May 28, 2019).

Direct introductions to pornography or other sexual content also influenced the curiosity of participants, causing them to become aware of sexual interests. When asked about what brought about his curiosity, Damien offered,

It was my friend. One day I went to his house and on the screen was Girls Gone Wild, and since then it was like I couldn’t stop watching it. I just felt so much attraction to it. So that got me curious. Then I would go to school and I started looking at people differently. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Brayton had two points of curiosity. He was introduced to pornography at an early age, but later became curious due to sex education and his own physical development. Brayton said,

I was introduced to porn by my cousins when I was in second grade, so I was curious then but not enough to look for myself. I became curious for my own self between sixth and seventh grade after my first sex education class—maybe because my body was changing (personal communication, July 28, 2019).

Being shielded from sexual content also influenced sexual curiosity among participants because it created an information void around the topic. Theodore specifically recalled an experience with his parents that caused him to become curious. Theodore’s recollection was that,
Access to sexual content intrigued participants and caused them to want more knowledge about sexuality.

Peer-to-peer conversations about sex and the sharing of details about their own sexual activities also spurred curiosity. Participants generally did not find their peers to be credible and felt that they fabricated their sexual experiences, yet these experiences still created enough intrigue to influence participants to explore sexuality for themselves. Carlos explained,

I would say it was around ninth grade when it started because I think majority of my friends at that point started losing their virginity. When a lot of people started losing it, I guess the curiosity came in. So, I started to wonder what the experience felt like for myself. That's when it kind of snowballed after that point. I just wanted to know firsthand what the big hoorah was about. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Likewise, Jaylen also noted that his curiosity naturally arose due to those around him having sexual encounters. “It kind of just came about, honestly,” said Jaylen (personal communication, June 3, 2019). He adds,

Once you're in the middle school, like from fifth to sixth grade, you actually learn a lot from that transition. Coming from my background, kids are exposed to things from early ages. They live that kind of life. You just hear from people, this person is having sex with this person. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

The sexual actions of others created a natural curiosity among participants, leading to their own interest in exploring sexuality.

Participans noted that they became inquisitive about sex due to a number of factors. Curiosity caused participants to explore and question the physical differences between genders. The visuals of sexual activity through pornography and movies also generated interest in
exploring sexual behaviors. Lastly, peers sharing their experiences about sex created interest in exploring sexuality. The curiosity of the participants created a pathway for seeking information and access to sex education in an effort to define sex for themselves.

**Subjects of Curiosity**

Sexual curiosity was piqued for many participants in middle school where their curiosity focused on exploring the logistics of sexual behaviors; curiosity in high school focused more on complex sexual topics, suggesting the sexual maturation of the participants. Most topics of curiosity initially arose during the middle school years. Many of the participants were interested in information about the physical aspects of the body and the logistics of sex. When discussing what he was not taught during his sex education experience but wanted to know, Milton said, “I wish I would have learned more about the female body. They tell females not to get pregnant, but I wish they went over female puberty” (personal communication, June 1, 2019). Theodore was also interested in the female body. He casually remarked, “I wanted to know what boobies looked like and that kind of thing” (personal communication, July 11, 2019). Their curiosity in seeing nude bodies shifted to interest in exploring the sexual boundaries of their own bodies.

Brian offered,

> I would have liked to have known that it is okay if you become romantically involved with someone and it's okay if you both get to that point where you're comfortable having sexual interactions with people. What I didn't like was just being told, “Don't do it ‘cause you're young or whatever.” (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

Damien’s interest went even further, as he wanted to figure out the intricacies of sex. “I would have wanted to know the specifics like how to put it in and how to please my partner because that's what I'm coming to do,” he stated (personal communication, June 3, 2019).
As sexual activities became a reality, participants began to hold themselves accountable through a desire and determination to become better informed of how to maintain their sexual well-being and appropriately engage in sexual activities. While in middle school, participants noted that they were curious about aspects of STIs. When asked about his specific curiosities around his experience of sex education, Milton answered, “I wish we would have focused more on sexually transmitted infections and went into more depth to understand them” (personal communication, June 1, 2019). Grant also had questions about STIs but wanted to learn about options for overcoming them because “STIs are not that bad. You can just go to the doctor. Most of them are curable or treatable. So, you can just take your meds to be okay. Like everybody makes mistakes” (personal communication, June 4, 2019). STIs were also of interest to participants in high school. Similar to Grant’s ideology around a desire for nuanced information of STIs and their true impact, Brian stated that he,

Would have liked to have focused more on categorizing severe diseases from the less severe, and accurately identifying when someone might actually need to be tested. I mean that as in we just would get pictures and were told this is what this disease looks like, and the symptoms of this disease. I would have rather the education program to teach in a manner of like, don't do this because of this, but if you are one of those people in this situation it is not the end of the world because “X” disease is not fatal. (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

Abstaining from sex was a priority for some participants as they experienced pressure from society to engage in sexual activities. Brayton explained, “I would have wanted to know the importance of not having sex. The importance of helping each other to refrain from it rather than being educated on how to be safe from this or that alone” (personal communication, July 28, 2019). Grant also noted that he would have welcomed information on abstinence because “it's okay to not have sexual encounters with people and that's perfectly normal. You shouldn't be having sexual encounters with people in middle school, and anyone who tells you differently is
obviously not a friend to you” (personal communication, June 4, 2019). Joshua also felt very similar because from his perspective,

> It isn’t something that you should have to rush like everybody makes it seem. Everybody makes it seem like, “Oh, you got to have sex,” but I'm more like a person where you don't have to have sex. Like, it's okay not to have sex. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

In response to wanting more abstinence education, Bradley summed it up by saying,

> I feel like since sex is more of an adult thing, it kind of gets grouped with stuff like alcohol and other drugs. So, I would try to normalize it. I think if you were to expose a middle schooler to sex it would probably decrease the eagerness for it. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Consent developed into a topic of importance as participants became sexually mature; this budding maturity stemmed from the participants’ experience of the social context around men, sexual assault, and their efforts to not find or place themselves in questionable situations. Karter brought the topic up as a curiosity, but also linked it to personal experiences. “Let’s say you and this girl consent to sex. Why is it that years later she says something?” asked Karter (personal communication, May 28, 2019). This caused Karter to then question, “What is consent and what isn’t consent?” (personal communication, May 28, 2019). Carlos showed a related interest in consent by stating, “I guess I would want to hear more about consent, like female consent. Nowadays, that's become a lingering problem, so males knowing what signs are consent and what aren't” (personal communication, June 3, 2019).

Sexual curiosity varied among the participants based on their personal experiences. Some individuals did not express curiosity because they felt that they knew what they wanted to know prior to receiving formal sex education at school. Others were curious about the logistics of sex and wished that sex education was more detailed. The details desired included information about STIs and ensuring that individuals know that there is life after contracting many STIs.
Participants also wanted information on how to normalize and minimized the pressure to engage in sex. Lastly, individuals were concerned about information around consent as they became sexually active. How participants addressed some of these deficiencies is detailed in the second theme section.

**Barriers**

Environmental barriers, such as home life, played a role in gaining access to sex education information and often prevented participants from exploring their curiosities and desires. A small number of participants did not express any barriers. For instance, Nate said,

> I have always been on the social side so whether there were the peers, or the Internet, I always had access to those. I feel like they gave us the right materials in school. The stuff that I was seeking ain’t meant for being in school. I was just trying to, you know, be manish.” (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

However, as participants expressed their youthful curiosities, many did encounter barriers to gaining the information they desired and felt they needed. Some parents were often direct or indirect barriers to participants accessing materials they considered educational or informative. Theodore stated, “When it came down to pornography, in particular, it was always sneaking” (personal communication, July 11, 2019). Damien acknowledged two barriers to gaining sex education. First, Damien shared that, “When I moved [in] with my stepmom, I wanted to have access to the shows that they blocked with the parental controls. I don't think we could watch anything on the Adult Swim” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). Additionally, Damien expressed that he was not able to gain sex education through personal exploration because of his living arrangement. “Everybody in my neighborhood were family members. I didn't really have outside friends that I could kiss on or anything of that nature. That was a barrier to keep me from
being curious and experimenting with somebody,” Damien explained (personal communication, June 3, 2019).

