

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR EXPERIENCE  
IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION

by

SALEEMA NOON

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Department of Family Studies (School of Family and  
Nutritional Sciences)  
The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

To date, most research in sexuality education has been conducted in the form of outcome or evaluation studies, primarily concerned with determining the quality, effectiveness or worth of a program. Although very little research has investigated students' subjective perceptions of their experience in sexuality education, several authors (e.g., Aoki, 1988; Borich & Jemelka, 1982; Patton, 1990; Voss, 1980) argue that such studies would provide valuable insights into sexuality education. The purpose of this study was to explore, through semi-structured interviews, students' perceptions of their experience in sexuality education. More specifically, this study examined, from the student's perspective, components of sexuality education such as the content, the teacher, the teaching methods used, the message conveyed to students about sexuality and the relevance to students' lives and concerns. Students' perceptions of the influence of the unit on their sexuality-related knowledge, sexuality-related attitudes and sexual behaviour or behavioural intentions were also sought. Fourteen 10th grade students (8 female, 6 male) who recently completed a unit on human sexuality in a Lower Mainland junior secondary school were interviewed for this study, and these interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Students' comments revealed that, although the curriculum document indicated a comprehensive approach, the unit was problem-focused. Students differed in their feelings about the teaching methods used, but almost all students viewed their sexuality education teacher in a positive manner. The message conveyed to students about sexuality was neither positive nor negative. Although abstinence was presented by the teachers as the preferable alternative to being sexually active, the teachers also recognised that not all teens choose to be abstinent, and need to be taught responsible sexual behaviour. Gender and relevance emerged as themes in interviews. It appears that the unit on human sexuality was of limited relevance to the lives and concerns of students who were not yet sexually active, and that male and female students had a different kind of experience in sexuality education.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Sexuality education in public schools began around the turn of this century in North America (Planned Parenthood Federation of America, 1982). In British Columbia, courses in sexuality education were offered in schools as early as the 1920's (Thomas, 1986). In these early efforts, human sexuality was viewed by educators as reproductive and genital behaviour, and early sexuality education courses were often called "hygiene" (Welbourne-Moglia & Moglia, 1989). These courses were typically limited to basic anatomy and reproduction, stories about the "birds and the bees" or the "facts of life" (Engel, Saracino & Bergen, 1993) and, according to Gordon (1986), were merely "...a course in plumbing--a relentless pursuit of the fallopian tubes" (p. 24).

Over time, it has been increasingly recognised that human sexuality involves much more than just biological facts or reproductive and genital behaviour, and this has influenced the nature of some sexuality education courses. Many different definitions of sexuality education have been proposed (e.g., Carrera, 1883; Haffner, 1990; Libby, 1971), but all tend to emphasize the importance of a wide variety of content areas such as sexual development, reproductive health, interpersonal relationships, affection and intimacy, body image and gender roles. Thus, current definitions of sexuality education tend to incorporate biological, sociocultural, psychological and spiritual dimensions, and include the development of skills for communicating effectively and for making responsible decisions.

At the present time, there are two approaches to sexuality education: the broad

and general "comprehensive approach" and the narrower and more specific, "problem-focused approach". Sexuality education programs based on the comprehensive approach typically promote "sexual health" among students (Engel et al., 1993). According to Maddock (1988):

"A sexually healthy individual has the ability to carry on effective interpersonal relationships with members of both sexes, has the capacity to respond to erotic stimulation in such a way as to make sexual activity a positive, pleasurable aspect of his or her experience, has the conviction that his or her personal and social behaviours are congruent with his or her gender identity, and can make rewarding sexuality-related decisions that do not conflict with overall values and beliefs about life." (p. 131)

Sexual health has been proposed as an appropriate goal for sexuality education because it focuses on both the positive and negative aspects of sexuality (Engel et al., 1993). With health as a primary goal, the objectives of comprehensive sexuality education would be to address information, attitudes, values, insights, relationships, interpersonal skills and responsibility (Bruess & Greenberg, 1988). A sizeable number of comprehensive sexuality education programs identify the goal of reducing or preventing sexual intercourse among participants [e.g., *Living Smart* (Core-Gebhart, Hart & Young, 1991); *Success Express* (Lucero & Clark, 1988)]. These programs promote abstinence as the most viable option for young people with regard to sexual decision making.

In contrast, problem-focused sexuality education programs direct their educational efforts toward the prevention of a sexuality-related problem. In a recent review of sexuality education programs, Engel et al. (1993) identify three major themes of problem-focused sexuality education: preventing adolescent pregnancy, preventing child sexual abuse and preventing AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Problem-

focused programs typically emphasize one of these themes in particular, but may also address a wide range of related psychological, social and cultural issues.

Although both the comprehensive and problem-focused approaches to sexuality education are offered in a variety of contexts, such as youth and family organizations or agencies, family planning clinics and religious groups, most sexuality education programs are offered to adolescents in junior or senior secondary schools. It is sexuality education in the school setting that is of central concern to this study.

Several recent reviews of sexuality education (Engel et al., 1993; Kirby, 1992; Scales, 1989) indicate that most U.S. states either require or recommend some kind of sexuality education in public schools, and most states provide curricula or curricular guidelines for implementation of these programs. In most schools, both sexuality education and AIDS education are usually taught as units in courses such as health education. Despite state mandates, however, Kirby (1984) found that very few schools in the United States offer comprehensive sexuality education programs, and even when these programs are offered, not all students enrol. He estimates that fewer than 10% of young people have participated in a comprehensive sexuality education program at school. As well, there is considerable state-to-state variation in program objectives, design and implementation, and little evidence that comprehensive and effective programs have been implemented at the local school level (Engel et al., 1993). Variation is also found in the accuracy of information provided, the tone in which the class is taught and the attitude of the educator (de Mauro, 1990).

In Canada, the situation is similar. Most provinces now mandate some aspects of

sexuality education in elementary and secondary schools (Cameron, Mutter & Hamilton, 1991). Because education in Canada falls under provincial rather than federal jurisdiction, the Ministry of Education in each of the ten provinces and two territories typically has its own guidelines and curricula for sexuality education and its own procedures for implementing this education. Thus, although all provinces and territories may have school programs that include sexuality education, the content and extent of implementation varies considerably, both between provinces and within different parts of the same province (Barrett, 1994). While it appears that implementation of provincial and territorial requirements for school-based sexuality education in Canada is high and increasing, there is little information about the actual depth and detail of topic coverage that occurs in the classroom given the limitations on classroom time and the diversity of programs across the country (Barrett, 1990).

At present, there are several pressing issues in school-based sexuality education. For example, questions have been raised about whether educators are appropriately trained and qualified to teach sexuality education (Engel et al., 1993). As noted by Marsiglio and Mott (1986), there are also concerns about the timing of sexuality education in schools, in that many students who do receive sexuality education are receiving it after they have already become sexually active. "For some, this may be too late" (p. 161). As well, the impact of school-based sexuality education is a concern.

The relationship between the written curriculum and the experiences of students in the classroom is also an issue in school-based sexuality education (Aoki, 1988; Fullan, 1982; Thomas, 1988, 1992). Although the curriculum document may identify the goals

and objectives of a program, these goals may not be realized in practice. Aoki (1988) distinguishes between what he calls the "first order curriculum world" and the "second order curriculum world". The second order curriculum world portrays curriculum as abstract specified learning experiences which the teacher is expected to administer to students. In this view, curriculum is a plan for guiding the actions of both students and teachers, and is primarily concerned with the extent to which pre-specified goals and objectives have been attained (Thomas, 1988).

On the other hand, the first order curriculum world emphasizes the interpretive and experiential nature of the curriculum, and the primary concern of a researcher examining this world is to "document reality from the perspective of those being studied" (Thomas, 1988, p. 71). The researcher must identify the meaning and relevance of a program for one or more involved groups or stakeholders which, in the case of schools, might include parents, teachers, administrators and/or students. A key assumption is that programs are interpreted and defined differently by individuals or groups on the basis of their interests and their background experiences. The worth or value of a program, therefore, is judged according to its relevance and meaningfulness for the various participants (Aoki, 1988). Aoki notes that there may be a discrepancy between the first order curriculum world and the second order curriculum world. That is, the experiences of students in the classroom may not match the curriculum document.

Because of these concerns, there is a need for more and better research on school-based sexuality education. To date, most of this research has been conducted in the form of outcome or evaluation studies, primarily concerned with determining the quality,

effectiveness or worth of a program (Thomas et al., 1993). Two general purposes of this research have been identified: summative and formative (Scriven, 1967; Thomas et al., 1993; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988; Worthen & Sanders, 1987). Summative evaluation studies often use quantitative surveys and experiments to measure the effects of school-based sexuality education on outcomes such as sex-related knowledge, sexual concerns and attitudes and sexual behaviour of program participants (e.g., Thomas et al., 1993). In summative evaluation research, it is typically assumed that the curriculum has been implemented as intended by the curriculum developer, and the concern is with how effective programs are in meeting their stated objectives (Voss, 1980). Judgements of program effectiveness, therefore, depend upon the extent to which the pre-specified goals and objectives of the curriculum have been achieved. The large majority of school-based sexuality education studies have been conducted for summative purposes (Kirby, 1992; Small, 1990; Thomas et al., 1993; Voss, 1980).

In contrast, formative evaluations often focus on the subjective evaluations of program participants and are typically carried out for the purpose of modifying sexuality education programs (Thomas et al., 1993; Worthen & Sanders, 1987). According to Thomas et al. (1993), "...formative evaluations seek to understand how participants experience and respond to a program in use, how these perceptions and experiences might be related to potential outcomes, or how the program might be improved or revised" (p. 122).

Very little research has investigated students' subjective perceptions of their experience in school-based sexuality education. Consequently, participants' perspectives

regarding components of the program (e.g., content, teaching methods, relevance to students' lives and concerns) are lacking. The examination of students' perceptions of their experience in sexuality education may help to identify program characteristics that help students to learn, why these characteristics are helpful, and for whom they are most helpful (Thomas et al., 1993). In addition, this research may help to improve the quality and scope of programs and thus improve the experiences of future participants. The examination of students' perceptions will also contribute to our general understanding of sexuality education. Indeed, Voss (1980) argues that sexuality education would benefit from the use of subjective research endeavours. Because program participants can provide valuable insight for program improvement, he suggests that their perceptions of various sexuality education program components be ascertained. Similarly, Borich and Jemelka (1982) suggest that instead of simply documenting program success or failure in terms of outcome "scores" of some kind, the use of qualitative methods in examining students' perceptions might yield richer data.

Based on these suggestions, the purpose of this study is to explore, through semi-structured interviews, students' perceptions of their experience in sexuality education. More specifically, this study attempts to examine, from the students' perspective, components of sexuality education such as the content, the teaching methods used, the sexuality education teacher, the message about sexuality conveyed to students, and the relevance to students' lives and concerns. In addition, students' perceptions of the influence of sexuality education on their sexuality-related knowledge, attitudes and sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions are sought.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In this chapter, a review of the literature on school-based sexuality education will be presented. It will be organized in two sections: 1) studies that examine the outcomes of school-based sexuality education programs, and 2) studies that investigate students' perceptions and experiences in school-based sexuality education. Based on this review, the specific research questions to be investigated in this study will be identified.

#### Studies Examining the Outcomes of School-Based Sexuality Education

Outcome studies of sexuality education are intended to measure the extent to which specified program goals and objectives have been attained (Arcus, 1986; Engel et al., 1993; Jacobs, 1988; Small, 1990; Thomas et al., 1993). However, because few programs have clearly stated *specific* goals and objectives, most studies examine whether or not a program is effective in attaining what have been identified as the *general* desired outcomes of sexuality education: to increase sexuality-related knowledge, to change sexuality-related attitudes and to change sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions (Arcus, 1986; Darling, 1987; Kirby, 1989; Thomas et al., 1993; Weiss & Jacobs, 1988).

Several reviews of the effects of school-based sexuality education on these outcomes have been published (e.g., Engel et al., 1993; Kilmann et al., 1981; Kirby, 1985, 1989). In general, these reviews indicate that school-based sexuality education *can* be effective, but often is not. On the first general desired outcome, it appears that sexuality education is effective in increasing sexuality-related knowledge, although there are some differences. For example, Kirby (1985, 1989) notes that in some cases the

increase in knowledge is quite small, while in other cases it is quite large. There is also some evidence that younger students tend to learn more than older students (Kilmann et al., 1981). On the second general desired outcome, sexuality education appears to increase some sexuality-related attitudes, but not others. For example, several studies suggest that courses on sexuality increased the tolerance of the students attitudes toward the sexual practices of others, but had little impact on students' beliefs about their own sexual practices.

On the third general desired outcome, the effect of sexuality education on the sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions of students appears to be limited. Kirby (1989) found no consistent nor statistically significant relationship between taking sexuality education and having had sexual intercourse. As well, students who received sexuality education were not necessarily more likely to use contraception than those who received no such education.

Since the publication of these reviews, several additional studies have been conducted examining the extent to which the general outcomes of sexuality education have been achieved. These studies report similar findings to those summarized in the reviews, and will be discussed according to whether researchers have examined changes in sexuality-related knowledge, sexuality-related attitudes or sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions.

Several studies have examined the effects of sexuality education on knowledge. DiClemente, Pies, Stoller, Straits, Olivia, Haskin and Rutherford (1989) measured the effects of a newly developed AIDS education program on the sexuality-related knowledge

of 639 students. The objectives of this AIDS education program were to increase adolescents' knowledge about AIDS, to decrease misconceptions about AIDS and to increase tolerance toward other persons who may have an "HIV-spectrum" disease (p. 189). Classes were designated as either intervention classes (three class periods of AIDS instruction) or non-intervention classes (no specific AIDS instruction). Results on the pre- and post-test AIDS knowledge survey indicated that AIDS instruction recipients experienced a significant increase in AIDS knowledge, having on the average 4.2 more correct responses to AIDS knowledge items than the non-intervention group.

Main, Iverson, McGloin, Banspach, Collins, Rugg and Kolbe (1994) investigated the impact of a school-based HIV prevention intervention on students' sexuality-related knowledge. Seventeen schools in six Colorado school districts were assigned to either intervention or comparison groups. Students in both the intervention and the comparison groups completed a self-report questionnaire at the start of the HIV prevention curricula and again six months following its completion. Students in the intervention group reported a greater increase in sexuality-related knowledge than did those in the comparison groups.

Farley, Pomputius, Sabella, Helgerson and Hadler (1991) also measured the effect of school-based sexuality education on adolescents' knowledge about AIDS. Surveys were conducted in two high schools in which baseline surveys had been carried out in the previous year. Students in the intervention school received an education program about AIDS; students in the control school received no specific AIDS education. Results indicated that students in the intervention school were more likely to correctly answer

questions about the safety of blood donation and the possibility of HIV transmission than students in the control school.

Kirby, Barth, Leland and Fetro (1991) examined the effects of a school-based sexuality education program on the sexuality-related knowledge of its participants. In a quasi-experimental evaluation, 758 high school students assigned to treatment and control groups were surveyed at four times: before their participation in the program, immediately afterwards, six months later, and 18 months later. The program did not significantly increase participants' knowledge about abstinence and birth control until 18 months after the program was completed.

Young, Core-Gebhart and Marx (1992) examined the effects of an abstinence-oriented school-based sexuality education curriculum, *Living Smart* (Core-Gebhart, Hart & Young, 1991), on the sexuality-related knowledge of its participants. An 84-item questionnaire was administered to 83 junior high students (the treatment group) before beginning the *Living Smart* curriculum and again within one week after the completion of the curriculum. This questionnaire was administered concurrently to 60 students who participated in other sexuality education classes and to 66 students not enrolled in any sexuality education class (the control group). Students who participated in the *Living Smart* curriculum showed greater increases in knowledge than those in either of the other two groups.

Several of these researchers also examined the effects of school-based sexuality education on the sexuality-related attitudes of students. DiClemente et al. (1989) found that AIDS instruction recipients experienced a positive change in attitudes such as

reflecting a greater tolerance for attending class with students who may have AIDS or HIV infection. Similarly, Farley et al. (1991) found that students in the intervention school were less likely to believe persons with AIDS should have certain restrictions on their activities. Young et al. (1992) report that students participating in the *Living Smart* (Core-Gebhart, Hart & Young, 1991) curriculum indicated more positive attitudes toward abstinence and more conservative attitudes toward the appropriateness of sexual intercourse before marriage than did students in both the control group and the group participating in other sexuality education programs.

As well, Olsen, Weed, Daly and Jensen (1992) examined the effects of three sexuality education programs promoting abstinence [*Teen Aid*, *Values and Choices*, *Sex Respect* (as cited in Olsen et al., 1992)] on attitudes toward premarital intercourse of over 1500 junior and high school students in three Utah school districts. In particular, the influence of three independent variables on students' attitudes were measured: virgin status (informed and uninformed), grade level and gender. Data were collected through a 105-item Youth Survey questionnaire administered at the beginning of the semester in which the program was presented and again at the conclusion of each program.

According to Olsen et al. (1992), the *Teen Aid* program appeared to be "modestly effective" in changing the attitudes of sexually active high school students toward a positive view of sexual abstinence. This program, however, had a negative effect on sexually active junior high students. In the *Values and Choices* program, no significant change was found in pre-test and post-test scores regardless of participants' virgin status, gender or grade level. The *Sex Respect* program led to more positive attitudes toward

abstinence in all groups except the junior high non-virgins.

In addition to examining changes in sexuality-related knowledge and attitudes among students, Young et al. (1992) and Main et al. (1994) also investigated the effects of school-based sexuality education on the sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions of students. Young et al. (1992) found that students participating in the *Living Smart* curriculum (Core-Gebhart, Hart & Young, 1991) reported both a decrease in participation in sexual intercourse in the last month and a decreased likelihood of participation in sexual intercourse before marriage. Main et al. (1994) reported that students who received the HIV prevention intervention expressed greater intentions to practice safer sexual practices within the next two-month period than did comparison group students. Among sexually active students at the six month follow-up, intervention students reported fewer sexual partners within the past two months and greater frequency of using condoms. However, the intervention neither delayed the onset nor decreased the frequency of sexual intercourse.

Christopher and Roosa (1990) also evaluated the impact of sexuality education on the sexual behaviour of adolescents, focusing on a program promoting abstinence [*Success Express* (Lucero & Clark, 1988)]. A self-report questionnaire was used to collect pre- and post-test data from 191 students who participated in the program and 129 students who did not participate in the program. Although males reported more dramatic effects, both male and female participants reported increases for several sexual behaviours such as touching female breasts, touching genitals and genital-to-genital contact. No changes were seen, however, in the rates of students engaging in sexual

intercourse.

Levy, Perhats, Weeks, Handler, Zhu and Flay (1995) evaluated the effects of a school-based AIDS prevention program intended to increase student participation in protective sexual behaviours. An experimental, longitudinal design was used in this study, focusing on the protective sexual behaviour of newly sexually active students. Fifteen high-risk school districts were divided randomly into two treatment and one control conditions. Students in both treatment conditions received a 10-lesson classroom program in the seventh grade with a five-lesson booster in the eighth grade, while control students received basic AIDS education in compliance with state mandates. Results indicate that the program had a positive impact on students' use of condoms with foam and frequency of sexual activity in the preceding month. Students in the control and treatment groups did not differ, however, in their intentions to have sexual intercourse or to use condoms in the next 12 months.

Marsiglio and Mott (1986) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Work Experience of Youth (NLSY) to evaluate the effects of sexuality education on the sexual behaviour of a nationally representative sample of 6015 women and 6054 men interviewed in 1984 when they were 19-27 years old. The primary objective was to determine whether teens who took a sexuality education course were any more or less likely than other adolescents to become sexually active, use effective contraception or experience a premarital pregnancy. Marsiglio and Mott (1986) found that adolescent women who had previously taken a sexuality education course were somewhat more likely to initiate *sexual activity* at ages 15 and 16. However, the effect of prior sexuality

education was small and was weaker than that of several other variables, such as church attendance, parent education and race, which were found to have a significant influence on initiation of *sexual intercourse* in this age group.

#### Studies Examining Students' Perceptions and Experiences

As reported earlier, studies examining students' perceptions and experiences in school-based sexuality education are limited in number. Of those that have been conducted, some use quantitative methods of data collection. For example, Herold and Kopf (1972) conducted one of the few studies to explore Canadian students' perspectives of the content of family life and sexuality education. Data were collected by means of a self-report questionnaire administered to 90 intermediate (10th and 11th grades) and 89 senior (12th and 13th grades) students at two Ontario secondary schools. Results indicated that students would have liked the opportunity to study sexuality education in more detail than had been offered to them. Students also desired many subjects, such as "birth control", "sexual response", "venereal diseases" and "dating" to be addressed at earlier grade levels, viewing these topics as relevant earlier in their lives. Based on their experience of sexuality education, the majority of students felt that the classes should be mixed rather than segregated according to gender.

The content of sexuality education was also the focus of Yarber's (1979) comparison of the opinions of four groups-- students, parents, teachers and principals-- concerning the amount of teaching emphasis that should be given to sexuality education at grades 3, 6, 9 and 12. Only student opinions will be reported here. When asked how much more ("much more", "a little more", "no more") they would like to learn about

selected topics in sexuality education, students at all four grade levels indicated a strong interest for more sexuality education than had been offered to them.

In 1986, McCreary Juhasz, Kaufman and Meyer surveyed 451 adolescents in two Chicago high schools regarding their beliefs about sexual behaviour and their perceptions of school involvement and responsibility for sexuality education. Based on their experience in sexuality education, only 20% of respondents felt that teachers were aware of what teens wanted to know about sexuality. Many respondents reported that they had already learned what was presented to them in sexuality education, rendering it somewhat unnecessary or irrelevant to their lives. Forty-one percent of respondents desired more detailed information about contraception and the opportunity to see and touch contraceptive devices.

Qualitative research methods have also been used to examine students' perceptions of their experience in sexuality education. One of the earliest of these qualitative studies was conducted by Calderwood (1965), who held open discussions (known today as focus groups) with teens about their experience in sexuality education. Six group sessions were held: three were coeducational, two were for boys only and one was for girls only. Subjects were obtained by asking students in a Family Life class to extend an invitation to their friends to participate. Students expressed the view that sexuality education should be seen as an integral part of a person's life and that it should be a continuous process at all grade levels, rather than crammed into senior year. Students also felt that adults don't really understand which sexual issues are relevant to teens' lives, and that sexuality education teachers should have a more realistic picture of teens' needs and concerns.

In 1978, Farrell interviewed British teens aged 16-19 years (randomly sampled from the electoral register) and explored the way these young people made meaning of sexuality education, their feelings about that process and the way in which their experience affected their behaviour. The interviews were structured, focusing on how specific independent variables such as the age at which sexuality education was taken and the amount of accurate sexuality-related information they had received prior to taking it affected student perceptions. Many of the students' comments referred specifically to the need for information about sexual matters to be treated openly as part of sexuality education. Almost one fourth of the teens felt they had learned about birth control too late. Many expressed comments regarding the lack of detail in sexuality education, and only one fourth of respondents were completely satisfied with their experience.

Pond-Brevik (1978) assessed the compatibility of family life and sexuality education available in New York at that time with the needs of students, and examined student opinion on how this instruction could be improved. The principals of five schools were each asked to choose 28 of their students to participate in the study. Data were collected using an objective, 20-item questionnaire, a qualitative take-home assignment and very brief interviews with some, but not all, students. Pond-Brevik (1978) investigated two specific hypotheses: that family life and sexuality education courses are undertaught and that they take place either too early or too late. Results revealed that family life and sexuality education were not available to enough students, especially those in sixth grade. Students felt that too much emphasis was placed on technical data, leaving more emotional concerns unaddressed. They reported experiencing anxiety when

expressing these concerns and questions in class.

Maslach and Kerr (1983) used interviews as the predominant form of data collection in their study of 88 adolescents in Buffalo, New York. These 30 minute interviews were unstructured, asking students merely to discuss, as frankly as possible, dating, sexual activity and contraceptive use. Results of this study revealed several comments about how the students made meaning of sexuality education. For example, students expressed a need for the expansion of curricula to include topics relevant to their lives, such as the "double standard", "teen pregnancy" and "single parenting". Guest speakers were desired by students because they were seen as more open and at ease with sexual matter and more tolerant of different viewpoints than were "regular" teachers. Students also recommended that a stronger emphasis be placed on the personal, emotional aspects of sexuality.

Only one qualitative study was found that evaluated Canadian students' experience of sexuality education. Thomas and Buckley (1989) sought to compare the views of 38 pregnant and 38 non-pregnant Canadian females toward sexuality education in schools. Semi-structured interviews were carried out in the homes of the women, focusing on feelings about school, attitudes regarding sexuality education, the use of birth control, decision-making and relationships. The sample of pregnant females for the study was obtained from the public health nursing division of a local health unit, Children's Aid Societies and a program for school-aged mothers. These pregnant women were then asked to suggest women who weren't pregnant, but who were similar to them in other ways, to participate in the study. Random comments made by the pregnant women in the

study indicated that sexuality education should be delivered earlier and that it needed to place stronger emphasis on contraception. In their view, the presentation of course content was ineffective, and teachers used too many technical terms. Thomas and Buckley did not report specific comments made by the non-pregnant women.

Most recently, Woodcock, Stenner and Ingham (1992) analyzed 100 of the 125 interviews previously conducted in a larger study exploring general adolescent sexual behaviour in England. The sub-sample used in this analysis included 50 males and 50 females aged 16-23 years, all of whom made at least one comment about their experience of sexuality education in their interview. Subjects were obtained from colleges and training establishments, hostels for single young people, youth centres and sports clubs.

Although 92% of respondents reported receiving some sexuality education at school, a large majority reported missing sexuality education classes for one reason or another. One third of the students found that sexuality education was inadequate in some way and, in particular, they felt that subject matter regarding STDs and contraception was not adequately addressed. Respondents felt that videos were overused as a teaching technique, giving teachers an easy way out of talking about sex. Many of them reported being able to detect their teacher's embarrassment or discomfort in dealing with certain sexuality issues. The timing of sexuality education was also a concern. One female respondent reported that she had already gotten pregnant and had an abortion by the time she was taught about birth control: "At school we had sex education but I was only fourteen then, 'round about when it (the pregnancy) happened, and it was after it happened that they started talking about it. I thought 'Oh great! now you tell me!'"

(Woodcock et al., 1992, p. 523).

### Summary and Limitations

#### Studies Examining the Outcomes of School-Based Sexuality Education

Reviews of outcome studies indicate that school-based sexuality education seems to be effective in increasing students' sexuality-related knowledge. Findings reveal that students participating in sexuality education or AIDS education demonstrated higher knowledge levels at the completion of the program than did students who received no such education. Studies examining the effect of school-based sexuality education on the sexuality-related attitudes of participants, however, report varied results. Some report modest changes, while others report negative or no changes in the sexuality-related attitudes of students. School-based sexuality education appears to have limited influence on students' sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions. In the few studies conducted, sexuality or AIDS education did not appear to delay the onset or decrease participants' frequency of sexual intercourse, or to increase the likelihood they will use condoms in the future.

Caution should be used when examining the effects of school-based sexuality education as outcome studies may have several methodological weaknesses that may limit the validity of their conclusions (Card & Reagan, 1989; Kirby, 1980, 1989; Stahler, DuCette & McBride, 1989; Smith Theil & McBride, 1992). For example, if the measurement instruments used in an outcome study are inadequate or invalid, it is difficult to determine whether goals and objectives have, indeed, been attained. Program goals and objectives may have been attained due to extraneous variables rather than due

to the program itself. Similarly, the use of control and experimental groups may be problematic (e.g., Farley et al., 1991; Levy et al., 1995). If participants in these groups differ in other areas, such as age, socio-economic status and race, it is unclear whether achieved goals are a result of the program or of the differences between the two groups. That is, post-intervention differences seen between the treatment and the control groups may have been due to extraneous variables rather than due solely to the intervention.

Several researchers (e.g., DiClemente et al., 1989; Kilmann et al., 1981; Kirby, 1980, 1989; Parcel & Luttmann, 1981; Smith Theil & McBride, 1992) argue that post-test data should be collected both immediately after the intervention and at a later date in order to accurately measure the long-term and delayed impact of school-based sexuality education. Some outcome studies, like that of Main et al. (1994), conduct follow-up investigations only weeks or a few months after the completion of the intervention. This may be insufficient time for delayed program effects to appear or for short-term program effects to fade. Others are limited in that they (e.g., Christopher & Roosa, 1990; DiClemente et al., 1989; Young et al., 1992) do not conduct any follow-up investigation at all.

#### Studies Examining Students' Perceptions and Experiences

Because studies examining students' perceptions and experiences are diverse, it is difficult to summarize these findings. Rather, the range and nature of students' perceptions will be identified. It appears that most adolescents felt that their experience of sexuality education was inadequate in some way in terms of the content and the teaching methods used. Students also expressed concern regarding the embarrassment

and discomfort of their teacher in dealing with certain sexuality issues. In order for it to be relevant to their lives and concerns, adolescents felt that sexuality education should begin at an earlier age and that it should be viewed as a continuous, integral aspect of one's life. Many adolescents attributed the lack of relevance of sexuality education to their feeling that adults are unaware of what teens want and need to learn about sexuality.

The limitations of studies examining students' perceptions and experiences in school-based sexuality education involve three areas: sampling procedures, research methods and the focus of the evaluation. The sampling procedures used by some of the researchers introduced bias into their study. For example, Thomas and Buckley (1989) and Woodcock et al. (1992) obtained their sample from specific areas in the community, such as the site of a program for teenage mothers, youth centres and sports clubs. Because teens using these services and facilities may very likely be different from those who do not, these samples may be unique.

Calderwood's (1965) study was probably quite progressive for its time. However, it is limited in its research methodology. Although focus groups promote very interactive candid discussion between students, this raises concerns about validity. Students were expected to express themselves in front of their peers, but it is unclear whether their comments reflected their true feelings or whether they were reflecting their perceptions of what their friends or the researcher might find acceptable. In addition, Calderwood often asked a student to take notes rather than tape-recording all of the discussion groups. Some of the discussion may have been lost or misinterpreted by the student, thus affecting the results of the study. Maslach and Kerr's (1983) use of unstructured

interviews is valuable in that students were invited to express themselves freely.

However, unstructured interviews may make it difficult to code results and to identify common themes among responses.

The third limitation concerns the focus of these program evaluations. For example, given that Woodcock et al. (1992) used a sub-sample of interviews previously conducted in a larger study examining general adolescent sexual behaviour, one must question how the topic of sexuality education arose in those interviews. Because not all students in the original study spoke about this topic, it seems that sexuality education was merely a theme apparent in some interview discussions. Given that the data on sexuality education in this study was not collected systematically, it is not possible to make any claims regarding the general prevalence or relative frequencies of various reactions identified. Thus, the results of Woodcock et al.'s (1992) study are limited because sexuality education was not the primary focus of the secondary data they analyzed.

#### Research Questions

Based on the findings of the literature reviewed in this chapter, two research questions to be investigated in this study were identified. The first research question reflects the findings of studies examining students' perceptions and experiences in sexuality education, which have identified several components that appear to be important influences on experiences. The second research question reflects the findings of studies examining the influence of school-based sexuality education in relation to one or more of three general outcomes: increased sexuality-related knowledge, changes in sexuality-related attitudes and changes in sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions. The "sub-

questions" of each research question are followed by a brief reference to literature illustrating their importance in the area of sexuality education.

**Research Question 1:** How do students perceive their experience in the unit on human sexuality?

**1a. How do students perceive the content of the unit on human sexuality?**

Research has revealed that many students are not satisfied with the content of the sexuality education they received. For example, students reported that they would have liked the opportunity to study sexuality education in more detail than had been offered to them (Herold & Kopf, 1972), and desired many subjects, such as "birth control", "sexual response", "venereal disease" and "dating" to be addressed at earlier grade levels (Farrell, 1978). In several studies, many students felt that technical information about sexuality was over-emphasized, leaving more emotional concerns unaddressed (McCreary Juhasz et al., 1986; Pond-Brevik, 1978; Woodcock et al., 1992). These students recommended that a stronger emphasis be placed on the personal aspects of sexuality.