School sponsored sex education programs and classes were also a source of frustration for participants because the schools they had attended offered limited topics on sexuality that did not respond to participants’ individual curiosities regarding sexuality. The lack of information caused some participants to turn to other resources for information. Carlos mentioned that, “With the Internet, almost everything [is] accessible now. If I decided to type it in Google, I could probably find it. I probably got more information from the Internet than I did the [sex education] class” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). The information schools provided also lacked depth and did not address solutions for problems students might experience. Brian stated,

The barrier was that they didn't want to teach a correct curriculum as in a proper way to put on a contraceptive or to take a contraceptive off. I would just like for the curriculum to be taught in the more option-based style other than, “Here's what sex is and here's a condom.” I would've liked for the curriculum to have been more realistic. You can actually help someone tremendously by letting them know they're not the bad guy just because they had something. The curriculum needs to be more solution based. (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

Lastly, Jaylen also noted his discontent with school sponsored sex education because it lacked resources. Jaylen explained,

As far as school, the resources were definitely limited, and came from the old high school and middle school, because for those classes you get a football coach or just like a random person. So, the resources for the class were definitely limited. So, I mean if anything, I just research it if I did want to know it, like with the Internet. You can find anything on the Internet. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Participants were curious about a number of topics. However, there were exterior barriers to them gaining information. Barriers consisted of physical and educational obstructions. Although the barriers in their lives varied, the participants felt that those barriers, ultimately, did not allow them to receive sex education in the manner in which they would have liked to.
Theme Two: Resourceful Exploration of Sex Education

Participants often felt that the realities of their sexual lives were unaddressed within their formal sex education programs and lessons, which led them to seek supplemental information—highlighting their resourcefulness. The young men had varying sex education experiences when attending their respective middle and high schools, but these different lessons all seemed to lack appeal for the students; the presented topics only skimmed the surface of sexuality from the participants’ viewpoints. For example, in commenting to the sex education he received, Damien said, “It wasn't helpful really, besides the people telling us to like make sure you have a condom on. They didn't really say anything else besides the usual things people say about sex—the birds and the bees” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). The participants diverse sex education experiences were accompanied by the varying levels of importance they placed on sex as a whole. Jaylen was more definitive in his lack of interest in sex, which impacted his interest in sex education. Jaylen explained, “I'm not really that big on sex. I don't just go out seeking it. I'm very indifferent about it. If it happens, it happens and if it doesn't, it doesn't. I wasn’t nerdy, but I was more into sports,” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). However, the majority of participants noted sex education was significantly important to them because they had questions and wanted to explore sexual behaviors for themselves. “I feel like I wanted to know how to please a girl. I wanted to know the ins and outs of sex. I wanted to be an expert. I wanted to be awesome,” commented Damien (personal communication, June 3, 2019). Participants’ interest and engagement in sex served as the motivation for seeking more information through available resources.

The mystique of sex caused the young men to embark on journeys to find answers for significant questions they had about sex. As Carlos explained,
I guess curiosity would be the big one. It’s kind of like one person showed me, so that kind of just led to an interest that just snowballed onto more and more and then it became like, “Okay, so that's how it goes.” I guess you learn more when you actually see it instead of just listening to people talk about it so that you won't be completely clueless when the time does come. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

The curiosity seems to have led participants to seek out two primary sources for information. The first being people, mainly adults, in their lives and the second being resources on the Internet—which is discussed later in this chapter. First, Milton noted he would seek out people who were not his sex education teacher because he described her as mean. Instead, Milton would,

   talk to more adults who were nicer about the topic if they were willing to go into depth with the topic and explain the topic. That would often be a biology teacher or our school librarian—who was also good with discussing the topic and not being real aggressive about it. (personal communication, June 1, 2019)

Although school officials were a valid source of information for participants, family members—mainly parents—were often the more influential resource. When asked what sources he sought out, Joshua responded, “My dad ‘cause I don't feel comfortable talking to my mom about sex. It just weirds me out. She makes everything a joke” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). However, mothers were seen as a significant source of sex education for the participants given that mothers were often open to discuss sexuality. Grant sought out his mother as a resource. He explained,

   I wanted to ask grownups, honestly. I would just ask my momma all the time, “What is this? Or, what makes you a momma? Why do I call daddy, daddy?” Stuff like that. So, I just always wanted to know everything, basically, from a young age. (personal communication, June 4, 2019)

Sometimes mothers directly addressed sexuality topics as commands that also served as preventative measures. Jaylen stated,

   The sex talks just came about. They came about, you know. For instance, my mom would come home and see me talking on the phone with a girl. Then she would give me the ‘don't be having the girls at my house’ type talk and the ‘don't be out here having
unprotected sex’ talk. Basically, she just wanted me to be mindful of what I was doing and the consequences of my actions. You know, like having a child is a big responsibility, and it can take away from your life. So, it was basically that type of deal. She was just being proactive in what she said. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Likewise, Bradley noted that his mother was also a resource, which actually made the sex education in school obsolete given his mother’s profession. “My mom worked in healthcare. I was taking classes when I already knew what a penis and vagina was. Outside of that, there wasn't really too much that I had to get outside of school,” stated Bradley (personal communication, June 3, 2019). However, some participants acknowledged resistance or hesitance to speak with their parents about sex for various reasons. Brayton explained why he held this common perspective:

I know that if I use my phone or if I ask a friend, they won't judge me and they won't hold back. I don't have a fear of being judged in a hurtful way, but, I didn’t want to ask my mother or father certain things because I didn’t want them to think that I was having sex or I didn't want them to be weird about it. (personal communication, July 28, 2019)

Adults were able to serve as a resource for participants, with mothers being the driving force for sex education for many of the young men in this research. Mothers—and fathers to a lesser degree—were available, seen as knowledgeable, and—most of all—trustworthy.

Information exchanges between peers also served as a source of sex education, specifically for those who were less sexually experienced. These peer-to-peer conversations provided insight into the nuances of sexuality. Nate stated that friends were useful because “they would give like recommendations on where they found stuff” (personal communication, May 28, 2019) such as Internet resources. Information exchanges between friends also served as a means of warning the participants that they were not immune to STIs or other sexual hazards. Milton noted that his friendships allowed for information exchange as a learning tool regarding the impact of STIs. He said,
My friends had sexual experiences earlier on, so they would always talk about the things that they did or would do. I remember one conversation in particular where one of my friends thought he had like an STI or whatever because he was messing with a lot of people. I think he had mono or whatever and he was like super nervous about it, and he kind of scared me a little bit, too. (personal communication, June 1, 2019)

Likewise, Joshua also explained that he used friends’ experiences as a resource. When asked about resources he used for information, Joshua stated,

My friends’ sexual experiences and what they had to go through. I know I have a friend, and the first time she lost her virginity was in ninth grade. She caught an STI from a famous, well not a famous, but like a popular high school person. He gave her an STI. So, I was like shocked. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Essentially, participants noted that they were seeking information and learning vicariously through their friends, or as Damien stated, “Most of my knowledge comes from personal experiences with friends having sex, knowing the information that they know and kind of using it for myself—using their information, their do's and don'ts” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). These interactions allowed participants to see themselves in their peers and to use those experiences as educational tools for their own future sexual interactions.

Finally, technology provided nonjudgmental, unbiased, and direct access to sex education information that allowed participants to explore their curiosities. Multiple participants mentioned the use of technology as a strategy for gaining access to sex education resources, including forums, definitions, pornography, and more. The Internet was not readily available to Damien at different points in his life, but he still found a way to access sexual content. He explained,

We didn't have the Internet when I stayed with my mom, but when I moved with my dad, we had it and had different things to look at. It doesn't have to be just porn; it could be like Game of Thrones because of the sex scenes. Pornography was a biggie. The magazines were always nice. We had DVDs; you know, like Girls Gone Wild DVDs. My dad’s room was accessible. So, me and my brothers would just go run and look at it. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)
Often, information-seeking strategies consisted of Internet searches and social media platforms, proving the relevance of technology in the quest for information. Nate said that,

> I used to go to the library and used their computers and just look stuff up that I was like inquisitive about or wanted to know about sex. I still constantly do my own research to learn more about different things like different diseases and stuff. (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

Brian also acknowledged that the Internet was useful when seeking out information because it was convenient. Brian stated,

> I was trying to find it where I could. You know, we're typically hardwired to Google anything anyway, half the time, and so, I figured why not use it then, too. If I was just pursuing any information on my own, like my motivator is just the simple fact that I knew it was a Google click away. (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

Though participants acknowledged that information is accessible through the Internet, sometimes information seeds were planted by other resources which led them to seek out additional information on the Internet. Milton explained that he “would learn a lot of stuff in science or biology and then I would go home and go on YouTube and learn about different things” (personal communication, June 1, 2019). Other social media platforms also became resources for finding explicit sex information. When asked where he found information while in middle and high school, Carlos claimed that he used,

> social media because I see like how people have sites where they are just strictly pornography type accounts where they just show multiple sex acts, just like short minute films or seconds of sex acts. You know, there's no age limit, so you can just make a Twitter account and instantly follow them. I know that social media is definitely one where we can find information. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Overwhelmingly, participants acknowledged that they would “Google certain information” (Brayton, personal communication, July 28, 2019), which primarily led to seeking pornography as an information resource. Pornography was alluded to as a tool for pleasure, but participants also noted that they often used it as an educational resource. Carlos explained that,
As young people, pornography was the main one that everybody just instantly gets. It's easily accessible and it's crazy that it’s free, but it's easily accessible. It becomes this type of thing where you can learn and can get a general picture of what it's like. So, that becomes a teacher outside of school. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Likewise, Joshua said, “Porn gave you, like, it showed you instructions on how to do something we didn't learn. Like nobody else will teach you. It's just something that you had to go looking for yourself” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). Pornography essentially became a how-to guide for performing sexual activity, as it was one of the more accessible and informative resources available to participants.