**1b. How do students perceive the teaching methods used in the unit on human sexuality?**

One of the key questions raised by school administrators, curriculum specialists, health educators and classroom teachers as they make decisions about sexuality education is "Do the instructional strategies address individual needs and learning styles?" (Ogletree et al., 1995, p. 186). Several researchers (e.g., Herold & Kopf, 1972; Maslach & Kerr, 1983; Woodcock et al., 1992) have found that at least some students were not satisfied with the instructional strategies or teaching methods used in their sexuality education unit.

Students reported that videos were overused as a teaching method, giving teachers an easy way out of talking about sex (Woodcock et al., 1992). They also indicated a preference for guest speakers because they were seen as more open and at ease with sexual matter and more tolerant of different viewpoints than were "regular" teachers (Maslach and Kerr, 1983).

**1c. How do students perceive their sexuality education teacher?**

It appears that the degree of effectiveness of sexuality education programs depends to a large extent on the characteristics of the educator (Engel et al., 1993). Indeed, it is a basic assumption in the field of family life education that the educator plays a pivotal role in the success of family life education programs because "...it is ultimately the educator who develops and implements a program and who interacts directly with program participants" (Czaplewski & Jorgenson, 1993, p. 52). Teacher characteristics reported by students included not comfortable, not adequately prepared or qualified to teach sexuality education, and not aware of what teens wanted to know about sexuality (McCreary Juhasz et al., 1986). Students also claimed that their sexuality education teacher used too many technical terms, perhaps because he or she did not feel comfortable talking about sexual topics (Thomas & Buckley, 1989).

**1d. How do students perceive the message the unit on human sexuality conveys to students about sexuality?**

Sexuality education programs vary in the message they convey to students about sexuality. Some programs may be narrowly focused on the negative aspects of sexuality, such as STDs and teenage pregnancy. It is increasingly clear that this negative focus is "too limited, and perhaps even harmful" (Engel et al., 1993, p. 77). Comprehensive

programs, on the other hand, convey the message that students can be "sexually healthy", focusing on both the negative and positive aspects of sexuality. Still other programs convey the message that abstinence from sexual activity is the only way to prevent sexuality-related problems.

**1e. How do students perceive the relevance of the unit on human sexuality to their lives and concerns?**

In order for sexuality education to be relevant to students' lives, its timing must be appropriate. Research indicates, however, that this is not always the case. For some it may be too late, coming after they have already become sexually active (Farrell, 1970; Marsiglio & Mott, 1986). For others, sexuality education may be provided too early. Information about contraception, for example, may not be understood by students who are not yet sexually active because it is not perceived as relevant to their lives at the time (Woodcock et al., 1992). Sexuality education may also be not relevant to students' lives if its content does not address the questions and concerns they have. According to Gordon (1986), "...our failure to tell children what they want and need to know is one reason why (the United States) has the highest rates of out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy and abortion of any highly developed country in the world" (p. 22).

**Research Question 2: How do students perceive the outcome or influence of the unit on human sexuality?**

**2a. How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexuality-related knowledge?**

In general, it is assumed that greater knowledge facilitates more responsible decision making (Kirby, 1980). Many adolescents do not use contraception because they

incorrectly believe that they cannot or will not become pregnant. Greater knowledge may help dispel some of these myths. Several researchers (e.g., Dawson, 1986; DiClemente et al., 1989; Farley et al., 1991; Kirby, 1980, 1985, 1989, 1992; Marsiglio & Mott, 1986) report that instruction in sexuality education substantially increases sexuality-related knowledge. AIDS instruction recipients were found to experience a significantly greater increase in AIDS knowledge than did the non-intervention group (DiClemente et al., 1989). It was also found that sexuality education significantly increased students' knowledge about abstinence and birth control (Kirby, 1991).

**2b. How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexuality-related attitudes?**

The study of the effect of sexuality education on the attitudes, beliefs or values of students is based on the premise that if students' attitudes, beliefs or values became clearer, then they would be more likely to avoid engaging in sexual risk-taking behaviour (Kirby, 1992). However, the results of different studies vary. Some indicate, for example, that students who received AIDS education were less likely than those who received no such education to believe persons with AIDS should have certain restrictions on their activities (Farley et al., 1991). Other programs, however, were found to have no effect or a negative effect on the sexuality-related attitudes of specific groups of students (e.g., Olsen et al., 1992).

**2c. How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexual behaviour or sexual behavioral intentions?**

Sexual knowledge, attitudes, beliefs or intentions may be treated as potential *mediators* of sexual behaviour, but they are by no means *indications* of sexual behaviour

(DiClemente et al., 1989; Goodson & Edmundson, 1994; Kirby, 1985, 1989). Indeed, Roosa and Christopher (1990) report that due to the large discrepancy between adolescent sexual attitudes and sexual behaviour, "...evaluations that do not assess sexual behaviour leave the most critical questions about [sexuality education] programs unanswered" (p. 363). Relatively few researchers (e.g., Christopher, 1990; Levy et al., 1995; Main et al., 1994; Marsiglio & Mott, 1986; Young et al., 1992) have examined the extent to which sexuality education influences the sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions of adolescents. Results of these studies indicate that sexuality or AIDS education does not seem to delay the onset or decrease the frequency of sexual intercourse among participants (Main et al., 1994). Sexuality education is also reported to have little effect on participants' intentions to engage in sexual intercourse or use condoms in the future (Levy et al., 1995).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

The experiences of students can be examined using various research methods such as interviews, open-ended questionnaires, case studies, participant observations and ethnographies. The appropriate methods for data collection vary with the situation and with the researcher's purpose (Klein & White, 1996). The purpose of this study was to examine, from the student's perspective, specific components of sexuality education. In addition, students' perceptions of the outcome or influence of sexuality education on their sexuality-related knowledge, attitudes and behaviour or behavioral intentions were sought. Participant observations and ethnographic studies typically provide insight into students' experiences in the classroom. In order to obtain students' perceptions of these experiences, however, direct interaction between the researcher and students is necessary. Although case studies may reveal in depth perceptions of a small group of students, some variability and breadth in students' responses was desired in this study. For these reasons, interviews were determined to be the most appropriate research method for data collection.

Interviewing involves face to face, one-on-one interaction between a researcher and research participants. Researchers who conduct interviews seek an accurate account of perceptions and experiences from the perspective of the research participant, and this may be obtained using one of several types of interviews: informal conversational (unstructured), interview guide (semi-structured), and standardized open-ended (structured) (Patton, 1987). In this study, the intention was to keep the interaction

focused, yet provide an opportunity for participants to identify and articulate their own experiences and perspectives. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant using an interview guide (see Appendix A). This guide included a list of questions or topics to be explored in the course of a 45-60 minute interview. The questions on the interview guide were based on key themes identified in the literature, and reflected the two research questions investigated in this study. A series of probes and follow-up questions were also developed in order to help students expand on their responses.

Several issues are common to interview research. For example, the interview researcher must somehow gain access to the perceptions and experiences of participants. In order to accomplish this task, the researcher must establish a level of trust with study participants. Ideally, the researcher is given the opportunity to spend some time interacting informally with students outside of the interview to establish this level of trust. Gaining access to students' perceptions and experiences also involves respect for each participant's own level of comfort in disclosure. For example, if a participant does not wish to respond to or expand on a particular question, the researcher must proceed to another topic of interest (Patton, 1987; Weiss, 1994).

Maintaining the researcher role is also an important issue. In order to be open to learning from the participants, the researcher must become aware of and put aside his or her own experiences and meanings (First & Way, 1995). The researcher must be careful not to assume the role of a therapist or an expert helper and must separate her/his personal agenda from the research agenda (Weiss, 1994).

Although there is no single stance or consensus in interview research on addressing validity and reliability, these are still important issues (Creswell, 1994). Internal validity, or the accuracy of information and whether it matches reality, is a concern in interview research. When researchers study a phenomenon, both the researcher and the subjects influence each other to a certain degree. For example, participants may respond to questions according to what they feel is expected or desired by the researcher rather than according to their true feelings. For this reason, it is important that the researcher create a comfortable, open atmosphere in which to conduct the interview. Participants must be informed of the purpose and rationale of the study, and the researcher must be open about how information is collected and what is going to be done with the information. As well, it is important that the researcher question the motivation behind participants' remarks and examine responses for inconsistencies. Conclusions based on inconsistent data should then be discarded (McLaughlin, 1986).

At the same time, the researcher must monitor his or her direct effect on participants' responses. The strength of data is questionable if the researcher may have led the participant to respond in a certain way. Data influenced by the researcher in this way should be discarded as invalid. The interview researcher should also make note of emerging themes, subjective feelings and impressions, and his or her own behaviour. Such notes help to guide future interviews and provide a frame of reference when interpreting data (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975).

External validity, or the generalizability of a study, must also be addressed in interview research. Often, the experiences of only a few people constitute an interview

study. For this reason, the knowledge gained from interview studies is not generalizable. The intent of interview research, however, is not to generalize findings. Rather, these studies are intended to provide insights which may then assist in interpretation of previous research or to inform future research. They aim to form a unique interpretation of specific events (Creswell, 1994).

Reliability, or the extent to which the study can be replicated, is another issue in interview research. Like the issue of generalizability, the uniqueness of a study within a specific context makes it difficult to replicate it exactly in another context. However, detailed statements about the process of gaining access, the researcher's selection of study participants, the research procedure and the analysis of interviews enhance the study's chances of being replicated in another setting (Creswell, 1994).

#### Gaining Access to the Research Setting

As noted earlier, interviewing involves gaining access to the perceptions and experiences of research participants. However, the interviewer must first gain access to the research setting. Several criteria were identified for the selection of a school to participate in this study. Since sexuality education in Canada is provincially mandated, some kind of sexuality education unit is offered to students in all British Columbia schools. The department in which this unit was offered was not important, but it was necessary that students at this school had already completed the sexuality education unit offered to them. A school in the Lower Mainland was preferable in order to minimize research costs and facilitate data gathering. This area also provided a large number of schools from which a selection could be made. As well, approval of the superintendent

of the school district, the principal of the school and the teacher of the class to be involved in the study was needed. It should be noted that it is not unusual to encounter difficulties obtaining this approval. The selection of a school in which to conduct this type of research is often problematic (Trudell, 1992).

Applications to conduct this research were submitted to five school districts in the Lower Mainland. At the same time, several teachers were contacted by phone, and were asked if they would be interested in participating in the study. No responses were received from three of these school districts. In one school district, a sexuality education teacher indicated considerable interest in being involved in the study, however, the necessary approval was not obtained from the superintendent. One reason cited for this lack of approval was that numerous research projects were already being conducted in this school district at that time. The remaining school district, Westport, did agree to participate in the study. Agreement was received from the vice-principal of the school district, who identified a school principal and two sexuality education teachers willing to participate in the study.

#### Description of the Research Setting

A general description of the school district and school involved in this study provides the context in which the research was conducted. Demographic information concerning this setting is described using both the very limited official data provided by the school district and the language of the school principal as he talked about the socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics and the scholastic ability of students in the school. The names used in this description are pseudonyms.

The Westport School District is a suburban school district with a total population of approximately 18,000 students enrolled in Kindergarten through Grade 12. Of these, about two-fifths are enrolled in secondary schools (grades 8-10).

Seven hundred and seventy-three students attend Somerset Junior Secondary School, with approximately 260 students enrolled in each of Grades 8 through 10. Although the cultural heritage of these students is diverse (with over twenty five different cultures represented), 75% of students are Caucasian, about 20% are of Indo-Canadian descent, and the remaining 5% are from various other ethnic backgrounds. Somerset is located in a neighbourhood inhabited predominantly by "professionals", and was referred to by the school principal as "upper middle class". Students enrolled at Somerset were reported by the school principal to have "slightly above average" scholastic ability.

#### Description of the Unit on Human Sexuality

Since 1994, sexuality education has been provincially mandated as part of the *Career and Personal Planning (C.A.P.P.)* program for students in British Columbia schools. At Somerset Junior Secondary School, program planners have combined C.A.P.P. requirements for sexuality education with the existing, locally developed, Westport Family Life Program to create a "unit on human sexuality" for each of Grades 8 through 10. Students receive this unit in their same-sex physical education classes of about 30 students from a teacher of their own gender.

Three main goals of the Grade 10 unit on human sexuality, as outlined in the Westport Family Life Program, are:

- 1) Students will be able to apply their knowledge of human growth, development and sexual differences to an awareness of themselves in their

relationships with others.

- 2) Students will be able to apply their knowledge of family and social influences in their decision-making process.
- 3) Students will have knowledge of incidence, causes, symptoms, treatment and prevention of STDs.

To achieve these goals, the unit on human sexuality addresses six themes: individual awareness and responsibility; social awareness and responsibility; relationships; reproductive biology; effective communication; and STDs. The unit addresses several sexuality-related topics which reflect these themes: human growth, development and reproduction; expressing emotion; decision-making and personal responsibility; decision-making and contraception; the experience of pregnancy; variation of sexual orientation; STDs and community health services; and AIDS.

The unit on human sexuality for Grade 10 students consists of eight lessons approximately 60-90 minutes in length, with each lesson addressing one of the above topics. As a result, the length of time planned for the unit is approximately ten hours, spread over a two week time period. The unit is taught in a room known at Somerset as "the loft", a small physical education facility that converts into a more formal teaching area when needed. The room is approximately 50 feet by 30 feet, with no windows or desks. There is an overhead projector and screen as well as a television and VCR on a cart stored in the adjoining equipment room. Students sit in rows or in circles for instruction.

Although sexuality education teachers at Somerset must address each of the required themes and topics in the unit on human sexuality, each is given a degree of

freedom to adapt the curriculum to their own teaching styles. That is, themes and topics may be addressed using a variety of teaching methods and teachers are provided with an assortment of resources such as worksheets, videos and class exercises, to aid in presenting course material effectively. Because the unit on human sexuality at Somerset is taught in same-sex physical education classes, the male students interviewed for this study were taught by a different teacher than the female students. For this reason, it is necessary to describe the male students' unit separately from that of the female students.

Mike, the male students' sexuality education teacher, reported addressing most topics in the unit through lectures using the overhead projector and the occasional use of videos. He also reported that a few class discussions were held. According to Mike, the videos available from the school library are "extremely out of date". For this reason, he obtained more contemporary materials elsewhere. The three videos shown in class were produced in the early 1990's (see Appendix B for a list of these videos). Mike did not indicate that he used any additional materials or resources.

When asked about his general perceptions of the unit, Mike expressed his view that, because of its small size and uninteresting surroundings, the loft is not particularly conducive to teaching sexuality education. He reported that, because of the constraints of this room and the "nature of the boys", he usually taught the unit for three-quarters (40 minutes) of the class period and then allowed students some physical activity time for the remaining class time. This resulted in a total of about five and one half hours of instruction. Mike also spoke of his concern that the way in which sexuality education is delivered to students needs to be reconsidered. He commented:

"Much of the material provided is to scare children away from premarital sex in an attempt to discourage their behaviour. I feel that kids walk away from the program overwhelmed with the possible consequences of a poorly made decision. On the contrary, I think it is our duty to share with the kids the feeling that being sexually active and raising families are wonderful experiences, but experiences that should be left until the adult years."

He also reported sensing a degree of negativity in the curriculum. He noted that, while one of the goals of the unit on human sexuality is to teach children to become effective decision makers, the curriculum and resources are designed to berate children for making poor sexuality-related decisions.

Jackie, the female students' sexuality education teacher, reported using a variety of teaching methods (lectures, videos, class discussions and small-group exercises) to present required topics in the unit on human sexuality. Although Jackie recalled students complaining that the videos shown in class were extremely out of date, she reported them to be produced in the late 1980's or early 1990's. Expressing her view that many teachers use videos as an escape from talking about sensitive sexuality-related topics with students, Jackie reported showing only a select few that seemed to contribute to students' learning. A list of these videos, along with examples of small-group exercises used in class, is included in Appendix B.