The resourcefulness of the young men proved to aid them in their quest for information. Participants noted that the main resources for education outside of formal sex education at school had become their parents, peers, and self-exploration of the Internet and pornography. Mothers were either approachable as a resource or directly addressed sex education with their sons. Friends were a resource, but primarily because of their negative experiences with sexual activities. Participants also used technology which included accessing Internet to gain information and find pornography. These resources were often fairly accessible to participants.

**Theme Three: Developing Sexual Values**

The acquisition of sex education information often contributed to the young men’s sexual wellness, suggesting that participants, overall, have taken sex education seriously. It was difficult for the participants to see themselves within some aspects of the formal and informal sex education they received because of the messages and values contained and expressed within the information. Participants’ exploration allowed them to locate information that fit their realities. This information affirmed their ability to become sexual beings by helping them define their sexual values as men. Participants did not disclose specifics about their sex lives, such as their
involvement and engagement with sexual activities. However, their values spoke to what it means to be a sexual being. Specifically, the values equated to gaining sexual confidence, managing their sexual wellness, and embracing their sexual responsibilities. The information gained, and sometimes applied, throughout their experiences ultimately aided them in their progression toward becoming sexual beings.

**Protecting Black Male Sexuality**

District sponsored sex education curriculum is often limiting and neglects specific cultural experiences that relate to Black men’s sexuality. Facilitators rarely, if ever, relate sex education content to their experiences as young Black men. Milton noted, “There's a lack of Black male teachers in the education system so by default our experiences don’t get expressed or they’re misrepresented, which leads to taboos and sexual confusion” (personal communication, June 1, 2019). Additionally, other content the participants would find did not speak to the totality of who they were either. For instance, Grant explained,

There would be information about how different diseases affected Black people. They would have information or statistics about this group or that group but never anything intersectional. I feel like anything I learned I had to gather and piece together myself. (personal communication, June 4, 2019)

The lack of information created a vague sense of the sex information’s applicability whereby participants were left to piece together information to develop their own sexual identity values.

Negative perceptions of Black men in society caused participants to be sexually guarded and prompted them to use their lived experience to offer counter narratives to Black male sexuality. One participant showed a desire to challenge hypersexual stereotypes and redefine Black men as socially-conscious sexual beings. Joshua stated that he felt pressured by his dad to have sex against his own desire not to. He said, “Sometimes dads—especially Black dads—
encourage their sons to have sex. My dad pressured me to have sex with girls, but that wasn’t my character” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). His dad’s insistence that he engage in sex with girls spoke to his dad’s values around sex and promoting stereotypical and heteronormative values of Black male prowess. Joshua’s assertion of his own values over those of his father allowed him to dictate the role sex has played in his life—a moment of self-authorship.

Myths about Black men’s hypersexuality caused participants to defend their social identities by turning to respectability politics to normalize Black men’s rights and responsibilities around being sexual beings. Milton took the proverbial high road when addressing the issue of adults voicing negative sexual tropes of Black men by invoking the image of President Obama as a powerful Black man who illustrated how to be a successfully sexual being. Milton explained,

The Black teachers would sometimes make the stereotypical jokes, like Black men have five or six kids and they don't take care of their kids. I even heard that growing up. My mom would say my dad was not doing what he was supposed to do. However, President Obama is a Black man that's married with kids and doesn't have outside problems. Black men can have a nice successful family. A Black man doesn't have to always be involved in drama controversy. (personal communication, June 1, 2019)

Those adults may have perpetuated stereotypes of Black men, but Milton was able to envision Black men as sexual beings who are capable of starting, supporting, and leading their own families. His vision acknowledges Black men’s ability to assert themselves as sexual beings whose desires echo aspirations of hope and determination for acceptance of Black men as viable sexual beings.

Bradley applied respectability politics more blatantly by suggesting that education is a means of erasing negative images of Black male sexuality. Bradley stated, “The stereotype that comes along with being a Black man is that you’re some kind of animal. The more sex education that Black men receive does kind of help reduce that stigma because we learn to control
ourselves” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). Bradley went on to discuss how this notion could protect Black men from rape allegations. Bradley attempted to preserve Black male sexuality by suggesting that Black men protect themselves from allegations of sexual misconduct by becoming more knowledgeable of sex-related topics. However, respectability politics are often frowned upon because of their use in policing the cultural authenticity, yet, for some black men, respectability politics have become a strategy for protecting Black male sexuality. Though not an all-inclusive experience for the participants, the use of respectability politics illustrates how some Black men straddle the fence between stereotypes and reality.

**Sexual Identity Values**

The establishment and protection of Black male sexuality served as the impetus for developing sexual values that defined the participants as sexual beings. Finding answers to their questions about sex allowed participants to build confidence in their sexual knowledge and sexual abilities. The participants understood sex to be an often-pleasurable experience, yet they equally understood they had to engage in sexual activities with care and concern for their well-being as Black men due to negative sexual experiences. Their livelihoods are also impacted by the responsibility they assumed to keep them accountable for their actions as sexual beings. These traits defined elements of their values as sexual beings.

**Building confidence.**

Having access to sex education that responds to the curiosities of young men affirms their desires and improves their sexual confidence in meaningful ways. Information-based confidence seemed to impact areas such as their emotional esteem, physical confidence, and belief in their ability to engage in sexual activities. The information that participants acquired often allowed them to build confidence in having knowledge about sex. First, acquiring sex education provided
a confidence boost for the participants because it was information they sought out for specific purposes that aided them in their exploration of sexuality. It was a maturing endeavor, as expressed by Brayton who said, “I feel accomplished. I was able to teach myself something that is a very serious matter without the consistent help of an adult or somebody else. Knowing that is a boost because I found it out for myself” (personal communication, July 28, 2019).

Additionally, the information allowed them to become participants in information exchanges. Theodore recounted his experience where he was generally less knowledgeable about sex and how the information he found eventually became handy when he found himself in similar situations. Theodore said,

> It made me feel good to know a little bit more about what I was talking about because a lot of times being in conversations about sexual things and not knowing what [peers were] talking about led me to fake it and act like I did know. I remember one time in middle school there was this White kid. He said something about popping a girl's cherry. I tried to pretend like I knew what he was talking about, and I ended up saying something and they actually made a joke at my expense. It revealed me as somebody who didn't know about the topic. So the sex education kind of helped in that. (personal communication, July 11, 2019)

The acquired sex education information was also useful in building confidence in their bodies and allowed them to normalize and affirm their physical transformation from adolescence to manhood. Milton acknowledged that the information he gained contributed to his physical confidence. He explained,

> Yeah, I think with your body changing and everything, you kind of don't understand it. So, you shy away from the topic or you feel ashamed because you don't understand it. I feel like when you get informed about what's happening, you're like, “Oh, this is something that everyone goes through. I shouldn't feel down or feel ashamed of this.” It definitely made me put my shoulders back and look up and be like, “Okay, this is not a big deal. It's part of life.” (personal communication, June 1, 2019)

Likewise, Grant acknowledged a similar level of confidence, but also connected physical development to attraction and how doing so made him more self-confident. Grant stated,
I feel like every middle schooler has a lot going on physically. Everybody goes through their weird, awkward phase. I was kinda going through that, but also thinking why am I not having sex? Will anybody ever love me? That sort of stuff. After having the knowledge that I have now, it’s kind of like I’m normal and I think that that is a comforting feeling. (personal communication, June 4, 2019)

Exposure to pornography also played a role in the participants developing confidence in their bodies, illustrating how seeing the bodies of the male actors caused them to question their own physical builds—specifically regarding penis size. The majority of participants noted that they learned what sex is and how to perform acts of sex from pornography, but they also expressed how pornography impacted their confidence in their physical bodies—specifically, their penises. Theodore stated that,

Basically, with pornography, I wouldn’t say sex ed too much—well both. I suppose at some point somebody in school said something about penis size, but pornography made me wonder if I was fitting the criteria for what they call “good D.” (personal communication, July 11, 2019)

Damien also noted that pornography made him question his penis size and biological abilities. He stated, “I used to think I was bad because I didn't know if my penis was big enough. I didn't even start ejaculating until like eighth grade, ninth grade.” (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Although pornography caused individuals to explore questions about their bodies, social stereotypes of the Black male physique influenced participants’ confidence in their penis sizes. Some participants expressed that as Black men, they often felt and feel the pressure of being physically stereotyped—which wasn’t always a bad thing. When asked if sex education—via pornography—impacted his attitude toward physical development, Brayton stated, “Yes, it did. Probably comparing my physical body to that of the average male per se. It probably did impact me in a good way; being above average—being healthy, being fit, and [my] penis size” (personal
Such confidence has led them to believe that they are sexually desirable because of the stereotype. Brian explained,

“There's this understood stereotype—biologically speaking—about Black men. The kind of things I've seen, whether in porn or just kind of with the friends, would definitely lead me to believe that, given like my biological composition, I'm at an advantage compared to other races. Now they don't teach like there's a size difference, but sex education has definitely propelled this confidence. We may be biologically more equipped, and that creates confidence in itself. It almost seems like we're more likely to have sexual interactions because that's an understanding that everyone has. (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

After achieving a level of confidence in their bodies, participants expressed that they were more at ease when engaging in sexual situations.

Next, their willingness to engage in sexual activities is, in part, linked to the confidence participants gained from acquiring sexual knowledge. Participants noted how the information allowed them to be prepared if a sexual situation arose. The information allowed them to enter those situations with the confidence of knowing what to expect. For instance, Bradley said, “I would say being more aware helps you because you’re less nervous while you’re having sexual activities” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). The confidence gained from possessing knowledge also allowed participants to prepare for sex, as well as engage in information exchange. Joshua explained that, “Every time you learn more about it, you feel more confident to have sex. It also made me more confident to talk to people about sex and to make sure that they're having safe sex” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). Additionally, access to information gave the participants the confidence and language to speak candidly with their partner(s) about their own sexual health. Brian referenced a song from Hip-Hop singer J. Cole’s album 2014 Forest Hills Drive, “Wet Dreams,” and, reminiscent of J. Cole’s lyrically depicted
experiences, noted the importance sex education information plays in building confidence. Brian explained,

Yeah, it was a confidence boost, ultimately. I think you're more likely to express any concerns you have with whatever partner you're interacting with. If you're lacking confidence and you're in that situation, you're going to be afraid to ask questions. You're going to be afraid to really act on certain things because you don't want to be embarrassed by that other person, or you just don't want to be embarrassed at all. You don't want them to go back and talk about you in a negative light, you know? And so, I think it's confidence. (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

Ultimately, having sexual confidence comes down to saving face. The participants wanted the knowledge to ensure that they knew what they were doing, could prevent embarrassment in a sexual situation, or avoid risk to their mental wellness.

Lastly, the various levels of sex education participants received in schools, along with the education they discovered on their own, helped the young men to gradually increase the confidence to engage in sexual activities. Bradley made a connection between sex education and sexual activities by stating, “I guess it is kind of like if you learn to play basketball, you’d probably be able to play a little bit more as you become better” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). Access to sex education improved their access to sexual activities and also created a cognitive sexual experience where participants detailed how learning sex education, from resources or their own sexual experiences, allowed them to become better sexual partners. “It improved my sexual activity because I learned to do stuff better,” said Nate (personal communication, May 28, 2019). Damien had similar reflections on what he learned from pornography and how it allowed him to improve his performance. Damien said,

Yeah, I got better at having sex. Even though I was already good, I learned how to go slow. To take my time. I learned some different techniques that pleases women. It's just that when you do something more, you just get better at it. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)
The accumulation of all sourced sexual education information also influenced participants in learning about their own bodies as they engaged in sexual activities. Brian noted that,

I was more comfortable getting into these situations. I had a greater understanding of what was going on. For instance, you have sex with a condom so much that you kind of learn the timing, the rhythm of your body. So, if you were ever, for example, in a situation in which you didn't have a condom or something, you know when it's time to stop. I don't mean that as in let's appropriate the pullout method, but like with that confidence, you know yourself so well that it's not something you have to worry about. (personal communication, May 28, 2019)

Brian’s exploratory sexual experiences allowed him to acknowledge the significance of his behaviors and how they may impact him, but he also explored the limits of his sexual knowledge due to his confidence. Overall, confidence proved to be a byproduct of acquiring sex education information. Confidence set the foundation for allowing the participants to prepare for their sexual experiences by being confident in their bodies and confident in their knowledge about preforming sexual activities.

**Being careful.** With sex comes the responsibility of managing one’s well-being, and participants realized this was an essential component of their sexual exploration. They realized that they must consciously engage in sexual activities to prevent, mitigate and/or minimize negative risks that could impact their health or futures as Black men. Their concerns suggest that they are aware of negative stereotypes of Black males, and none of them wished to be another statistic. When asked if sex education has influenced his sexual behaviors, Karter simply said, “Yes, to just be careful. To understand what I am getting myself into” (personal communication, May 28, 2019). Joshua had similar thoughts when he responded, “Yes, it made me not want to have sex with everybody” (personal communication, June 3, 2019). Most participants expressed concerns for not wanting to become another Black male statistic relating to causing unwanted
pregnancies, but learning about STIs appeared at the top of their list of concerns. Jaylen explained his concerns when he stated,

> Just learning about the different diseases or causes of them, or just having sex can change how you approach it. So, one time you probably not use a condom, but you think about the consequences that could have been and you go back and be like, “Oh, I have to do this because it's not about the feeling I get. It's more of just being mindful of your own health.” (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Damien had similar sentiments and noted that his education primarily stemmed from pornography. However, Damien also explained how pornography taught him the physical techniques of sex but did not teach him responsibility when it came to related health concerns or possible consequences. Damien explained,

> I would say I learned to have endurance. I know how to please my partner better by doing different things and different techniques. I've learned that a lot of people are not protected. I noticed, when I did watch pornography, that a lot of the mistakes people would tell me not to make, a lot of people in the videos were making those same mistakes. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Like others, Grant also described his concerns for his sexual health related to STIs. Grant was aware of HIV statistics in Jackson, Mississippi—a predominately African American/Black community—and how these statistics related to his own identity as a queer, Black male. Grant commented,

> At first, I didn't want to have sex. I was scared to do this because my biggest fear was, what if I have a baby? I was like, “Stay away from sex.” And then after I became sexually active, it was like, “Okay, if I’m going to have sex, I will use a condom, always take a shower, go pee, and drink water afterwards.” It was more so about taking care of me first, which it can be a little touchy sometimes because sexual partners don't understand that. It's not that I don't want to take care of them. You also have to protect yourself, especially today, especially living in Mississippi. I mean like living in Jackson, the HIV rate is significantly higher in that population. It's like, “Are you on prep? Are you using condoms? Like have you had a checkup?” At first it was scary, but now it's just more so like be aware of who your sexual partners are and who their sexual partners are if you’re that comfortable. For me, my rule is if we aren't that comfortable to have that conversation about who else we may be seeing, then we just can’t have sex at that point (personal communication, June 4, 2019).
Grant’s concerns related directly to geographical statistics regarding STI rates. He specifically believed that his experience with sex education caused him to not want to engage in sexual activities, but he progressed to a willingness to have sex if he is protected. For Grant, this includes being able to have an open dialogue about his partners’ sexual health as well. The participants held themselves accountable for their sexual actions and realized that they were the ones in charge of their sexual wellness.

**Accepting responsibility.** Having access to sex education and confidently engaging in sexual activities led the participants to accept the duties of being responsible sexual beings. The young men mentioned various aspects of responsibility as a result of obtaining sex education, which provides insight into the value they placed and place on being sexually knowledgeable. Participants took responsibility for multiple factors—their decisions and actions, sexual health, knowledge acquisition, and ability to share accurate information, as well as understanding consent between intimate partners. First, there was a responsibility to become educated about sex beyond the physical act itself. Many participants addressed such topics as STIs, their bodies, and even their mental well-being. Although participants expressed broader views of sexual responsibility, Grant spoke candidly about the lack of education his partners have shown around sexuality and how that impacts his own decisions. Grant stated,

> Yes, I think that most men are just dirty. It probably sounds weird, but most men just don't understand their own sexual health. There are men's health magazines, but they talk about building muscle and like working out and being really fit. If people want to have a healthier lifestyle—that’s fine, but being physically fit is not the only indicator of being healthy. I think that since having this information it has made me realize that most men don't know how to take care of themselves holistically. (personal communication, June 4, 2019)

The accumulated information has helped them define who they are as men who are sexual beings. Sex education is essential to responsibility because “It's like this is what we were
designed to do as men, and what we were designed to find out,” Brayton stated (personal communication, July 28, 2019). The information allowed the participants to internally reflect on their relationship with sex. To this degree, their acquired information proved not only beneficial for themselves, but also highlights potential information exchange in positioning a man to help others to define their relationship with sex as expressed by Damien. According to Damien,

It makes me more responsible, and I feel like men should be responsible. I feel like everyone should be responsible. In my sense, it does make me a better man to have this information—to know this information. I'm glad that I have acquired it. It helps me figure out where I stand as a man and how I want my children to be taught—how I want my son to become a man. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Gender bias is present within sex education, and the acquisition of more self-directed sex education allowed participants to reflect on these social issues and determine their own sexual responsibility. Milton noted how he was treated in contrast to girls in terms of expectations around sex, and it caused him to question the gendered implications of sex education. He decided to double-down on his own ability to gain and use sex education information for his well-being. Milton explained,

It definitely did. It made me pay attention to society’s ideas of manhood. Like, people not being as hard on me about sexual health as there were with women made me feel like, “Oh, I'm a male. I don't have to worry about this.” However, once I got the information, I was like, “I've been played, basically. I haven't been told everything.” It definitely made me look at manhood in a different way. Manhood isn't like this thing that these people have described. It's not like being carefree or doing whatever. It's about being informed and knowing what you’re doing. (personal communication, June 1, 2019)

The ability to acquire sex education has important implications for how Black males experience the responsibility of being sexual beings. Responsibility is not taken lightly and leads to reflections of how sex education impacted their sense of themselves as men.