When asked of her impressions of the unit on human sexuality she delivered to her Grade 10 students, Jackie spoke first of the class atmosphere. She believed that, because she presented course material in a matter-of-fact manner, her students felt relaxed throughout the unit. In terms of the content of the unit, she expressed her view that students today are "bombarded with AIDS" in comparison to other important sexuality-

related topics.

### Sample

As mentioned above, the unit on human sexuality for Grade 10 students at Somerset is conducted in same-sex physical education classes. Thus, for this study, the sample was selected from two physical education classes (one male, one female) in which the students had already participated in the unit on human sexuality. Because it was conducted near the end of the school year, some time constraints were imposed on the study. As well, the physical education teachers of the unit on human sexuality requested that they select the sample. They selected nine female and eight male Grade 10 students (N = 17) who, in their view, were most likely to be articulate and well-spoken, and thus most likely to make a valuable contribution to the study. However, not all of these students participated in the study. The parents of one male student refused to give him permission to participate in the study. Another male student missed two scheduled interviews and was not further contacted. An interview conducted with one female student was deemed unusable due to its short length and lack of detailed responses. The final sample comprised eight female students and six male students (N = 14). All of these students were Caucasian, with the exception of one Japanese-Caucasian male.

### Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained by sending letters to the superintendent of the Westport School District, the principal of Somerset Junior Secondary School and Mike and Jackie, the teachers of the classes involved in the study. Copies of these letters are provided in Appendix C. In addition to these letters, the

researcher met with the principal and the teachers to explain the purpose and rationale of the study and to discuss their role in the research. Once all of these individuals agreed that the study could be conducted in the school, an afterschool meeting was arranged with the students selected to participate in the study. At this meeting, the researcher explained the purpose and rationale of the study, and responded to questions and concerns voiced by the students. Letters were then sent to the parents of each student selected to participate in the study, asking their permission for student participation. A copy of the letter sent to parents is also included in Appendix C. Parents were requested to sign and return the second page of this letter to the school. If parental permission was granted, informed consent was then sought from students selected to participate in the study (see Appendix C).

The purpose and rationale of the study were reviewed with each student before their interview began. They were assured complete confidentiality of the results of the interview, and were told that pseudonyms would be used in the written research report. Participating students were asked if they wished to be informed of the findings of the study. A summary of the findings was sent to these individuals at the completion of the study, as well as to the superintendent of the school district, the principal of the school, and the teachers of the Physical Education classes. Research participants were also given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview to ensure its accuracy and to make any modifications if appropriate.

## Method

As with all interview research, there was a need to identify limitations of the interview guide, to check the time length of the interview guide and to make modifications in order to maximize insight into the experiences of students. For this purpose, pilot interviews were conducted with three Caucasian male 11th grade students selected from a school district of similar socio-economic composition to that of Westport School District. These pilot interviews suggested that the length of the interview guide was appropriate (each interview lasted 45-60 minutes in length) and that interview questions were, for the most part, easily understood by the students. Interview questions were reported to stimulate thought and to encourage students to reflect on their experience in sexuality education from several angles. The students also noted that the interview questions addressed all important components of the sexuality education they had received.

The pilot interviews also indicated, however, that certain interview questions regarding the perceived influence of sexuality education may be difficult for students to answer. For example, two of these students found it difficult to recall specific instances of how sexuality education has affected their life because very little time had passed since they had received the unit on human sexuality. In addition, the students found it difficult to isolate the influence of the sexuality education they had received at school that year as distinct from the influence of sexuality education they had received from other sources. The interview guide was revised accordingly, and one of the pilot interviews was transcribed and used to test the data analysis procedure.

Once the pilot interviews were completed, research at Somerset Junior Secondary School began. The majority of interviews were conducted by the researcher in the Physical Education office, located adjacent to the gymnasium. In addition to assorted physical education equipment and other materials belonging to the physical education teachers, this office contained a desk and a couch on which the interviewer and student sat. Although the Physical Education office provided a comfortable, quiet room in which to conduct interviews, there were some difficulties. Because interviews were not conducted in a designated interview room, they were subject to frequent interruptions. As well, the Physical Education office was not always available due to the needs of the physical education teachers. For this reason, it was necessary to conduct three of the interviews in the gymnasium or outside the school building.

Interviews took place at a time designated by research participants, who were permitted by the school to schedule an interview during lunch hour, during physical education class, during a class period reserved for silent reading, or after school. Interviews were somewhat shorter than expected, lasting 40-50 minutes. The length of interviews depended on whether the student arrived on time for the interview, whether the student had a class immediately following the interview, and on how much the student was willing to share of his or her experience in the unit on human sexuality.

Interviews were semi-structured in order to keep the interaction focused, yet provide the opportunity for participants to identify and articulate their own experiences and perspectives. A copy of the interview guide is included in Appendix A. Students were asked questions concerning their perceptions of their experience in the unit on

human sexuality and of the influence of the unit on their sexuality-related knowledge, attitudes and sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions. For example, they were asked "In your view, what was the most effective teaching method used in the unit on human sexuality?", "How relevant was the unit to your life and concerns at the time?", "What new things did you learn from the unit on human sexuality that you didn't know before?" and "Do you think taking this unit has had any influence on your sexual behaviour or how you think you might behave in the future?". Each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Ideally, the researcher would have had the opportunity to spend some time interacting informally with students outside of the interview in order to establish a degree of rapport with each participant (Weiss, 1994). However, due to time constraints, this was not possible. To establish a level of comfort with each research participant, general questions that required minimum recall and interpretation were asked first in interviews. Questions were designed to progress from general to more specific, providing a systematic method for all topics on the interview guide to be addressed. This order changed, however, with the natural progression of the interview. As well, comments made by students that did not correspond directly to interview questions were pursued further. These unexpected comments served as additional areas of investigation in future interviews.

Students were encouraged to expand on their responses by the use of probes and follow-up questions. For example, if the student was asked "Which topics were emphasized as most important?", a probe would be "Do you agree with this emphasis?",

or "Would you change this emphasis and, if so, how?". If discussion of a particular question seemed to be complete, or the participant started to repeat the same points and terms, the researcher introduced a new question on the interview guide. Similarly, if a participant did not wish to respond to or expand on a particular question, the researcher proceeded to the next item on the interview guide. It is important in this kind of research for the researcher to respect each participant's own level of comfort in disclosure.

Some general concluding questions were asked near the end of each interview. Students were invited to discuss matters that had not been addressed, to expand further on any of the questions asked, and to express any feelings or comments they may have had. Following each interview session, the researcher recorded her own perceptions of the interview experience, including any non-verbal responses of study participants, in a field notebook to facilitate interpretation and analysis of data.

#### Analysis of Interview Data

Several researchers have outlined processes for analysing interview data (e.g., Creswell, 1994; Filstead, 1970; Patton, 1987, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Weiss, 1994). Each researcher uses his or her own terminology to describe similar processes of organizing interview transcripts into themes or categories emerging from the data. The strategies suggested by Weiss (1994) appeared to be most relevant to this study and were used to analyze interview data.

Because the data in interview research are words rather than numbers, interviews were first transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were read and reread carefully by the researcher, with any details about each interview recalled by the researcher jotted

down in the margin as they came to mind. At this time, student responses were examined for inconsistencies and contradictions. These inconsistent responses, as well as responses that may have been the result of leading questions asked by the researcher, were discarded from the data. Interview transcripts were read by two other researchers in the area of sexuality education to ensure the removal of such questionable data.

Interview transcripts were then coded, that is, student responses were assigned to six categories reflecting the research questions: content, teaching methods, teacher, relevance, message and influence. Although students often made comments that fell into more than one category, they were assigned to the category which appeared to be the most accurate fit. For example, the comment that the sexuality education teacher was not aware of what students want and need to know about sexuality could be assigned to both the "teacher" and the "relevance" categories. It was determined by the researcher that this comment would be more appropriately assigned to the "teacher" category. Examples of the assignment of interview data to categories were also reviewed by two researchers in the area of sexuality education in order to ensure a systematic sorting method.

Important sections of the interviews, such as descriptive quotes that were selected to illustrate the findings of the study, were isolated in the text. Two copies of transcripts and notes were made, with one copy serving as an archive. The other copies of each interview transcript were cut up and sorted according to the category to which they had been coded. The result was a set of folders [referred to by Weiss (1994) as *excerpt files*] for each category, containing all relevant examples from each student interview. For example, the "content" excerpt file included portions of each interview transcript,

illustrating each student's perceptions of the content of the unit on human sexuality.

Next, each excerpt file was organized into sub-categories based on student responses and summarized. In Weiss's (1994) terms, this phase is known as *local integration*. The "content" excerpt file, for example, was divided into sub-categories such as "additional topics to be covered" and "topics emphasized as most important". In this phase, the *main line* of each sub-category, or what most respondents said, was summarized. Interview material that did not fit in the main line, the *variants*, was then summarized. It is important not to overlook the variants of interview data, as the perceptions of all participants provide a valuable contribution to the study. To continue using the "content" excerpt file as an example, the main line of the "additional topics to be covered" sub-category was that the "emotional aspects of sexuality" needed to be covered. The variants of this sub-category included perceptions of some students that topics such as "adoption", "abortion" and "how to put on a condom" should be covered.

In the final phase of data analysis, Weiss (1994) suggests that a framework leading to some general conclusion be developed. For the purposes of this study, however, it was determined that categories would be presented in the order in which corresponding research questions were addressed on the interview guide.

#### Strengths and Limitations

One of the strengths of this study is the steps taken to maximize validity. These included assuring students that their responses would remain confidential, tape-recording of interviews for accuracy, and providing students with the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview to ensure its accuracy and to make any modifications if

appropriate. To minimize her own effect on participants, the researcher put aside her own personal experiences and meanings, and was careful not to assume the role of a therapist or expert helper. Following each interview session, she also recorded her own perceptions of the interview experience in a field notebook that provided a frame of reference when interpreting data. Data that may have been influenced by the researcher was discarded. Although studies of students' perceptions have been conducted using survey methods, this study enhances the validity of such assessments by using in-depth probing of responses. This increases the accuracy of responses and, hence, validity. Another strength of this study is the steps taken to maximize reliability. Careful and detailed statements about the process of gaining access, the researcher's selection of study participants, the research procedure, and the analysis of interviews enhance the study's chances of being replicated in another setting.

As with all research, there are also limitations of this study that should be noted. Self selection bias is a limitation. Due to permission procedure requirements, a convenience sample was used. As a result, the sample is limited to the types and numbers of both students and teachers who were willing to participate in the study. In addition, this study is limited by the kinds of sexuality education programs that are available for examination. That is, the researcher could not choose the characteristics of the sexuality unit to be investigated. She had to work with what was available in British Columbia schools at the time the study was conducted. These selection issues may have introduced some bias into the study. Although interviews were semi-structured in order to keep the interaction with participants focused and to address all research questions, this

interview method may have constrained students' responses. Had the interviews been less structured, students may have been given the opportunity to more thoroughly reveal their perceptions of their experience in sexuality education. As well, the use of a tape recorder may have been somewhat intrusive, inhibiting students from expressing themselves freely and openly.

Because the study was conducted by an outside researcher rather than a teacher at the school, it was not possible for the researcher to establish a continuing relationship with each participant. She did not have the opportunity to establish rapport with the students prior to the interviews and, therefore, may have affected their responses in some way. It is also unclear whether students' responses were influenced by the researcher's age, appearance or ethnic background. Finally, social desirability bias may have presented a problem. Because sexuality is a sensitive issue, students may have responded to questions according to what they felt was expected or accepted by the researcher, their teacher, or their peers rather than according to their true feelings. For this reason, it is important that the researcher attempted to establish a level of comfort with study participants, assuring them that study findings would remain confidential.

Although the school administrators and teachers were extremely supportive, some constraints were placed on the study that were not ideal from the researcher's point of view. For example, the physical education teachers selected students to participate in the study that, in their view, were most articulate and well-spoken. Although this type of sample selection was appropriate for the research methods used in the study, many students experienced difficulty expressing their views clearly and succinctly. Because

they were conducted during class time, the length of interviews was limited. As well, interviews had to be conducted in the Physical Education office rather than in a designated interview room and, therefore, were subject to interruptions.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

In this chapter, the findings of this study will be presented. First, descriptive profiles of each student interviewed will be provided. Next, students' responses to research questions will be addressed in the order in which they appear on the interview guide. Additional perceptions expressed by students that were not investigated by the research questions will then be presented, followed by the identification of two themes emerging from the interviews.

#### Student Profiles

The following student profiles are based on the perceptions of the researcher during the interview. These profiles provide descriptive information about students' personal characteristics, and are included to help bring their responses to life. Although considerable variation was found in their ability to articulate their responses, to express their views clearly and to recall specific details about their experience in the unit on human sexuality, students' responses generally revealed important information about their experience in sexuality education.

Eight females participated in the study: Chantel, Jade, Rebecca, Elaine, Michelle, Jessica, Shanna and Lisa. From the moment she walked into the room, I found Chantel very easy to talk to. She appeared to feel comfortable and relaxed, and immediately started a conversation about the school assembly she had just attended. We seemed to establish a level of comfort quite quickly. Chantel expressed strong beliefs and values concerning her sexuality and, more specifically, her sexual behaviour. Although she

indicated that she may have felt differently a few years ago, Chantel said that she was in no hurry to become sexually active. She was aware of the risks involved as well as the consequences of unsafe sexual behaviour, and did not feel any peer pressure to abandon her own beliefs and values and become sexually active like some of her classmates.

Jade seemed to be quiet, yet was not shy. I attempted to break the ice by complimenting her on her outfit, and she opened up-- we chatted casually for about five minutes. As soon as the interview began, however, Jade's quietness returned. She did not have much to say about her experience in the unit on human sexuality, nor did she express any personal beliefs around sexuality. I found myself probing her responses and encouraging her to expand more often than in other interviews. For these reasons, my interview with Jade proved to be one of the more difficult I conducted.

Rebecca arrived a few minutes early for our appointment. She appeared to be in no hurry to complete the interview, despite the fact that school had just finished for the day. Her parent permission form was turned in just a few days after they were distributed, and she presented herself as a very reliable, responsible person. Rebecca later informed me that she had been selected by Rangers Canada, a community service and enrichment organization for young women, to spend the summer in a small town in Mexico learning Spanish and experiencing Mexican culture. She was pleased, but not boastful of this accomplishment, which appeared to be consistent with her reserved, quiet demeanour.

Because it was conducted during final exam period, my interview with Elaine was a bit shorter than the others. She had a French exam later that day, and she appeared to

be somewhat preoccupied. She scurried into the room, a pile of French notes in hand, and flopped herself onto the couch. She was quite talkative, and did not appear to be nervous or uncomfortable. After taking a deep breath, she informed me that she was ready to begin. Throughout the interview, Elaine focused carefully on the questions asked. She rarely digressed from the topic at hand, and revealed little about herself.

Michelle appeared to be a bit nervous throughout the interview. She sat still and upright on the couch, and indicated to me several times throughout the interview that sex was "not a major thing" in her life at the time. For example, she reported finding it useful that teen pregnancy was addressed in the unit because many of her classmates are sexually active, but stressed that this was not an issue for her. Michelle also recalled appreciating her teacher's emphasis on waiting until one is mentally and emotionally mature enough to become sexually active. She indicated that this confirmed her belief that she is not ready to engage in sexual intercourse. When asked if she would be interested in taking a complete course on human sexuality, Michelle replied that such a course would have limited use to her at this time in her life.

Because Jessica had to attend an unanticipated Girls Basketball Team meeting, my interview with her started 15 minutes later than planned. She also had a class in the next period and, as a result, our interview was cut short. Although a bit flustered upon entering the room, Jessica quickly relaxed. She appeared quite confident and almost eager to tell me of her experience in the unit on human sexuality. Jessica's straightforward, direct responses to interview questions gave me the impression that she was an opinionated young woman. She also revealed some of her sexuality-related

views. For example, aware of the importance of using contraception, she expressed that she would be very angry if she discovered that one of her classmates had unprotected intercourse.