Participants also dove deeper into the relationship between sex education, social issues, and responsibilities. Those interviewed demonstrate how Black males are concerned for their
social welfare in the United States and indicate that aspects of societal expectations have an influence on their sexual decisions. Jaylen detailed a number of social concerns for Black males to consider versus the need for sex. Jaylen believed that,

> Being a Black man in today's society is a lot of work. Most people take it for granted. Sex is the least of your concern[s], if you're a Black man. You have many more things to worry about as far as the system, the government, and how they view you in society. So, if sex is like up there at the top of your list, you have a lot of things to worry about. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

Societal stereotypes of Black male sexuality continuously haunt the sexual experiences of young Black males. Being worried about social injustice while exercising sexual responsibility led Black males to make sexual choices that would not negatively impact their futures. As noted earlier, the experiences of others, especially peers, often proved educational. A few participants discussed topics of consent and being knowledgeable of sexual abuse. Joshua tied the concept of responsibility to consent and race by stating,

> I never have sex with White women because White women just think they can lock Black boys up by a switch of a word. Even though they might want to have sex with you, their parents might see you with them and they might say that you’re raping her. (personal communication, June 3, 2019)

The participants were generally aware of how their sexual decision-making is contextualized by social realities that are impacted by stereotypes.

> To be a Black man means to be informed and sexually responsible. In order to be sexually responsible, the participants used the information they accessed to reflect on how sexual topics relate to who they are as Black men. This has caused them to make calculated decisions about their sexual health, sexuality, sexual partners, and sexual responsibility. Overall, they have illustrated what being responsible and protecting themselves means to their well-being.
Connection to the Research Questions

Schools often provided varying levels of sex education for Black males in this research; however, the education often came too late or was not sufficient enough to address the topics Black males wanted to explore. This caused Black males to seek their own information on the “how-tos” of sex. Ultimately, Black males sought information that helped to define their sexual wellness identity. The data generally responded to the research questions and allowed the researcher to better understand how Black males experience sex education in Mississippi.

Question One: What has it been like for Black males, aged 18 to 22, to seek information regarding sex education in a state that limits sex education in public schools?

Schools provided basic sex education experiences that often left the young Black men in this study eager to learn more about what sex meant to their lives. The sex education curriculum typically covered contraceptives, teen pregnancy, STIs, and abstinence. Instructors were often knowledgeable of the subject matter but were not experts as their primary roles were coaches, and physical education teachers. In limited cases, school nurses and public health educators taught the lessons. Overall, sex education was frequently described as a hit-or-miss experience with participants receiving sex education that failed to speak to or adequately address their curiosities.

The young men often acknowledged being exposed to aspects of sexuality at very young ages, which also influenced sexual curiosities. This caused participants to seek out their own education by talking to the people in their lives or by covertly exploring sexual materials. Mothers played a significant role in the sexual wellness development of many of the participants, but pornography became a major educator because it provided details within a judgment-free context. Participants acknowledged they would seek pornography for pleasure, but they were
more driven by learning what sex was, how to perform it, how to please their partner(s), and how to become social participants within sexualized spaces. Although sex education was often at a premium and did not elaborate on topics of interest to the participants, they found ways to explore their curiosities—which allowed them to formulate sexual knowledge.

**Question Two: How do Black males use the sex education information they obtained?**

Black males were assertive in learning what they felt they needed to know to become accountable for their own sexual knowledge and sexual wellness. Having the information allowed the young men to develop and adopt language to engage in sexual discourse with other individuals. The confidence they gained from the information they acquired also normalized and affirmed their physical transitions into manhood. Although most of the participants noted pornography as an educational tool, it also caused some participants to lack confidence by prompting them to question their physical development, especially their penis sizes. Other participants felt that stereotypes about Black men’s physical endowments gave them an edge over other individuals. Penis size was a topic of contention, but the information participants received from their various educational tools gave them the confidence to seek out and engage in sexual activities with their partners. This earned confidence was important because many participants were scared of being embarrassed if they found themselves in a sexual situation and did not know how to perform to the perceived satisfaction of their partners.

Gaining information about sex allowed the young men to responsibly engage in sexual activities. This information allowed them to practice caution and reflect or strategize before they engaged in potentially risky sexual activities. Contracting an STI was their primary concern and what they wanted to protect themselves from the most. The young men also found themselves responsible for deconstructing gender bias around sex education to hold themselves responsible
for their own actions and sexual wellness. Additionally, these males feel that their identities as Black men are under attack and they must be responsible when engaging in sexual behaviors with others because they stand to socially lose more than they will gain from the encounter. Their cumulative and evolving knowledge allowed the participants to understand that with sexual activity comes significant responsibility and to succeed in their current goals as college men, they must make decisions that will positively impact and advance their futures rather than jeopardize or derail them.

**Summary**

The participants of this study are sexual beings who rely on sex education as a means of constructing their experiences and values around their sexual identities. The education they were provided in middle and high school was insufficient, which caused many to seek their own sources of information as they began to question their physical and mental development and the logistics of sexual behaviors. Although parents—primarily mothers—were a sex education resource outside of school, pornography became an educational tool that allowed individuals to explore their curiosities without judgment. Their information use centered around development of their sexual experiences and values, allowing them to determine how sex played and will play a role within their lives and livelihoods.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION

Delivery of sex education programming, such as services provided by the CHART program, varies greatly from school district to school district, and creates an unstandardized array of experiences for youth in Mississippi that leads to critical information gaps. To compensate for deficiencies within the Mississippi sex education curriculum, the young men in this study turned to their parents, peers, and the internet as resources. They found the information they needed to engage in sexual behaviors, and they learned how to protect themselves from situations that put their well-being at risk. Therefore, this study demonstrates a correlation between obtaining sex education information and learning to become sexually responsible.

Contrary to the theorized sexual notions of Black masculinity, the Black males in this project did not present as hypersexual men exploiting their prowess to define their ideologies of manhood. As cool pose theory (Majors & Billson, 1992) would suggest, sexuality plays an integral role in how Black men present their masculine selves. Their sexuality, according to this theory, is where they are allowed to show dominance. However, for the Black men in this study, hypersexuality did not factor into how they viewed their own identities as Black men. In fact, once their sexual curiosity faded, they were interested in ways of being sexually responsible.

It is important to note, however, that although participants did not brag about their sexual prowess or present as being motivated and driven by sex during the interviews, many noted that they gained prestige from existing stereotypes of Black male sexual dominance. The participants said that they benefitted from societal perceptions of Black male sexual virility, and that the illusion of Black male sexuality allowed their physical image to do most of the work for them when courting partners. Furthermore, many felt that they received clout for being a Black man
because of societal myths about the Black male body, especially their presumed physical endowment. Some participants worried about their penis size, but ultimately felt that as Black men, they were more endowed than their non-Black male peers. The myth of any Black man being a Mandingo Warrior, or well-endowed, allowed participants to feel that they owned something that everyone is aware that they possess as Black men. It was an ego boost to acknowledge that others have penis envy. Though not considered hypersexual, the study’s participants did and do seem to benefit from the ideologies surrounding Black male sexuality. These socially issued benefits allowed the participants move through the world while feeling confident and taking pride in their bodies.

The fact that they were sexually curious but not driven by a sexual appetite perhaps points to the responsibility they feel as young men in college. Some participants noted that they have had previous scares with STIs and pregnancies, which became grave lessons in responsibility. In getting to know the participants, I learned that many were highly involved on campus and in their communities, and several spoke of their future goals. They were sexually active, but it was not something they specifically sought out to fulfill their sense of manhood. In fact, the majority seemed indifferent about having sex, but grateful for their sexual knowledge. This is in line with what other researchers have found about the sexual behaviors of millennials. Sexual activity has declined among youth over time with millennials—including LGBTQ+ youth—being the least sexually active group since the 1980s (Twenge, Sherman, & Wells, 2017; Hunt et al., 2019).

Consistent with the Guttmacher Institute (2017), national data on sex education programs matched what students experienced in Mississippi, which caused a gap in their knowledge. Data reports found that Mississippi school districts do provide sex education inclusive of age
appropriate HIV information, but this information’s medical accuracy is not mandated (Guttmacher Institute, 2017). Participants acknowledged that abstinence was often at the heart of the sex education that they received. Abstinence education was a welcomed conversation for some as it lessened the pressures of pursuing sex as a teen. However, abstinence was not realistic for most of the participants, even if they were not sexually active. They were, however, sexually curious. There was a sense of wanting to know the unknown about sex because it was simultaneously seen as a taboo and a rite of passage into manhood and adulthood.