Although I tried to initiate some casual conversation with Shanna before the interview began, she did not seem to respond. My questions and comments were returned with a smile and a quiet, short response. In order to provide Shanna with some more time to feel comfortable, I started the interview with an extended series of descriptive questions that required minimum recall and interpretation. Eventually, Shanna appeared to relax and open up. She progressively became more candid and expressive throughout the interview, and expressed interest in the ramifications of the study when she asked if the unit on human sexuality at her school would be influenced by the findings.

From the moment she walked into the interview room, Lisa came across as a very confident friendly, cheerful young woman. She immediately positioned herself comfortably on the couch and initiated a casual conversation. She asked how my day was going, who I had interviewed so far, and expressed how excited she was that she could contribute to my research. Needless to say, we became comfortable talking with one another quite quickly. It was not long before I sensed Lisa's openness about sexuality. She responded to interview questions using correct terminology where necessary and showed no signs of embarrassment or unease in doing so. She also recalled feeling very comfortable in sexuality education, and asking several questions in class when they came to mind. Perhaps Lisa's openness toward sexuality results from

her interest in the field. At the completion of the interview, she asked me about the kinds of courses I take at U.B.C., about the requirements for the graduate program in which I am enrolled, and about my career options upon graduation.

Six males participated in the study: Rich, Matthew, Riley, Ethan, Jake and Colin. Rich came across as friendly, but shy. He spoke softly and politely, and sat up very straight throughout the interview. Rich seemed quite eager to participate in the study. He returned his parent permission form the day after they were distributed and volunteered to be interviewed during his lunch break rather than during class time. He was also willing to reveal quite a bit about himself. For example, he reported that he did not ask questions in class, not because he did not feel comfortable asking questions, but because he is just "quiet in gym". Rich also spoke of his mother and her attempts to discuss sexuality issues with him. He admitted walking away from her on several occasions when the topic arose because he is just not comfortable speaking to his mother about sexuality. He also revealed that he "parties" sometimes and considers himself to be somewhat outgoing.

From his clothing, the way he walked, and his build, Matthew created the impression that he was an athlete. Indeed, he informed me before the interview started that he played on the school basketball team and intended to try out for the National Soccer Team. Matthew appeared to be very confident, and had a relaxed, "laid-back" attitude toward the interview. He didn't seem to mind where it took place, how long it lasted or what type of questions I was to ask him. Once the interview started, however, it was clear that Matthew was somewhat nervous. Although he responded to questions in

a matter of fact, nonchalant manner, he sat very upright, his face became flushed easily and he played with the microphone throughout. Mark's comments were brief, and he revealed little about himself.

Riley came across as a reserved, yet friendly young man. Although at the beginning of the interview he nervously sat up straight, he soon began to relax. Within a few minutes he leaned back, cross-legged on the couch, and proceeded to eat his lunch. Although his responses were, at times, lacking in detail, Riley expressed himself quite clearly. When asked to expand, he appeared to think carefully before providing additional information.

The search for a room in which to conduct the interview allowed time for some casual conversation with Ethan. We talked about things such as his feelings toward his mother being a teacher at the school and his visit to the principal's office that morning for being late to class. Because it was after school, we were forced to conduct the interview in the gymnasium. The noise, people walking through, and the loud speaker announcements made it quite difficult to concentrate on the topic at hand. Nevertheless, Ethan did his best to focus on the interview, and we seemed to establish a degree of comfort quite quickly. He spoke fast, giving me the impression that he had a lot to tell me about his experience in the unit on human sexuality. From his responses to my questions, Ethan appeared to be an intelligent, reflective young man. After thinking carefully about each question, he expressed himself clearly and quite eloquently.

Jake is a heavy-set, Japanese-Caucasian young man. When I met Jake at the introduction meeting for prospective participants of the study, he appeared to be a bit of a

busy-body. He greeted students with sarcastic or funny comments as they entered the room, he asked several questions about the study, and he laughed and joked with his friends throughout the entire meeting. It did not seem that Jake was serious about participating in the study. Surprisingly, however, he approached me after the meeting and scheduled an interview for the following week. His parent permission form was returned to me the next day. When I went to his classroom the day before the interview to remind him of our appointment, he informed me that he had not forgotten about it and that he had planned to be there. Sure enough, Jake met me in the interview room on his lunch break the next day. He was cheerful, but quiet. I immediately sensed that he was nervous about the impending interview. That he fiddled nervously with the microphone and had a flushed face throughout the entire interview confirmed my hunch.

Colin arrived a few minutes early to the interview, positioned himself comfortably on the couch, and indicated to me that he was ready to begin. He came across as a very mature, intelligent individual. Within the first few minutes of the interview, it was apparent that Colin had a lot to communicate to me. He spoke quickly, responding to interview questions in a very articulate, eloquent manner. My interaction with Colin seemed more like an informal conversation between friends than an interview conducted for research. It was candid, natural, and revealed rich information about his experience in sexuality education.

#### Responses to Research Questions

This study investigated two research questions that emerged from the literature review on studies of school-based sexuality education. The first research question

addresses students' subjective perceptions of their experience in the unit on human sexuality, while the second research question focuses on the outcome or influence of the unit on students. Presentation of students' responses to these research questions will be organized according to the sub-questions of each research question. Findings will be presented in the order in which corresponding research questions were listed on the interview guide.

Research Question 1:

How do students perceive their experience in the unit on human sexuality?

1a. How do students perceive the content of the unit on human sexuality?

Students' perceptions regarding content focused on both the subject matter addressed in the unit and the structure of the unit. According to the students, the topics emphasized as most important were "contraception", "teen pregnancy", "STDs" and "sexual decision-making", with approximately one to two hours spent on each topic. A few students indicated that "date rape", "communication", "reproduction", "anatomy" and "eating disorders" also received some emphasis. There was some suggestion that this provided students with the "basics" about sexuality. As Matthew commented:

"Um, [it] just helps you to learn what you need to know, that's basically all it does, just teaches you what you need to know. It's just like any other class, but just a different subject".

However, the majority of students felt that the unit should go beyond the basics to address topics in more detail. While most wanted more detail on all topics in order to better understand and remember information, some reported a desire for more detail on one or more specific topics. For example, Chantel indicated:

"Um, I learned what I should... what's the highest percentage of like, um,

pregnant and STDs, what I should use, um, lots of STDs, what they are, they should talk more about that. They just say what they are, but they should get into more detail, how you get them, like they kinda just show you the notes and that's kind of it. They should go really into detail, the common ones, whatever."

The students also felt that additional topics should be included in order to make the unit more relevant to their lives and concerns. Topics suggested most often were "male sexuality", "female sexuality", and "emotional aspects of sexuality". Female students reported learning about male anatomy, but more than half of them expressed a desire, or a right in the opinion of some, to learn more about male sexuality in general. According to these students, it would have been helpful to learn about the "male perspective", or about the way in which males talk and think about sexuality. As Michelle recalled:

"No, well, we go over, like, the organ, like, you know, all those things, but we don't talk about, like, what happens to them and what happens to, like, we just talk about the girls and its, like, we have, I think we have a right to know what happens with them, 'cause we don't understand it, then it makes it more confusing for us."

Similarly, some male students expressed a desire to learn about female sexuality, since females "experience different feelings and phases" in their sexuality than do males. They would have found it useful to know what a woman experiences, emotionally and physically, when she is pregnant. According to them, males might then be more aware of the consequences of getting a female pregnant. For example, Colin suggested:

"Yah, so it's, like, ya know, put the low down of what a woman feels like when they're pregnant, or found out they're pregnant, sorry, um, and what they go through, and I think if a man really understands that, then they might actually think about 'Well, if I get this woman pregnant, I'm gonna have to deal with this.'"

The importance of the emotional or personal aspects of sexuality was also identified, particularly, the emotional dimensions of deciding to become sexually active. Students wanted some emphasis to be placed on the importance of "doing it with someone you care about" and making sure one is emotionally ready to be sexually active, rather than solely on the importance of "using protection". For example, Chantel urged that the tendency of teens to engage in sexual intercourse "for the fun of it" or "on the spur of the moment" be addressed. She expressed a concern that many of her peers were not emotionally ready to be sexually active, and were engaging in intercourse for the wrong reasons. They were not able to talk to their partners comfortably about the consequences of their sexual behaviour and, in her view, were therefore not mature enough to be sexually active. Similarly, Rebecca noted that the unit addressed mainly how to handle and avoid sexuality-related problems. She would have found it helpful to learn, however, more about developing and maintaining healthy relationships:

"Like, it didn't really talk about, like, it didn't really talk about sexuality, like, how we are right now with our sexuality, like, it was more or less about, like, what to do if you're pregnant, 'n...ya know, it didn't say, like, what you should do, like, right now, you know, like..."

Other topics that students would have found relevant to their lives included "date rape", "how to put on a condom", "abortion", "adoption" and "recent statistics on the incidence of AIDS and other STDs".

Nearly all students recalled that the unit on human sexuality was repetitive. However, their perceptions regarding this repetitiveness differed. One third saw it as positive, reporting that more review was needed to help students understand and remember the information presented. They suggested that students participate in sections

of the unit on human sexuality throughout the school year or that a short review section be included at the beginning of each class period. Jade urged that more review of material be provided, especially for students who have been absent from class:

"Or, like, at the beginning of each class, ya know, "Everybody who was away, ya know, this is what we did.' Like, in, like, normal math classes, that's what they do and in this class they just think 'Oh well, you missed it.'... they're not so much worried about this part, like as they are in, like, a science class, like, if you miss, like, the Punnet Square or something, they make sure that you get it, and then if you, like, miss, like, drawing out, like, male whatever, then you miss it and you probably know it anyways type thing."

And Rich noted:

"Um... I think that every time it's like review, it helps you, it makes you more aware and you get a better understanding, like, every time and as you, as it's getting reviewed or whatever, um, the person's mind will just click-- 'Oh yah, that's what that and that , that's why' and just..."

On the other hand, some students spoke negatively of the repetitiveness of the unit. They felt that they had already covered much of the material in previous years, and, for this reason, did not learn a lot of new information. In their view, their school had been teaching the same material in the unit for several years, and teachers need to make it more exciting and interesting for students.

Despite the repetition of content, several students indicated that new information was added each year and that the focus of the unit had changed as appropriate for their grade level. These students noticed a shift from an emphasis on anatomy and reproduction the previous year to a focus on contraception and sexual decision-making this year.

Perceptions concerning the structure of the content focused on the time allocated

to the unit. Half of the students reported feeling rushed throughout the unit, although different reasons for this were identified. Most attributed feeling rushed to the limited time allotted to the unit. In particular, they recalled that the unit got cut short because "there were a lot of things going on at that time of year". Alternatively, some students recalled feeling rushed throughout the unit because their sexuality education teacher was in a hurry. These students remarked that their teacher moved quickly from one subject to another and, as a result, there was little time available to ask questions or to discuss topics further. They felt that the teachers realized that they had to teach the unit, but rushed through it to the best of their ability. For this reason, sexuality education was characterized as a "rushy" topic. As Shanna indicated:

"...I guess it kinda seemed like she just wanted to get it over and done with. Um, she just always looked down at the paper on the overhead and just kinda go through it and, and soon as it was over, she just, 'Any questions?', and we kinda quickly moved on and I don't know if it was the time or...its' just the feeling I got, I guess..."

Almost all of the students reported a desire for the unit to be longer by at least one week. This would allow for additional topics to be addressed, would enable more detailed coverage of topics relevant to their lives and would provide increased time to ask questions. Colin was quite emphatic in stating his views that a longer unit on human sexuality would be more effective:

"Um, I think two weeks is enough if you just do the basic stuff. Maybe make it a month or something... so that you know every single fact about the sex and stuff like that, have guest speakers in and stuff like that, maybe some questionnaires to test your knowledge, so that you actually come out of there, actually getting something, not just two weeks of lectures, like, you should come out of there getting something. I think if that happens, I'm pretty sure everybody's gonna be buying condoms and contraceptives and everything."

Still, there were a few students who felt that the unit did not need to be any longer because it covered "pretty much" what students wanted to know, and they felt they would have become bored if it had lasted any longer. They also felt that a longer unit would result in over-coverage of topics and that it would take away too much time from physical education class.

1b. How do students perceive the teaching methods used in the unit on human sexuality?

There were some differences reported in the teaching methods used in the unit, depending on the gender of the teacher. Both male and female students recalled that their teacher used lectures with the overhead projector, videos and class discussions. However, only female participants reported the use of worksheets and small group exercises.

When asked to identify the most effective teaching method used, responses varied considerably. Here, students cited class discussions, lectures with the overhead projector or a combination of both. Those who found class discussions or small group exercises to be most effective (about half) indicated that it was helpful to hear the viewpoints of their classmates and to learn from the questions asked by others. Some felt that class discussions encouraged students to ask questions and brought issues out into the open.

As Rich recalled:

"...it got every people, like, got everybody involved and when, I think that when everyone was, like, involved, questions that other people have that they don't want to ask, 'cause they think it's stupid or whatever, gets right out."

A small number of students who cited lectures with the overhead projector as the

most effective teaching method used found that taking notes while the teacher was presenting material helped them to learn and retain more information. These notes could then be used as a reference at a later date. These students found lectures to be more effective than videos because lectures proceeded at a pace slow enough for them to take notes. According to them, videos were often shown too quickly, were not rewound for re-viewing, and were not stopped periodically for discussion. When asked why he preferred lectures to other teaching methods, Matthew responded:

"Um, I don't know, it seems like more people pay attention about when he talks about stuff and takes notes and you're always, like, doing something, 'cause everyone was taking notes and it's when you write stuff, it obviously sinks into your head and stuff."

Almost one third of the students cited both class or small group exercises and lectures as the most effective teaching methods used in the unit. These students found it difficult to select only one effective teaching method because, in their view, these two were helpful for different reasons. Some indicated that, although the class discussions were interesting, more was learned from the lectures given by the teacher. Students also reported that each method was appropriate for different topics. Technical topics, such as STDs, were most effectively addressed in the lecture format, while class discussions or small group exercises were more helpful when discussing emotional topics, such as sexual decision-making. Mark appreciated the variety of teaching methods used by his sexuality education teacher.

Students were also asked of their perceptions of the least effective teaching method, and these responses also differed. Jessica expressed strong negative feelings about class discussions:

"...it's one thing if you're with your friends and you can talk, 'cause, I, I can't see myself talking about things like that in front of people, like, I'm not friends with. Like, maybe they're acquaintances, but that's it...it's not something I just wanna blurt out to everyone...you don't wanna say anything. 'Cause you don't want, say you say something and then, like, what if they go, like, spread all these rum...start saying to people, and, you know..."

Other students commented that they "did not really gain anything" from class discussions and that the lectures with the overhead projector were boring and ineffective.

Every student interviewed spoke of the videos shown in the unit on human sexuality. Some did so in a positive manner, recalling that the videos taught them a lot of new information and served as a good review of material learned previously. Colin reported that he had known little about sex and AIDS, but watching the video got him "thinking". Similarly, Rebecca recalled:

"We saw this video and it was with Whoopi Goldberg, I think and she was, she was a teenager who got pregnant and she was saying, like, what her life was like and how she had this baby and her mom was always taking care of it and how her mom, like, put all this responsibility on and she just wanted to go out with her friends, but she couldn't because she had the baby or whatever and I think that was, like, good to show what it would be like...even though it was, like, a 25 year old talking, it was, like, realistic thoughts and, like, things I would think if I were that person, you know...I could relate to it. Even though I'm not pregnant or whatever, but you know..."

In contrast, other students did not find the videos to be helpful, and one stated bluntly:

"The videos were kinda stupid". Another student recalled the videos just showing couples expressing their feelings to an interviewer and, for this reason, they did not teach or explain anything to students. Some did not find the videos helpful simply because they were "really old".

In fact, all but two students, regardless of whether they viewed them as helpful,

commented that the videos were extremely outdated. They found it hard to concentrate on the subject matter of the video without being preoccupied with how old it was and laughing at the appearance of the actors. For example, Michelle commented:

"...and it was, it was so outa date, like, you know, you got, there was a black girl and she was, it's got all this 80's music and stuff and all you can do is sit there and laugh at it, right? It's like, OK, they're singing all these stupid songs like 'Addicted to Love' and all this and it's, like, 'OK'..."