There were few references to same-gender sexual encounters within the sex education lessons, but it was often brought up in a joking or passive manner. As our world becomes more diverse and inclusive, it is important for sex education curricula and facilitators to develop attitudes that normalize sexual orientation and gender identity diversity in order to provide information that fits, or at least addresses, all students’ desires, curiosities, and realities. However, the students did not receive this education. They were educated on HIV/AIDS related topics, which is problematic given that HIV/AIDS is not a gender or sexuality specific virus or illness. Furthermore, to only mention HIV/AIDS when referencing the LGBTQ+ community speaks to the trend of only providing sex education to LGBTQ+ Black men as a means of lessening the spread of the virus (e.g., Wade, Harper, & Bauermeister, 2018; Hosek et al., 2015; Crosby et al., 2014).

The current state of Mississippi’s sex education—as portrayed by my study’s participants—does not respond to what young men want to know about sex, in agreement with Limmer’s (2010) previous study. The Black men in this study wanted to learn about the mechanics of sex to be informed and to feel more confident in engaging in sexual activities. Their curiosity was driven by their interests in human anatomy, how to perform sexual acts, and
how to be a good sexual partner. Once sexually active, they then became curious about their safety and how to avoid risky behaviors. Safety and avoiding risky behaviors were an afterthought—mirroring what youth see in pornography—yet these were often the first topics taught to them as youth. However, young people are often still trying to figure out what sex is before they can understand or even become concerned with protecting themselves from STIs and teen pregnancies. The teen STI and teen pregnancy rates in Mississippi—ranked third highest in the nation—illustrate that youth are exploring sexual intercourse without knowledge and/or regard for their sexual health. State sponsored sex education appears to omit the most important topics that these young people were curious about as they developed their own knowledge and values around sex. Therefore, the Black male youth in this study did not learn about themselves as sexual beings with sexual desires, but rather as bodies to be regarded as a space for sexual deviance (e.g., contracting STIs and becoming teen fathers).

Parents played a role in the sex education of youth but it was not prevalent enough to offer comprehensive and medically accurate sex education. Parents teach their children about sex based on their own experiences in hopes that it will resonate with their children (Grossman, Charmaraman, & Erkut, 2016). Although dads did provide some direct and indirect knowledge, it was moms who were more assertive in educating their sons about sex. Previous research has found that mothers have been instrumental in the sex education of LGBTQ+ children (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2017) and sons with intellectual disabilities (Pryde & Jahoda, 2018). Mothers of participants in this study had a vested interest in protecting their sons from STIs and teen pregnancies given that they understood parenthood and more often lived out the responsibilities associated with raising children. Mothers were a valued resource, but often not their sons’
preferred resource as they did not provide judgement-free, intricate details about performing sex acts.

Some of the more intricate sexual details were shared among participants and their friends, but those conversations were rarely educational. Most peer-to-peer conversations, especially among other males, were more braggadocious about sexual activities. Peer-to-peer conversations involving potential sexual partners were more educational for the young men as they were able to learn more about their partners’ desires, needs, health, and other sexual attributions. Youth programs, though limited in access, did provide a blend between what mothers instilled and what peers issued. It became a safe space for questions and receiving more detailed information about sexual activities than from parents and peers.

Access to pornography is prevalent and has been the ultimate guide for teaching sex education, which is similar to Currin et al. (2017) findings of gay and bisexual males’ use of pornography as an educational tool. Similar to McCormack and Wignall’s (2017) findings, pornography taught participants what they wanted to know about anatomy and provided a how to guide for them. There was an aspect of pleasure to watching sexually explicit material, but it also allowed participants to more adequately conceptualize and figure out how to be a sexual partner, though in accordance with the pornography they watched. This topic was missing from their educational experiences in school and was one factor that caused participants to seek out their own understanding. The education they received from pornography, as well as from other educational sources, allowed them to understand risky sexual and social behaviors as pornography rarely demonstrates safe sex and sometimes portrays sexual aggression as fantasy. Pornography proved to be accessible and a welcomed educational tool as it provided a sense of
judgement-free learning; however, pornography also negatively influences public opinions of comprehensive sex education (Wright, 2018).

Pornography—with its capitalistic approach—does provide an element of sex education, but with the cost of also providing a problematic script for males to mimic. Rothman and Adhia (2016) found that the frequent viewing of pornography was associated with dating abuse, interest in replicating—often risky—acts viewed in pornography, and use of marijuana during or after viewing pornography. There was also a correlation between consumption of pornography and lower rates of condom usage (Wright, Sun, & Steffen, 2018). Pornography creates a standard for what youth believe sex to be—which simultaneously creates a false sense of the fulfillment of manhood. As a sex education resource, pornography proves to be continually problematic to the sexual health of youth, especially young boys who are developing their sexual identities.

Although access to comprehensive and medically accurate sex education was not provided by the participants’ schools, the young men were resourceful in finding the information they needed to answer their questions. They often used the school sponsored sex education information as a component of their sexual index of information. As school sponsored sex education information only shared what policymakers who approved the curriculum wanted students to know about sex, more knowledge was needed. To fill in the information gaps and to answer their own questions, these young men turned to various sources, illustrating their resourcefulness in locating the information they desired. The cliché phrase, where there’s a will, there’s a way sums up the participants’ ability to access information. Young people are going to various extremes to access materials, often in secrecy. Opportunities to normalize Black male sexuality and remove the taboo and shame from their curiosities are missed. Therefore, Attwood, Barker, Boynton, and Hancock (2015) advise that sex education should be located within the
realities of youth’s lived experiences. Such an education would holistically inform these youth about sex, and also affirm Black male sexuality. The information provided would be contextualized by the experiences of those informed.

The Internet served as an accessible tool for exploration of information sources while the young men developed their sexual identities. Martin (2018) suggested that most boys welcome puberty because it was a sign of their emerging masculinity. As boys, participants of this study were eager to learn about their bodies and the bodies of other people as they developed sexual interests. However, with a sense of secrecy, Black men in this study found and then used the tools and devices they chose to access as their information sources. They became researchers who found and analyzed the information to resolve their curiosities, which ultimately aided them in their sexual identity development. Dolcini, Warren, Towner, Catania, and Harper (2015) found that the Internet is a tool often utilized in finding sexual health related information among today’s youth. Although not a widespread sex education resource, the Internet has been beneficial in providing a space for exploration of sex topics (e.g., HIV/STIs; condoms; communication; relationships). Internet sources may lack credibility, which somewhat mirrors curriculum based sex education in the state. However, the resourcefulness of young Black men learning about sexuality demonstrates the shortcomings of the current landscape of sex education because they ultimately found what policy-makers attempted to withhold from the curriculum.

This more independent and self-selected gathering of information allowed participants to develop their own sexual knowledge indexes—inclusive of values—around sexual behaviors. Previous researchers have suggested that sexual prowess was a main factor in the development of Black men’s masculinity. However, this research indicates a multitude of findings. Black men used their sexual knowledge to be sexually responsible including, sharing information, managing
their sexual health, and engaging in less risky behaviors. Taking responsibility was seen as a duty of manhood—including learning information related to all aspects of sexuality. They saw sexual responsibility as their duty as men. Their sexual lives are not based on quantity of interactions or partners, as sexual prowess theory suggests, but rather, were about how to be sexual beings with integrity. Sex is not their essence, just one element of who they are and have become as young men.

**Implications of Research**

The results of this study build on existing evidence that youth, including Black males, will seek out comprehensive and medically accurate information about sex if it is not provided. Participants first wanted to learn how to have sex and then became concerned with how to maintain their safety as a result of some of their behaviors. This, along with other topics of interest, suggests that the sex education provided by the state of Mississippi left participants needing more information that catered to their specific situations around sexual activities, pregnancy scares, STIs, and sexual orientations. However, turning to resources that may not be comprehensive or medically accurate is a problem and hazardous to the well-being of young people.

The research provides new insight into the relationship between youth and pornography as an educational tool. The dependency on pornography for pleasure and education creates a conundrum between fantasy and reality in that pornography counters what many are taught about such topics as condom usage, consent, and sex in general. Allowing pornography to provide the most honest answers Black boys seek about sex sets them up to emulate what they see in pornography.
These results should be taken into account, when considering how to teach sex education and design its curricula, by approaching the biological, physical, and mental aspects of sex education. Sexual behavior is more than biology, though it is a fundamental aspect to know. Biology provides an understanding of pregnancies, sexual health, and sex in general. Physical aspects include an understanding of one’s own anatomy and development, as well as the physical development of other human bodies. Still, understanding the emotional aspects of sex education—including healthy relationship education—is important for boys to learn to address their emotions around masculinity, sexual behavior, and healthy relationships with other people.

Additionally, college administrators welcome students from various states and countries to campuses, and with them arrive different experiences with sex education. Colleges have a federal mandate to address Title IX cases, but there is no mandate to proactively address comprehensive and medically accurate sex education information so that all students enter college campuses having been provided a standard foundation for the understanding of sexual responsibility on campus. Students are often asked to participate in healthy relationship and consent modules and lectures as a part of their orientation programs, but programs and participation vary between colleges. Providing comprehensive sex education—including healthy relations and consent topics—would allow all students to be more prepared for sexual and relational experiences in college.