Nearly half of the students found the videos outdated because, in their view, teens today are faced with different or more important issues than were teens at the time the videos were made, rendering the videos somewhat irrelevant to their lives. They noted that AIDS has become a much bigger issue in the past decade, and concern was expressed that students would perceive issues and problems stressed in the videos as no longer important because several years had since past. As Jessica commented:

"We had a video or two, but they're old videos and we've seen them and I think they need to be updated more, like, they're the 70's and 80's and it's like, I think it'd be different 'cause, you know, times change, people are, like different...like back then, people weren't really, they're, like, you know, didn't really talk about this...like, well, as far as I know, they didn't really and now in the 90's people are open with things and, like, these issues are so much more important now than they were back then even if they were still there."

Similarly, Colin stated that he would have felt more comfortable watching a video made in 1995 because scientists have discovered a lot of new viruses and "a lot has changed" in the past decade.

Alternatively, students suggested that the videos were difficult to relate to because social relationships among teens have changed over the years. For example, it was argued that males would approach females at a party differently today than they would

have "back then". As well, Elaine found that the videos were aimed at a lower knowledge level than that of students at her school:

"...it's funny 'cause I think that, well at least, like, people from our school are more educated on the subject. Like, the people in the videos are, like, so, like, they, like, 'Can you get AIDS from a water fountain?' and stuff, so its kinda funny when we watch stuff like that, 'cause people are way more educated than that...I'm not sure...maybe because then when they made the video, like, that stuff was just, like, AIDS and stuff was just kinda coming out then and so people didn't really know, but now people, like, and since you have to learn this type of stuff everybody knows a little bit more."

Although not asked directly, students offered some suggestions for teaching methods which they thought would have been helpful. Several mentioned "birth control stations" such as they had in previous years, where they could see and touch actual contraceptive devices and discuss its effectiveness. Lisa recalled this teaching method as being facilitative of learning:

"They set up stations and all the different, um, contraception, like condoms and yah, we'd go to each of them and look at them and...we'd guess what percentage [of effectiveness] it would be and she'd [the teacher] end up telling us what it really was and...we would all go and we'd actually have to think about how much, or what percentage it does help for you and then we would all discuss it and then she'd actually tell us and then it would stick in your head."

Many students also felt that guest speakers would have been helpful, as indicated by Jade:

"I'll probably forget them [things learned this year], like, I might know where one more thing is, but, I mean, nothing really was, like pressing in my mind, like, like it would be if there were a guest speaker doing, talking about it and I'd remember it, ya know, I'd remember their situation, I'd remember it for, like, years and stuff."

Some were particularly interested in specialists in the area of sexuality, as they would

bring different issues, ideas and views into the school. Because these guest speakers would be "new" to students rather than a "normal" teacher, it was thought that students might pay more attention in class. Other students wanted to bring victims of date rape and AIDS, and teen parents into the classroom. They could talk about how their life has changed as a result of their decisions, and serve to demonstrate the consequences of risky sexual behaviour. As Colin suggested:

"Yah, maybe even the victims...Maybe some HIV positive people or, or people who have AIDS to come in and actually talk about it, you know, try and get it, 'cause I think if we have somebody who's right in front of you who has HIV, has AIDS and you just listen to what they have to say, it actually might make you think...even if it is a small unit, even if it is a two week unit, to have that person come in there. It may actually make you think that, you know, this unit wasn't two weeks of fun-- it was pretty important."

1c. How do students perceive their sexuality education teacher?

Students spoke of their sexuality education teacher in relation to several personal characteristics: knowledgeability; comfort in teaching the unit; influence on the comfort level of students; friendliness and approachability; awareness of what students want and need to learn about sexuality; and ability to maintain control of the class. There was considerable consistency in students' perceptions of these characteristics.

All but two students viewed their teacher as knowledgeable in the area of sexuality, as evidenced by the manner in which he or she dealt with questions. Students were encouraged to ask questions in class and responses, for the most part, were given without hesitation and in considerable detail. According to Jake:

"Confidently... he answered them thoroughly and asked if there were any more questions about it."

Similarly, Colin recalled:

"It was, like, it was, it wasn't a problem to him. It was, like, well, the reason why this is so is because...and he explained the question. He wouldn't be afraid to go into detail and stuff like that."

A number of students also reported their teacher looking at them in the eye rather than reading from notes while relaying information during class.

Experience teaching the unit on human sexuality and age were among reasons identified for the knowledgeability of their teacher. Riley was the only student to question his teacher's knowledge in the area of sexuality. Although he did not expect his teacher to be an expert on the topic, he noted that teaching sexuality was not his teacher's "forté".

Almost all students reported finding their teacher to be comfortable teaching the unit on human sexuality, as indicated by his or her demeanour in class. The teacher laughed and joked occasionally with students, creating a light-hearted, relaxed class atmosphere. As did other students, Jade reported that her teacher did not appear to be embarrassed in class:

"...if your teacher seems like she's embarrassed about talking about it then you'd be, like, she's embarrassed, and if they start, like, blushing when they start mentioning, like...or if they can't do it without blushing then it's, like, 'Okay, '(laughing)...she seemed like, ya know, she could say things without, like, fluttering or whatever and she'd just, like, go through it."

Students felt that the level of comfort of the teacher influenced their own comfort in class. Their teacher joked with them periodically, illustrating to them that learning about sexuality can be fun, and almost half of the students recalled being able to ask questions without embarrassment. For example, Elaine recalled:

"Yah, yah, yah she, yah, people, actually, this was the first year I had her for this and in past years everybody would write them [questions] down on a piece of paper, but almost everybody was comfortable with just raising their hand and asking questions...we hardly used the paper thing at all this year."

It was also noted that the teacher would never make anyone "feel dumb" for speaking up in class and that the teacher always had a smile on her face, reassuring students that all of their questions were valuable. The fact that the teacher was "young" and, therefore, "was pretty funny about it" was also helpful.

Only a few students were not convinced that their teacher was completely comfortable teaching the unit on human sexuality. They felt that the teacher used the overhead projector to avoid talking about certain topics and was too embarrassed to perform a demonstration of how to put a condom on properly.

All but two students expressed the view that their sexuality education teacher was friendly and approachable. Although their teacher did not always announce that he or she was available to talk about more personal issues outside of class time, these students would have felt comfortable doing so. They reported liking their teacher a great deal, and felt that he or she would listen without judging students or breaking students' trust. As well, they indicated that they would feel more comfortable talking to their sexuality education teacher about a personal issue than most of their other teachers.

Students' perceptions of whether or not their teacher was aware of what teens want and need to know about sexuality varied considerably. A substantial number found that their teacher was, indeed, aware of what they wanted to learn, reasoning that he or she addressed the main questions they had about sexuality and specifically selected topics

of interest and relevance to teens. For example, Michelle recalled:

"So, she never really, I think she taught what we needed to learn mostly, she didn't go off, like, on little things, she went to the major things that you, like pregnancy... 'cause a lot of people nowadays are getting pregnant and stuff so..."

And Elaine indicated:

"Yah, she's pretty much up to date with stuff, I think. Just, like, the way she spoke and stuff, the way, I don't know, she totally seemed like she did, like she's not one of those old gym teachers who, like, doesn't know anything."

On the other hand, a considerable number of students found that their teacher was not aware of what teens want and need to learn about sexuality, recalling that he or she simply followed the curriculum guide without considering their needs and interests. As

Matthew reflected:

"I think it's just what he had teach us... I think he did just what was set out for him. Um... he's a pretty young guy so I think he knows what, what should be done and what should be taught to us and stuff, how we feel and stuff."

Several students spoke of the way in which their teacher effectively maintained control of the class. In their view, their teacher was aware of when it was time to have fun and when it was time to be serious, and never let jokes go too far. A few male students recalled that if a student asked a "smart ass" question in class, their teacher simply told him that his question was inappropriate and that when students acted in an immature manner, their teacher told them to "grow up". Similarly, Jade reported:

"...well, if somebody started, like, you know, talking loudly and interrupting she did the normal teacher thing and, you know, 'You guys, stop talking.' or whatever and 'Listen.' and 'Get mature!' or something like that which is fine, she's normally a friendly teacher so when she gets like that nobody's really..."

Nearly all students spoke of their teacher's positive effect on their experience in sexuality education, reporting that their teacher taught the class a lot about sexuality, and made the unit on human sexuality as enjoyable as possible. When asked how his teacher affected his experience, Ethan replied:

"Well, I think he made it a positive one. He made it much... 'cause I know there's a lot of kids that if they had the choice, wouldn't wanna learn or like... 'This is a waste of time.' and a lot of kids would be, like, 'Let's do something else.'. At least with him, he makes it... every one knows they have to learn it, but he makes it a bit more enjoyable than just having to learn it... like, there's... not a lot of kids come out saying 'Oh boy, that was fun!', but at least it wasn't boring as, like, math class or something. He makes it a bit more..."

Other students commented on the positive effect of their teacher's personality, recalling that he or she was open, cheerful, and conducted class with a positive attitude. No students reported their teacher having a negative effect on their experience in sexuality education.

More than half of the students believed that the unit on human sexuality would be very different if conducted by a different teacher, referring to both the gender of the teacher and the context in which he or she is known to students. Several male students reported that their class would feel embarrassed to ask a female teacher questions and that they would not take the unit as seriously. It was also suggested that it "makes sense" to have a male teacher teaching human sexuality to males because males, unlike females, are aware of what males "go through". As Matthew commented:

"Um, I don't think anyone woulda taken it serious, I, I think they would've made a lot more jokes and just stuff like that, just thrown it out or...I don't know. Just, just the way guys are... 'Oh, it's from a lady.' and stuff like that. It's, like, 'Oh, what do you know, you're not a guy, you just know how a girl feels.'."

Similarly, a number of female students reported that they would be uncomfortable and embarrassed if the unit was taught by a male teacher. They, too, would find it difficult to ask a male sexuality-related questions and felt that he would not be able to relate to or understand female concerns about their sexuality.

Students referring to the effect of the context in which a teacher is known to students reported that it would be difficult to envision a math teacher, for example, conducting the unit on human sexuality. They argued that, in this situation, students would feel uncomfortable and would not pay attention in class. As Jade reflected:

"I think it's better that it's the gym teacher, I'm not sure why, (laughing), just 'cause with a math teacher you're used to, like, learning about, having them teach you, like, dividing equation-type things... like, ya know, when a math teacher's come down and she's teaching you, like, sewing you think, ya know, 'What the heck?' or, if all of a sudden, your socials teacher has to become your chorus teacher and you're, like, 'You can't sing!' (laughing)."

1d. How do students perceive the message the unit on human sexuality conveys to students about sexuality?

According to all of the students, sexual behaviour was portrayed by their teacher in what they referred to as a "neutral" manner. Their teacher recognized that the decision to become sexually active is a personal one, and that many teens are sexually active. At the same time, however, he or she described sexual intercourse as an adult activity involving serious consequences for those involved. It was also conveyed that teens, whether they are sexually active or not, need to be informed as to how they can protect themselves, need to learn how to make wise sexuality-related decisions, and need to be aware of the consequences of their sexual behaviour. The consistency of student perceptions regarding the message conveyed to them about sexuality is evident in the

following student responses. Michelle reported:

"...they kinda have an upper downer kinda thing, you know, they would bring it up, but they'd also bring it down, so you were aware of what was happening, like, they couldn't do all the positive, because you'd be, like, 'Oh, nothing's gonna happen, I'm going to go out and have sex.' And they can't put it all on the downer because then you'll never have sex and everybody's scared of everything, so they kinda put it in the middle..."

When asked about the message the unit conveyed to students about sexuality, Rich recalled:

"Um, I think it was, um, trying to produce more of an attitude and to give people opinions about, like, what to do and make them more aware of what's going on in the world and what's, what's coming of it."

And Colin recalled his teacher telling his class:

"Here are certain things you can take that can help percent STDs, um, you know, if you don't want to get AIDS, the best thing to do is not have sex at all, but we all know that will probably never happen, so use condoms, women use diaphragms...you know..just be careful, and make sure you're ready to deal with the consequences..."

All students agreed that the message conveyed to them about sexuality was appropriate, realistic and, therefore, relevant to their lives. They shared their teachers' views that, although sexual intercourse should be an activity reserved for adults, many teens are sexually active and need to learn how to protect themselves. Some felt that it would be unrealistic to deny that teens engage in sexual intercourse. For example, Shanna reported:

"...well, I don't think anybody should be telling people to go out and have sex because that...(giggle). Um, and I guess you can tell people not to have it, but they're not really gonna listen to you, so I guess it's better just to say 'If you're going to [have sex], make sure it's safe.'"

Others agreed with the message conveyed to them, believing that teens need to learn

about the consequences of their sexual behaviour in order to make wise sexuality-related decisions. In their view, awareness of these consequences may encourage teens to re-evaluate their sexuality-related decisions or to think twice before acting. As Ethan expressed:

"I think, yah, I think it's a good message and its relevant, like, kids should know it because if you didn't know, like, if you're, like, ignorant and didn't wanna know or, I don't know, I think people need to know, 'cause it does wake you up, it makes you realize that it's not...doesn't just happen on T.V., it doesn't just happen to other people, it could happen to yourself so you need to be careful."

Most students spoke of the way in which their sexuality education teacher presented abstinence as the preferred alternative to being sexually active. They recalled being reminded by their teacher on several occasions that abstinence is the only way to ensure protection from pregnancy, the HIV virus and other STDs. At the same time, however, their teacher recognised that not all teens choose to be abstinent, and need to be taught other ways of protecting themselves. For example, Michelle recalled:

"...she brought it up and she said, you know, the best thing we can do is have, like, be abstinent, you know...but she would also say, you know, like, a lot of girls aren't gonna do that, you know, like, and she would mention that in class and say 'You know, the safest thing to do is not have sex.'...And she would just bring it up, you know, she would just say 'The easiest way to avoid all these bad things is don't have sex.', so she just brought it up."

Similarly, Ethan reported:

"Um, he showed, he showed it as a way of contraception and how, obviously, that one is the only one that's 100% safe and that it, you know, it's a choice to make, but it's not...you don't have to make that choice, you can alw...you can really take lots of precautions and still be relatively pretty safe, but it is always an option and it is a good one, but you don't...he didn't say, you know, 'Don't have sex or do, or...', you know. So he brought it up as a...as a...he brought it up as a topic, but didn't,

like, force it on any..."

No students reported that their sexuality education teacher presented abstinence as the only acceptable option to teens in terms of their sexual behaviour. When asked their views concerning such a message, all students expressed their disapproval. Without hesitation, they argued that the promotion of abstinence as the only acceptable option for teens would be inappropriate and unrealistic. Some felt that students would laugh if their sexuality education teacher told them that they must remain abstinent. As Chantel noted:

"Uh, I think the class would laugh at her and say she's a joke...face reality, pretty much."

A number of students also spoke of the detrimental effect such a message would have on the credibility of a sexuality education teacher. Michelle, for example, described her classmates' probable reaction to their teacher telling them that they must not have sexual intercourse:

"I think everyone would just back off from her and not listen to what she had to say because that's not what people are gonna do...She can say that all she wants, right, but the class is gonna back down and say 'No one's gonna do that if they don't want to.' It's, you know, they're gonna back off and say whatever 'Don't tell me what to do, you stupid boss!'..."

And Ethan commented:

"I don't really know how they [his classmates] would've reacted because then it shows that he's [the teacher] pretty closed-minded, sort of, doesn't think of...of..., like, doesn't think of the other side sort of thing and why would you listen to someone who like that, like, who doesn't have an open mind, who doesn't even think about it? Why is he forcing it on us? Why doesn't he just tell us the information and let us decide for ourselves?"

Others expressed their anger and frustration at the prospect of being told that they must remain abstinent. For example, Colin described what he would say to a teacher

conveying this message to him:

"I can understand your point of view, but you're not my dad, you know, you can't tell me not to have sex and you can't do that to anybody. Everybody has a mind of their own, you know, let them deal with the consequences. You've taught us the consequences. If we don't listen to what you've taught us and just go and have sex without a condom, or whatever you might've taught us. then we live with the consequences. Don't take, don't take, don't take our responsibilities away from us. I mean...'"