Understanding and accepting the importance of comprehensive and medically accurate sex education is paramount to youths’ sexual development. Knowledge gained from the information they collect positions them to develop their own values around sexual behaviors. Their values then determine which behaviors they deem risky and what effect those behaviors have on their holistic health and life in general.
In the era of the #MeToo Movement and state bans on abortion, sex education curricula are, indeed, changing nationally. Nash, Mohammed, Cappello, and Naide (2019) found that seventeen states have modified policies to improve sex education. According to Planned Parenthood—a nonprofit organization that provides reproductive health care—researchers, found that 89% of likely voters approve of providing sex education in middle school and 98% feel it is important for high schoolers (Kantor & Holstrom, 2018). Dent and Maloney (2017) even found that evangelical parents—often considered to be politically and religiously conservative—want their children to have access to sex education that removes the veil of shame from sex. However, some parents, conservatives, and policymakers are at odds with creating more comprehensive sex education—illustrated by what is happening in California. The state’s expansion of health education includes issues around nutrition, safety, mental health, alcohol and drugs, and gender-neutral and LGBTQ+-inclusive language. A goal of the California sex education overhaul is to normalize sexuality as a part of human development. In 2019, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, Tennessee, Utah, and Virginia also passed legislature aimed at addressing such topics as contraceptive usage, consent, sexual violence, and LGBTQ+ inclusion. Expansion of sex education is often based on political and religious perceptions of what youth need to access. Although adults have their ideas about what is best for youth, it is important to remember that we center their experiences to create a curriculum that responds to their realities.

**Limitations**

Three main limitations were noted within this research. First, access to the greatest number of potential participants was a challenge and several factors ultimately led to a small number of participants. Multiple educational institutions were contacted to request permission to interview students on campus, but only one was supportive of this study. HBCUs in the state
would have provided greater access to more Black males, but the campuses presented legal obstacles, declined to provide access, or simply did not respond to email requests. Magnolia State University provided access to the population studied, though, most of the Black males on campus were football players who had limited time to engage. Most of the participants were involved with summer school, new student orientation, or lived close to campus and were available for conversation. MSU administrators were also supportive of the researcher and offered additional resources such as contacts, interview space, and access to the campus WiFi network.

Next, the data collected in this project was all self-reported and social desirability may have played a role in the data collected. Participants may not have been as forthcoming with information given the sensitive nature of the content of this research project. One participant specifically asked for permission to be honest, which shows that at least this participant was willing to withhold information if he felt he could not be honest with the researcher. The researcher made various attempts to reassure participants that they could be as honest and authentic as possible because the researcher wanted to capture their true experiences. Although participants seem to relax after engaging in conversation for a few moments, only the participant knows if he was honest with the researcher.

Lastly, generalizability of the results to the greater Black male population is limited by the small sample size. Although there are lessons that can be gleaned from this data, the sample size’s demographics do not allow for diversity of Black male experiences to be accounted for within seeking and using sex education. The study did not seek to recruit Black males from various backgrounds such as those who did not receive district sponsored sex education or those who attended private and independent schools in the state, nor were other factors such as ethnic
or socio-economic backgrounds considered. This group of participants were enrolled in college and highly involved on campus, which speaks to what they are currently prioritizing given their time commitments.

Additionally, participants in this study were selected based on self-identification with the study’s eligibility requirements. All participants identified as male with no participants identifying as trans. Most of the participants mentioned sexual partners, but only one directly identified specifically as queer. These identifiers were not critical to this study but could have potentially impacted participants’ experiences with sex education. Therefore, a generalization cannot be made with trans masculine identities because different demographics may have different experiences with sex education and different values around sexual behaviors.

**Recommendations**

This project highlights new possibilities for enhancing sex education curricula provided to youth, especially Black male youth. Mississippi school districts are allowed the freedom to deliver sex education however they see fit. This includes the grade level at which students receive the lesson(s) and who is allowed to facilitate the lessons, both of which present issues for the students who need information. For instance, the delivery of the content often comes after students have had exposure to other forms of sex education. The delivery of the lessons occurs at different grades and at different frequency across districts. Additionally, sex education facilitators were often educators who had limited training in presenting sex education material beyond their own personal experiences. These issues highlight the need for the state to standardize the curriculum and facilitation of its sex education programming (inclusive of facilitator training) to allow for consistent programming across the state. Furthermore, sex education should occur more frequently throughout the schooling experience and address
students’ evolving needs over time in an adjustable, age-appropriate manner. In this case, age appropriateness does not refer to the withholding of information, but rather, to delivery of information within a timely manner that fits students’ realities of exposure to sexuality.

Comprehensive and medically accurate sex education information is necessitated to address the basic needs of individuals. Black males were concerned about aspects of sexuality that transcend the physical acts of sex. They wanted to know about pleasure, desire, and consent. Therefore, the inclusion and expansion of comprehensive and medically accurate sex education that addresses interpersonal and relational topics will provide a foundation for Black males to understand their bodies and thoughts, as well as how to create healthy sexual interactions with others. This inclusion and expansion would create a culturally responsive sex education that helps Black males affirm how sexuality and relationships impact their lives.

Ladson-Billings (1995) theorized culturally responsive teaching as acknowledging, responding to, and celebrating cultural assets. Culturally responsive sex education must achieve the same goals. Culturally responsive work infuses social justice into its practices and allows oppression, power, and privilege to be suppressed. Culturally responsive sex education could be achieved by first centering Black boys as sexual beings. It is essential to create spaces that affirm and celebrate Black male sexuality and place their identities within a cultural context. Next, facilitators of sex education must allow Black boys to co-facilitate the direction of their sex education and nurture their realities by responding directly to the students’ inquiries about desires, interests, and curiosities. Lastly, culturally responsive sex education curricula must include means for holding Black boys accountable for achieving a sense of sexual responsibility in order to manage their sexual well-being as paramount throughout their lives and livelihoods. Culturally responsive sex education could provide an avenue for teaching Black boys sex
education in a manner that removes secrecy and allows them to explore who they are as sexually developing Black men. Future research should venture further into the sex education experiences of Black males given the lack of academic research.

It is imperative to note that this project was based on participants’ ability to reflect on experiences that occurred, in some cases, ten or more years prior to the interviews. Accessing a younger population currently experiencing a sex education program could provide new insights because participants would be able to reflect on their experiences in real time. Additionally, participants spoke about how the information they obtained guided their experiences, but future research could consider the impact of sex education on the process and development of becoming a sexual being.

Summary

Understanding the experiences Black males have with sex education in Mississippi has provided new insights into the informational needs and uses of Black males around sexual education. Sex education has proven to be an essential resource for helping Black males understand the role sex plays within their lives and the importance of comprehensive and medically accurate sex education as Black males within society. Their quest for information goes beyond the mechanics of sexual performance and activity; they are seeking to find out what sex means to their lives. Sex is, in essence, one facet for how they come to express themselves as Black men. Societal influencers would suggest they are hypersexual, but rather, their quest for information provides them with the knowledge needed to affirm, express, and protect who they are as Black men.
APPENDIX A

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Black males' quest for sex education in Mississippi
Researcher(s): Devin D. Moss
Faculty Sponsor: Kate Philippo, Ph.D.

Introduction:
You are being asked to take part in a research study being conducted by Devin D. Moss for a
dissertation under the supervision of Kate Philippo, Ph.D. in the Department of Educational
Leadership and Policy Studies at Loyola University of Chicago.

You are being asked to participate because you have self-identified as an 18 to 22-year-old Black
male who has experienced sex education programming through the Mississippi public school
system. Approximately 10-20 Black males will participate in this research project.

Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before deciding whether to
participate in the study.

Purpose:
This dissertation will explore how Black men have sought and used sex education in their lived
experiences.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to:
• Complete a 2 to 3-minute demographics survey to determine eligibility;
• Meet in a confidential space secured with assistance from campus administrators, and
• Participate in a 45 to 60-minute audio-recorded interview discussing how you have
accessed and used sex education. The interview will explore your experience with sex
education in school, if and how you obtained additional sex education information, and
how you used this information in your experiences.

Risks/Benefits:
To the best of the researcher’s knowledge, the questions you may be asked will cause no more risk
of harm than you would experience in everyday life. However, the questions about seeking and
using sex education may be sensitive or embarrassing. Benefits of this study may include making
meaning regarding your experiences with sex education. Furthermore, this study will provide
knowledge to researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers as they consider developing sex
education programs for Black men.