It was also suggested that the promotion of abstinence as the only acceptable option to teens may, in fact, cause teens to "rebel" and to become sexually active. This suggestion was based on the belief that, if teens are told not to do something, they are just going to want to do it more. As Rebecca indicated:

"Well, it's like that thing where you, when you're parents tell you not to do something and you go, you do it just because, like, 'cause they said you couldn't..."

1e. How do students perceive the relevance of the unit on human sexuality to their lives and concerns?

All but two students reported that the unit was, indeed, relevant in some way to their lives and concerns. They had learned a lot of information that could be applied to their lives, and the main questions they had about sexuality had been answered. The unit also addressed topics that were relevant to their lives at the time, such as "contraception", "STDs", "teen pregnancy" and "sexuality-related decision-making".

It appears, however, that the unit was more relevant for some students than others. For example, Rich felt that it was especially relevant for the students in his physical education class, who often go on dates, go to parties and drink alcohol. In his view, the students in his class are often placed in situations involving sexual activity or

the opportunity to engage in sexual activity, and would, therefore, be able to use the information learned in the unit. On the other hand, Michelle found the unit to be of limited relevance to her life because she is not sexually active and does not plan to be for a long while. Although the unit provided her with useful information and answered many questions she had about sexuality, this knowledge is of little use to her at this time in her life:

"I just don't really care about sex right now, like, it's just not my major thing right now...I know what I need to know right now. If I, later on in life when I'm thinking about it and the little things, then, you know, maybe I'll think about it and go 'Why didn't I take a course or something to learn about these things that I'm thinking about now?', but right now it's not really, like, a major concern of mine."

When speaking of the relevance of the unit on human sexuality, almost half of the students made reference to its timing. They argued that sexuality education should start in elementary school in order to provide students with necessary information before they are faced with sexuality-related decisions or become sexually active. For example, Ethan commented:

"...I think it's something that needs to be learned, needs to be taught and the kids need to learn it before they get too old because then it wouldn't be important, it'd be, like, past the facts, like..."

And Colin expressed:

"...I was just glad I knew about the stuff before, you know, before I actually went out and done it, I mean, I haven't yet, and I don't really plan on it for a while, um, but, I've had friends who've done it and they've said 'Oh yah, it's the best thing!' and stuff and they've done some stupid things like not using condoms...but I think if they were actually upstairs with me and watched the unit, they'd probably think totally different...like, 'Oh, I'm gonna use a condom all the time now...'"

Some students provided suggestions to increase the relevance of the unit to their

lives and concerns. In particular, Shanna argued that students should be involved in the planning of such programs. She reasoned that by obtaining teens' points of view, adults would be more aware of what teens want to be taught and could alter curricula accordingly. As a result, more relevant programs could be developed.

Research Question 2 :

How do students perceive the influence or outcome of the unit on human sexuality?

2a. How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexuality-related knowledge?

Almost all students reported learning a great deal in the unit on human sexuality. This knowledge included both a review of previously learned material and new information on a wide range of topics such as "contraception", "the consequences of teen pregnancy", "the sexuality-related decision-making process", "anatomy", "date rape" and "laws around sexuality". Lisa noted proudly that she could now answer the sexuality-related questions of her friend's younger sister. Only one student, Jade, claimed that she did not learn a lot in the unit. She asserted that the information presented was "pretty common sense", and, for this reason, she did not learn any "breakthroughs".

About half of the students believed that the knowledge they gained as a result of the unit would remain with them over the long term. They reasoned that they would remember the information they learned because of its important and serious nature and because it included "life-saving information". When asked why he would remember the information he learned in the unit, Matthew replied:

"Because I know myself that it's important and it wasn't just useless information, so I think I'll, you know what I mean. Like, some information you learn once and then you're done with it, like, some of the stuff you learn in math or science, you know, some of the stuff you just

learn it once, take a test on it, and then you...you don't really need to remember it for the rest of your life, but I think it's more, like, a real life, um, real world type stuff that you need to know when you're out of school and when you're in school..."

2b. How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexuality-related attitudes?

Two themes were apparent in students' perceptions of the influence of the unit on their sexuality-related attitudes: reinforcement and awareness. A considerable number of students found that the unit did not necessarily change their sexuality-related attitudes, rather, it reinforced the attitudes and beliefs they had held for several years. They were already aware, for example, of the importance of using contraception and that one should love a person before engaging in sexual intercourse. Some commented that they felt the same way about delaying sexual activity as they did before receiving the unit, but that they now felt stronger about certain issues. Ethan demonstrated the reinforcement of his sexuality-related attitudes as a result of the unit, perhaps, most clearly when he commented:

"...I don't know if it changed my attitude towards sex or like I'm gonna say 'Oh, no, I'm not gonna have sex 'till I'm, like, 20 or 'till I'm married'. Like, I...it didn't really do that but it just made me realize more the decisions I have to make before I do something like that. Just that, there's a lot more thinking behind it than just yes or no, like, there's a lot more to think about...I 'm not saying, like, I went in there knowing everything I needed to know, I'm just saying that um...I,I,I...my views didn't change, really, I just, it kind of added to what I thought already...and it kinda proved what I thought already, like, sort of thing."

A little more than half of the students, six male and two female, felt that the unit made them more aware of the consequences of their sexual behaviour. Several referred to their increased awareness of the importance of protecting oneself from STDs, and

claimed that, as a result of the unit, they now felt more strongly that they must use contraception consistently. As Riley remarked:

"...after the course, like, I realized that you have to be really, really careful, 'cause if anything goes wrong, then you're screwed..."

These students also noted that they had become more aware of the consequences of teenage pregnancy, realizing how much their lives would change if they were faced with this situation. They felt that they were too young to deal with a teenage pregnancy, and, for this reason, would think before they "jump into a decision and make the wrong one".

When asked if and how the unit influenced her sexuality-related attitudes, Elaine responded that it made her think "Oh yah, I guess it could happen to me!". Similarly,

Colin recalled:

"...when I went through that course, that little section in the P.E. unit, I though, you know, well, AIDS is AIDS and it happens and stuff like that, but when I was up there for the past two weeks watching the videos, taking down the notes, I actually realized how serious it was and somehow they have a way of giving you the message in a kind of creepy way, you know, it's, like, you walk out, like...'woah!...I'm not having sex!'"

2c. How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexuality-related behaviour or behavioral intentions?

A substantial number of students reported that the unit did, indeed, have an influence on their sexual behaviour or behavioural intentions. Several of these students claimed that, as a result of the unit, they would be more likely to use contraception. For example, when asked if the unit had affected her sexual behaviour, Lisa replied:

"Oh yah, I'll always use it [contraception] unless I was, like, planning to have a baby...I don't think I would have used it, well I think I would've, but I don't think I would've, uh, been so powerful on it if we didn't learn about it."

They also indicated that, keeping in mind that they may not be aware of their partner's sexual history, they will now be more likely to use a condom every time they engage in intercourse and will "use protection and be safe about it".

The unit enabled others to "think before acting" and, therefore, to make wiser sexuality-related decisions. These students noted that, as a result of the unit, they will make decisions based on knowledge rather than on how they are feeling on a particular night. They were aware that their actions in one night could "screw up" their entire life, and that there are many diseases that can dramatically threaten their health.

Two students, Rebecca and Michelle, felt that the unit has caused them to delay sexual intercourse. Rebecca reasoned that she now knows that she is not ready to deal with the problems that come with being sexually active. She was quite certain that she would remain abstinent until she is "totally ready" to engage in sexual intercourse. Similarly, Michelle revealed that she will be more cautious when making sexuality-related decisions:

"...when I'm older and deciding I'm gonna start having sex, I'm gonna be able to think about, you know, the protection I have to use, the things, all the STDs, all those things. Even then it might change, like, you know, if I think I'm ready to do it, I might think back and go, 'Uh, maybe I'm not.' and, you know, that's a good thing. There's nothing wrong with that, you know, it's, like, OK if I'm able to stay off it as long as I want, then that's a good thing, I think myself."

Others reported varied effects of the unit on their sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions. For example, they recalled having discussed with friends the consequences of sexual activity, and claimed they will now be less likely to have numerous sexual partners. Lisa felt that she will be more prepared to handle sexual situations. She spoke

of the respect she and her classmates now have for one another, and would be very angry if she found that one of her peers had engaged in unprotected intercourse.

Only a few students reported that the unit on human sexuality had no influence on their sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions. For example, Shanna indicated that, because she was not sexually active, her sexual behaviour did not change as a result of the unit. Jake did not foresee his sexual behaviour or behavioural intentions changing because he has "always made good decisions".

#### Additional Perceptions Expressed By Students

Although they were not addressed by the research questions investigated in this study, students expressed several additional perceptions of both their experience in the unit on human sexuality and of sexuality education in general. These additional perceptions concern the perceived importance of sexuality education, the class setting (coeducational or same-sex) in which students should receive sexuality education, the class in which students should receive sexuality education, and the class environment in which the unit on human sexuality took place.

#### Perceived Importance of Sexuality Education

Nearly all students expressed their perceptions of the importance of sexuality education. They indicated how early students should receive sexuality education, how often they should receive it, and whether sexuality education should be mandatory for students. Students also spoke of their classmates' attitudes toward sexuality education.

All students viewed learning about sexuality as an important component of their education. They felt that sexuality education teaches students a lot of valuable, helpful

information and that their teacher addressed a wide range of "extremely important" topics. Rich remarked that all students should receive sexuality education because it provides them with "pre-awareness and everything for the future". Colin spoke of the importance of sexuality education in relation to the training of sexuality education teachers:

"Yah, I mean, if you don't know about these things, not only, you know, are you in trouble, but if you try to teach somebody this kind of stuff that you don't know, then the kids are in just as much trouble as you are...Yah, the training would be very important 'cause I don't want any false statistics, you know, this is our life we're talking about here."

And, with a degree of indifference, Rebecca commented:

"Yah, but it's just, like, a unit, you know, just something you do in gym, kinda like a first date, you know, it's not something you look forward to, but it's not something you, like, 'Oh, no! Not family life again!', you know?"

A few students argued that sexuality education is important because many teens do not talk to their parents about sexuality. For example, Shanna argued that, if students are not taught at home, school is a "perfect place" to learn about sexuality. Similarly, Michelle suggested that students who do not feel comfortable talking to their parents about sexuality should come to Somerset for the unit on human sexuality. Rebecca felt lucky because her parents bought her a book when she was younger describing the changes occurring in her body during puberty, and was grateful that she could learn about sexuality without having to ask questions.

Several students suggested that sexuality education should begin in elementary school, in sixth or seventh grade. They argued that it must be provided to students before they become sexually active, but after they are old enough to understand its

significance and seriousness. Most also argued that sexuality education should be offered to students at least once a year. As Jade noted: "...so you don't feel like an idiot if you're going to the doctor...not knowing what they're talking about."

The majority of students felt that school-based sexuality education should be mandatory. In their view, although some students would rather not learn it, human sexuality is a subject about which everyone needs to learn in order to survive. Riley argued that the unit on human sexuality should be mandatory because it provides students with valuable information:

"... 'cause, um, it's a big part of our lives and, um, uh...I think it's a lot more valuable than, like, triangles we learn in math or something, like, some stupid stuff like that, like, it's a lot more valuable 'n that 'cause, like, it's, it's your whole life, and..."

Similarly, Shanna reflected:

"Yah, I guess if more people are sexually active at this age, they should know about things...teachers can teach you. Um, you should, I think you should still understand everything about it, just...to give you the knowledge."

Although students reported valuing it a great deal themselves, they perceived their classmates' attitudes toward sexuality education to be considerably more varied. Some felt that their classmates took the unit on human sexuality seriously, recognizing that it helps them prepare for the future. They suggested that their classmates generally looked forward to sexuality education, welcoming a break from changing into gym strip. Jade noted that, although they did not exclaim, 'Yes! We get to learn more stuff!', most of her classmates realized that they would learn some important information in the unit:

Many others reported, however, that their classmates viewed the unit as

unnecessary because they were already sufficiently knowledgeable about sexuality. As Jessica commented:

"Well, I think there's a couple of them that take it as a big joke, like, 'Oh, I know everything.'. Really, they don't know anything at all..."

The "cocky attitude" of some students was also recalled. It was assumed that these students were angry that the unit on human sexuality was replacing valuable physical education class time and, if given a choice, would opt not to participate. Colin remembered some of his classmates complaining, "Oh, this is just a dumb sex education unit again. I did this last year." In his view, students who do not value sexuality education are immature and will ultimately suffer from their lack of knowledge.

#### Coeducational vs. Same-sex Class Setting

Students revealed considerably varied perceptions of whether the unit on human sexuality should be taught in a coeducational or same-sex class setting. Only one student, Riley, felt that the unit on human sexuality should, by all means, be taught in a coeducational class setting. He suggested that females would introduce different points of view into the class, creating more interesting, heated group discussions. In his view, a coeducational class setting would also be beneficial in that female sexuality would be discussed in more detail. Riley did not foresee his classmates becoming more embarrassed or taking the unit less seriously with the addition of females into the class.

A few female students also desired the unit on human sexuality to be taught in a coeducational class setting but, at the same time, were concerned that this class composition may disrupt the class environment. In their view, a coeducational sexuality education class would enable females to learn more about male sexuality. It would also

allow them to become more aware of the questions males have about their sexuality and of how males are taught about sexuality. As Chantel commented:

"I think that's silly to have the guys and girls separate because they should be together if she's talking about both of them. I don't see why they should be separated.. We're in grade 10, we're, we're old enough to do it, we get our licenses at 16 and stuff, why can't we be together talking about sex? I find it stupid how they can't do it."

At the same time, however, these students noted that the success of a coeducational sexuality education class would depend on the maturity level of their male peers. That is, they were concerned that males might get embarrassed learning about sexuality in the presence of females. As Shanna indicated:

"I'm just thinking guys, just because they're so immature, um, no, I think, I think it should be mixed. I'd say go mixed but..."

It was also suggested that students might become more shy and reserved in a coeducational class setting.

Some students expressed that, while there are many advantages of coeducational sexuality education classes, they preferred a same-sex class setting. They acknowledged that a coeducational class setting would enable both the male and the female points of view to be represented in group discussions, but were concerned about the possible detrimental effect of a coeducational class on the class environment. In their view, a coeducational sexuality education class may very well result in a large group of embarrassed, silly people cracking jokes and making fun of the subject matter.

A considerable number of students reported that they would, under no circumstances, desire a coeducational sexuality education class, and identified several reasons for feeling this way. They argued that students would feel uncomfortable in the

presence of the opposite sex and, therefore, would be less likely to voice their opinions or to ask questions. As Michelle indicated:

"...a lot of girls would back off, like, even me...I wouldn't be able to, you know, raise my hand and go 'What would I do if I'm pregnant?' kinda thing like that...I also feel like girls are more easier to talk around than, like, guys. Like, you know, you see a group of guys or whatever an all they talk about is, like, you know, like stup...like football or something, like not stupid things but, you know, girls can sit around and say, 'Yah, I like this boy.' or whatever...it would make everybody too uncomfortable I think."

They also felt that their classmates might become shy or make too many jokes in a coeducational class. Matthew described the environment of a coeducational sexuality education class as follows:

"People making fun of everyone and...no one could say anything, because you'd think 'Oh, what if, what if I say something. What is that girl gonna think of me?' and just, you know."

#### Class in Which Unit on Human Sexuality Should be Conducted

Most students spoke of their perceptions regarding the class in which the unit on human sexuality should be conducted, and these perceptions were quite varied. A few of these students argued that the unit should remain a component of physical education, citing their discomfort in a coeducational sexuality education class as a main reason behind their opinion. Elaine felt that students should receive the unit in physical education because it seems a natural topic to address in this class. She also felt that addressing the unit in a different class would not help to change male students' negative attitudes toward sexuality education:

"I think a lot of guys would just be, like...there's a lot of things they'd rather do than sit and listen about family life, like, I'm sure if they weren't in gym...if they were in any other class I'm sure they'd always have

something better to do or they could think of something better to do than to sit, you know what I mean, like..."