Compensation:
There is no cost to participants to contribute to this research; however, participants will be
compensated for their time at the completion of the interview. Participants will receive a $20
Amazon electronic gift card.
Confidentiality:
- The survey records of this study will be kept private in a password protected cloud folder. Research records will be kept in a password protected e-file separate from research writings; only the researcher will have access to the records. The researcher will download audio files to a second password protected cloud folder. The researcher will destroy the audio recording of the interview after it has been transcribed using a confidential transcription service which the researcher anticipates will be within two months of its taping. Additionally, participants will be given a pseudonym to further protect their identity. The final publication will not include any identifiable information.
- Personal identifiers will be removed from the data and the data may be used for future research studies without additional informed consent needed from the participant.

Voluntary Participation:
Participation in this study is voluntary. If you do not want to be in this study, you do not have to participate. Even if you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Your decision to participate will not affect the services you are receiving at your current institution or any future services at the researcher’s educational institution.

Contacts and Questions:
If you have questions about this research project or interview, feel free to contact Devin D. Moss at dmoos4@luc.edu or the faculty sponsor Kate Phillippo, Ph.D. at kphilippo@luc.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Loyola University Office of Research Services at (773) 508-2689.

Statement of Consent:
Your signature below indicates that you have read the information provided above, have had an opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Participant’s Signature ______________ Date ______________

Researcher’s Signature ______________ Date ______________

Loyola University Chicago Lakeside Campus
Institutional Review Board
The Protection of Human Subjects

Date of Approval: 5/7/2019
Approval Expires: 5/7/2020
APPENDIX B

RESEARCH SITE APPROVAL LETTER
Devin D. Moss  
99 Ascension Drive, Apt. F114  
Asheville, NC 28806

February 27, 2019

Dear Mr. Moss,

On Thursday February 21, 2019, the IRB Executive Committee discussed your request concerning your study entitled “Black males’ quest for sex education in Mississippi.”

The committee members unanimously agreed that your request requires no IRB involvement here, because The University of Mississippi is not ‘engaged’ in this research (as per the OHRP 2008 memo: ‘Engagement of Institutions in Human Subjects Research’).

Also, there is no University mechanism or office designated to give permission (or deny permission) to recruit and study students.

Best wishes in your research,

Thomas W. Lombardo, Ph.D.  
Director of Research Integrity and Compliance (Interim)
APPENDIX C

RECRUITING EMAIL SCRIPT
Recruiting Email Script

Greetings,

My name is Devin D. Moss. I am a doctoral candidate at Loyola University Chicago in the Cultural and Educational Policy Studies program. I am conducting research on Black men’s experiences with sex education in Mississippi, and I am inviting you to participate or to share this email with your constituents.

Eligible participants include self-identified Black men between the ages of 18 and 22. Potential participants are also required to have participated in a sex education program in Mississippi while in middle or high school.

Participation in this research includes taking a 2 to 3-minute demographics survey and participating in a 45 to 60-minute audio-recorded interview in a confidential location on campus.

Participants who complete the interview will be compensated for their time.

If you have any questions or would like to participate in the research, I may be reached at dmosse@luc.edu.

Kate Phillippo, Ph.D. is serving as the faculty sponsor for this project and may be contacted at kphilippo@luc.edu.

Thank you,

Devin D. Moss
Ph.D. candidate
Cultural and Educational Policy Students
Loyola University Chicago
APPENDIX D

QUALTRICS DEMOGRAPHICS SURVEY
Qualtrics Demographics Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study on Black men’s experience with sex education. Complete the following survey to help researchers determine eligibility for participation. This survey will only take 2-3 minutes to complete, and the responses you provide will not be used to personally identify participants. Select the response that describes you best.

What would best describe your race?
- White
- Hispanic or Latino
- Black or African American
- Native American or American Indian
- Asian Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern
- Biracial/Multiracial (please specify):
- Other (specify):

What is your gender identity?
- Male
- Female
- Trans
- Non-binary/Gender non-conforming
- Other (please specify):

What is your current age?
- 18
- 19
- 20
- 21
- 22
- 23+

What is the religion/spiritual belief system you were raised with? (You may choose more than one.)
- Catholicism
- Christianity
- Unitarian Universalism
- Judaism
- Islam
- Hinduism
- Buddhism
- An African native traditional or diasporic religion
- An American native religion
- Neopaganism
- Agnosticism
- General atheism
- Other (please specify):

When did you participate in a sex education program? Select all that apply
- Middle School
  - 5th
  - 6th
  - 7th
  - 8th
- High School
  - 9th
- 10th
- 11th
- 12th
- Other (please specify):
- Do not Recall
APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Black Males and Sex Education Interview Protocol

Interviewee Number: ________________________________

Introductory Protocol

Good morning (afternoon). My name is Devin DeShun Moss. Thank you for participating in this research project. You have been selected to participate in this interview based on being a self-identified Black male who participated in a sex education program as a middle or high school student in Mississippi.

To facilitate my note-taking, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. The purpose of this is so that I can get all the details but at the same time be able to carry on an attentive conversation with you. I assure you that all your comments will remain confidential. Only the researcher on the project will be privy to the tapes, which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed.

In addition, I must ask you to sign a form devised to meet my university’s requirements for research with what they call human subjects. Essentially, this document states that, all information will be held confidential, your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and we do not intend to inflict any harm.

I have planned this interview to last approximately 45 to 60-minutes. Please read and sign the confidentiality statement.

Introduction

My research focuses on understanding how Black males in Mississippi access and implement sex education in their experiences. I am going to ask you a few questions about your sexual health knowledge and sexual practices. I understand that these questions are very personal, but they are important for understanding this phenomenon. There are no right or wrong or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable with saying what you really think and how you really feel. Do you have any questions before we begin?

A. Interviewee Background

- I noticed on your survey that you acknowledged having received sex education lessons in________ grade. I’d like to ask you a few questions about those lessons. What do you recall learning?
  - Do you recall learning any of these things from your sex education classes? *Written list provided to participant:
    - No Sex/Abstinence
    - Encouraged to use condoms
    - Encouraged to talk to partners about birth control
    - Physical development/Puberty
    - What it means to be a man
    - Sexual orientation
    - Sexual abuse/Healthy relationships
    - Local resources for sexual health
    - Personal hygiene
    - How babies are made
    - Other ____________________________
B. Information Seeking

- This may have been before or after your first sex education experience, and either is fine, but what age did you become curious about sex related topics? How did you get the information you wanted?
- What would you have wanted to know as a middle schooler? High schooler?
- Most people don’t learn everything about sex from sex education. I want to ask you about other sources of information you used. What information sources did you seek outside of school? Did you seek information from magazines, social media, people, porn, or television, for example?
  - What led you to use this source?
  - What did you learn from this source?
- What information did you want to have access to, but couldn’t? What was the barrier?
  - Did you get that information? Did it help you in any way?
- How would you rate your knowledge about sex currently? How did you come to this conclusion?

C. Information Use

- Now let’s think about your experiences after learning more about sex education. How have you used the information that you gained?
  - Did gaining an understanding of sex help you in other ways? Such as emotionally, physically, mentally, or spiritually for example? Tell me more.
  - Did the new information impact your self-esteem? Tell me more.
  - Did the new information impact your sexual activity? Tell me more.
  - Did the new information impact your body image? Tell me more?
  - Do you think that this new information impacted your values about manhood in any way? Tell me more.
  - Did you learn anything that you feel contributed to your sense of being a Black man?
- If you could design sex education curriculum for Black teenage boys, what would you want to make sure to include?
- We’re almost finished, is there anything else you’d like to tell me?

Post Interview Comments and/or Observations: ___________________________________________

__________________________________________

Other Topics Discussed: ___________________________________________________________

__________________________________________

Post Interview Comments or Leads: ________________________________________________

__________________________________________


King, J. (2010). *College students' perceptions of their sex education experiences.* (Electronic Thesis or Dissertation). Retrieved from https://etd.ohiolink.edu/


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university students and how does this relevance differ by field of study?. Higher Education, 1-22.


VITA

Moss is originally from Memphis, TN, but has called many places home. He graduated from the University of Memphis and moved to Baltimore, MD where he envisioned becoming a teacher. After having a change of heart, he had a chance conversation with a career counselor who helped him to discover student affairs.

Moss began his career at Savannah State University as an Academic Specialist for TRiO but found his calling in LGBTQ+ student services. He went on to serve as the Coordinator of LGBT Programs at the University of South Carolina and then the Director of The Gender and Sexuality Resource Center at Northwestern University. He has managed such initiatives as gender-inclusive housing, gender-neutral restrooms, and LGBTQ+ student leadership programs.

After volunteering as a Dean on Call, Moss switched his career trajectory to focus on supporting students who were experiencing vulnerable moments. He has served as an Area Coordinator at the State University of New York in Geneseo and as the Assistant Director of Student Community Ethics at Western Carolina University. Moss currently works within Residence Life and Dining Services at the University of Wyoming.

Over the years, he has earned a B.A. in English from the University of Memphis, a M.S.Ed. in Higher Education Administration from the University of Kansas, a M.A. in Gender Politics from New York University, and a Ph.D. in Cultural and Educational Policy Studies from Loyola University Chicago.

Moss’ ultimate career goal is to continuously inspire students to be brave with their lives.