Matthew and Riley suggested that the unit on human sexuality should be conducted in an academic class rather than in physical education, reasoning that physical education should be reserved for physical activity rather than academic topics. If students received sexuality education in social studies, for example, they would be more motivated to learn and would pay more attention in class. Rich suggested that the unit on human sexuality and the elective family life class should be combined:

"Um, 'cause if you, if they put it all together rather than have it apart, the students would be able to, like the brain or whatever, would be able to file it all and, like, keep it together instead of having it separate and it's...learn one thing about this and then in another...in gym or whatever, learn about the same thing, but get, have totally different ideas and try to throw it together."

#### Class Environment

All students felt comfortable throughout the unit on human sexuality, describing the class environment as relaxed and inviting of people to express their feelings or views. Some attributed this high level of comfort to being in the class with their friends. As Michelle recalled:

"I was comfortable, 'cause, I don't know, my friends were in the class...I have two really good friends in my class, so I just raise my hand or whatever, and they would...they're like the background of me, you know, like, they can stand up for me if I say somethin' stupid..."

Others reported feeling comfortable in the unit because they were in class with members of their own gender. They did not feel embarrassed because, being of the same gender, everyone was thinking in a similar manner.

All students also recalled their classmates, "even really quiet people", asking

questions. For the most part, these questions were asked without reservation or embarrassment and demonstrated students' genuine desire to learn. However, some students, more males than females, noted that some questions were not serious, reflecting the immaturity of some of their classmates. This immaturity was also apparent in these classmates' behavioral conduct and attitude toward the unit on human sexuality in general. As Ethan recalled:

"There's always a few kids in the class that are always you know, the jokers and...always making funny cracks, but, um, I think, it's funny for a while, but then after a while people realize that it's just because they're a little bit less mature than most people...some people...at first it's funny and then it's, like, 'Well, grow up!', 'cause we're really serious that we're learning about and they're not taking it very serious..."

As well, several male students were reported to have joked around in class toward the end of the unit, when they began to lose interest and the ability to pay attention. The assumption was made that, because they did not take the unit seriously, some teens would rather learn about human sexuality outside of school. In contrast, few female students spoke of the joking and lack of seriousness of their classmates as a disruption to the class environment. Most of their classmates took the unit on human sexuality quite seriously, as indicated by their behaviour in class. Elaine described the environment of her class by comparing it to the behaviour of her male peers in class:

"...like, whenever we, like, they [the males] usually do it first, then we'll go up to the loft and start and all the contraceptive things will all be, like, broken...like, all the guys broke them and everything and..."

#### Themes Emerging From Interviews

Analysis of the data revealed two themes emerging from the interviews: relevance and gender. Examples from students' responses will be used to illustrate these themes.

### Relevance

Although the relevance of the unit on human sexuality to students' lives and concerns was investigated as a specific research question, relevance as a theme is evident throughout students' responses to several other research questions. For example, several students recalled the unit being repetitive. In their view, much of class time was spent presenting topics that they had learned before. For this reason, little class time was left to discuss topics relevant to their lives, such as "STDs", and to address topics in more detail. As well, several relevant topics, such as "the emotional aspects of sexuality" were not addressed at all.

The relevance of the unit on human sexuality also emerged as a theme in students' perceptions that the videos shown in class were extremely out of date. Students felt that these videos were of limited relevance to their lives because teens today are faced with different or more important issues than were teens at the time the videos were made. The videos shown in the unit were also difficult for students to relate to because social relationships among teens have changed over the years.

Students expressed considerably varied perceptions of whether their teacher was aware of what teens want and need to know about sexuality. Some students felt that their teacher was aware of what they wanted to learn, recalling that he or she emphasized topics of interest and relevance to teens. Other students argued, however, that, because he or she simply followed the curriculum guide without considering their needs and interests, their teacher was not aware of what students wanted and needed to learn. For this reason, these students found some of the topics addressed in the unit to be of limited

relevance to their lives.

As well, the unit on human sexuality was more relevant for some students than others. Rich recalled the unit being especially relevant for the students in his physical education class, who often go to parties, go on dates and drink alcohol. On the other hand, Michelle found the unit to be of limited relevance to her life because she is not sexually active and does not plan to be for a while.

Several students suggested that sexuality education begin in elementary school, linking the timing of sexuality education to its relevance. In order for it to be relevant to their lives and concerns, they argued that sexuality education be provided before students become sexually active, but after they are old enough to understand its significance and seriousness.

#### Gender

Gender as a theme in students' perceptions of their experience in sexuality education is evident in several ways. For example, many wished the unit included information about the sexuality of the opposite gender. Although female students learned about male anatomy, over half wanted to learn more about male sexuality in general. They would have found it helpful to learn, for example, about the way in which males talk and think about sexuality. Similarly, some male students wished they had learned about female sexuality, since females "experience different feelings and phases" in their sexuality than do males. Gender as a theme is also illustrated in the finding that, while female students reported frequent use of worksheets and small-group exercises in class, male students did not. Rather, male students recalled their teacher presenting most

information in the form of lectures using the overhead projector.

As well, the theme of gender is evident in the majority of students' reports that they would not feel comfortable receiving sexuality education from a teacher of the opposite sex. Several male students argued that their class would have felt embarrassed to ask a female teacher questions, and that they would not have taken the unit seriously. A number of female students expressed that it would have been difficult to ask a male teacher sexuality-related questions and that he would not be able to relate to or understand female concerns about their sexuality.

Students' perceptions of whether or not the unit should be conducted in a coeducational or same-sex class setting also illustrate gender as a theme emerging from the interviews. Several suggested that a coeducational sexuality education class would allow the points of view of both males and females to be represented in class discussions and activities. In contrast, an equal number expressed their disapproval of this suggestion. They claimed that they would not feel comfortable in a coeducational sexuality education class, and that having both males and females in one class might cause more joking and immature behaviour.

Gender as a theme is also apparent in students' perceptions of the class environment. Some male students asked "not so serious" questions in class. They also joked and laughed throughout the unit on human sexuality, creating a disruption to the class environment. Female students, on the other hand, took the unit quite seriously. For the most part, they asked questions reflecting a genuine interest in learning, and the disruptive behaviour of students in class did not appear to be a concern.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

In this chapter, the major findings regarding five components of the unit on human sexuality will be discussed: the content, the teaching methods used, the teacher, the message conveyed to students about sexuality, and the influence on students' sexuality-related attitudes. Significant findings concerning the themes of relevance and gender will also be addressed.

In the introduction, two general approaches to sexuality education, comprehensive and problem-focused, were identified. Students' perceptions of the unit on human sexuality indicated that it was problem-focused. The topics of "contraception", "teen pregnancy" and "STDs" were emphasized, and students referred mainly to problem-focused influences of the unit, such as making them more aware of the consequences of sexual activity and teaching them how to deal with a teen pregnancy. These perceptions contradict the stated goals and themes of the Westport Family Life Program curriculum document, which reflect the comprehensive approach. This discrepancy between the written curriculum document (second order world of curriculum) and what students experienced in the classroom (first order world of curriculum) is well-documented in educational literature (e.g., Aoki, 1988; Fullan, 1982; Thomas, 1988, 1992). As noted by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (1975, as cited in Woodcock et al., 1992):

"In fact the curriculum of the school is very much the creation of its staff--the teachers in the classroom--and in many ways it is best seen as the accumulation of individual classroom work. If one wanted to discover with accuracy what the curriculum was in any one school one would have

to observe all the teachers of that school in their own classrooms." (p. 518)

It is not possible to determine from the findings of this study why this discrepancy continues to exist, but a number of factors may be important. The limited time allotted to sexuality education may be significant, as students in this study, as well as in previous studies (e.g., Pond-Brevik, 1978; Thomas & Buckley, 1989; Woodcock et al., 1992; Yarber, 1979), recalled feeling rushed throughout the unit on human sexuality. Forrest and Silvermann (1989) report that nearly all of the teachers they surveyed believed that school-based sexuality education should be comprehensive, and should address a wide range of topics. In practice, however, these teachers were given little time for sexuality education (an average of 6.5 hours per year) and, as a result, they could not provide a comprehensive experience.

As well, teachers' beliefs and perceptions regarding sexuality may be an influence. The teachers in this study may have emphasized problem-focused topics because they perceived these topics to be of particular importance or relevance to students. Indeed, Chilman (1990) and Maddock (1989) report that there exists a widespread and mistaken assumption that adolescence is inevitably fraught with problems and that their sexuality is dangerous and disturbing. Similarly, McCreary Juhasz et al. (1986) refer to a commonly held perception of adolescents as irresponsible and sexually very active. If the teachers in this study make this assumption or hold this perception, it may not be surprising that the unit on human sexuality was problem-focused.

It is also possible that the teachers may have felt more comfortable adopting a problem-focused rather than a comprehensive, "sexual health" approach because problem-

focused information was perceived to be more technical and less value-laden. That is, the teachers may have felt more comfortable discussing the prevention of STDs or the consequences of teen pregnancy than discussing the development and maintenance of healthy sexual relationships. As well, the topics emphasized by sexuality education teachers may reflect, not their own beliefs and perceptions, but formal or informal school or district policies or community issues and concerns about adolescent sexuality.

Not surprisingly, students expressed different perceptions of the teaching methods used in class. This may reflect the important educational principle that students have different learning styles, that is, they each have preferred ways for processing and organizing information and for responding to environmental stimuli for achievement in various subjects (Winder & Grigg, 1992). Although a preference for a specific teaching method is not necessarily an indicator of one's learning style, the findings of this study suggest the importance of using a variety of teaching methods. As Sims and Sims (1995) argue:

"It is emphatically necessary that instructors and trainers use a variety of teaching and training techniques. The traditional lecture and independent project fit the learning style of only some learners. It may be advisable for instructors to give a variety of work assignments and to have several bases for assigning grades." (p. 207)

Similarly, Schunk (1996) posits that if teachers stress only one type of learning style, students who process information differently may doubt their ability to understand material, which will undermine their self-efficacy and motivation for learning. This may be critical in sexuality education, where students are presumably learning to make very important life decisions.

Students painted a very positive picture of their teacher, referring specifically to his or her high confidence and comfort level. This contradicts the findings of other studies that suggest that sexuality education teachers are often uncomfortable and embarrassed teaching this subject (Calderwood, 1965; Maslach & Kerr, 1983; Woodcock et al., 1992). Students involved in these previous studies reported teachers to have had difficulties maintaining control of students in class and to have felt uncomfortable discussing certain sexuality-related issues.

It is unclear why the findings of this study differ from those of previous research. However, the emphasis placed by students in this study on the confidence and comfort characteristics of their sexuality education teacher is significant in that research indicates that these characteristics are related to teacher effectiveness. According to Engel et al. (1993), teacher interest in and comfortable attitudes about sexuality have been found to be the most significant variable in sex education program implementation. As well, certain affective, personal attributes of sexuality education teachers, such as "taking an open approach to sexuality", "the ability to speak freely and honestly about all aspects of sexuality", "comfort in sexual communication" and "an ability to listen, understand questions and assess needs" have found to be positively associated with effective presentation and acceptance of information (Hyde, 1990; Maslach & Kerr, 1983).

Despite the problem focus of the unit, students reported that the message conveyed to them about sexuality was neither positive nor negative. Although abstinence was presented by their teachers as the preferable alternative to being sexually active, their teachers also recognised that not all teens choose to be abstinent, and need to be taught

responsible sexual behaviour. Students in this study were adamant that the presentation of abstinence as the only acceptable option to teens would be unrealistic and inappropriate. It was particularly interesting to hear these comments, as this was not the message conveyed to students by their teachers. However, students indicated clearly that they would not listen to or respect a teacher who demanded that they remain abstinent, and they suggested that this prescriptive message might cause teens to "rebel" and become sexually active. Given the concerns of some critics that sexuality education may encourage teens to become sexually active, it is somewhat ironic to hear these students suggest that telling teens not to engage in intercourse may, in fact, encourage them to do so (e.g., Calderwood, 1965; Christopher & Roosa; Goodson & Edmundson, 1994; Kirby, 1993). Responses of students in this study appear to support findings of some studies that abstinence-only sexuality education is limited in effectiveness. As Sol Gordon (1986) argues, "The simple message--No, Don't, Stop--doesn't work. The double message--No, but...--is more effective." (p. 24). Similarly, Kirby (1993) suggests:

"Because programs can effectively delay the onset of intercourse and increase the use of contraception, and also because no existing program prevents most youths from having intercourse during their high school years, programs should both encourage youth to delay or refrain from intercourse and also encourage them to use contraceptives." (p. 24)

It is interesting to note that, in comparison to questions about the components of the unit on human sexuality, students' responses to questions about the influence of this unit were brief. This is not surprising, since it may be difficult to isolate the influence of a single educational unit, especially one that is only about ten hours in length. Because the students had received the unit on human sexuality only a few months before the

interviews were conducted, they may also have found it difficult to identify changes in their sexuality-related knowledge, attitudes or sexual behaviour within this short time period. The pilot interviews had indicated that questions about the influence of the unit were more difficult to respond to than other questions. Despite modifications made to the interview guide before interviewing at Westport began, students may still have found it difficult to answer these questions and, thus, were able to provide only brief responses. Also, because these questions were typically addressed toward the end of each interview, students' responses may have been limited by the amount of time remaining.

From the students' comments, it appears that the unit on human sexuality was of limited relevance to the lives and concerns of those students who were not yet sexually active. This finding supports Woodcock et al.'s (1992) contention that sexuality education may be provided too early for some students. They suggest that information about contraception, for example, may not be processed by students who are not yet sexually active because it is not thought to be relevant and they have not given any thought to their future use of contraception. This suggestion contradicts the underlying assumption in family life education that if young people are prepared specifically for their future family roles (anticipatory socialization), their adult family life experiences in these roles will be more successful (Hennon & Arcus, 1993). DeLissovoy (1978) has made this point with regard to parent education. While he agrees that the goal of better prepared parents is a sound one, he questions whether adolescents are an appropriate target group for parent education. In his view, adolescents are not ready to understand and to prepare for the specific developmental tasks of parenthood because it is not yet

relevant to their lives. He believes instead that the best parent education for adolescents would be pre-parent education that focuses on the precursors of successful parenting, such as self-understanding and the development of interpersonal relationships and skills. Relative to sexuality education, the findings of this study indicate that students who do not view being sexually active as relevant to their lives may not be ready to understand and appreciate the importance of using contraception. For these students, it may be more beneficial to help them develop the skills and personal characteristics, such as self-esteem, that are needed to make intelligent decisions about contraception in the future. Such an approach would be more consistent with comprehensive than with problem-focused sexuality education.

Relevance as a theme was also apparent in the perceptions of some students that, although their teacher was comfortable and confident, he or she was not aware of what they (the students) want and need to know about sexuality. In this case, the sexuality education teacher may have limited the relevance of the unit to some students' lives and concerns. Indeed, Gordon (1986) argues that "useful sexuality education should tell children what they want and need to know...our failure to tell children what they want and need to know is one reason we have the highest rates of out-of-wedlock teen pregnancy and abortion of any highly developed country in the world" (p. 22). Whatley (1992) suggests that educators might make themselves more aware of current levels of adolescent sexual knowledge and concerns and draw on this awareness to plan classroom content and approaches. For example, insight into young peoples' interest and concerns around sexuality might be gained by paying more attention to what adolescents watch and

listen to in popular films and music videos. This insight may then be used to help design class activities and discussions.

The emergence of gender as a theme throughout interviews indicates that male and female students had a different kind of experience in sexuality education. This difference was apparent in the different teaching methods used by each of their teachers as well as in student behaviour in class. It is possible that the sexuality education teachers simply chose the teaching methods that they felt most comfortable using, without considering the gender of their students as a factor in their decision. On the other hand, the sexuality education teachers may have chosen teaching methods that, in their view, would be most conducive to learning or most appropriate for the students in their classes. That is, Jackie may have included worksheets and small group exercises in class, believing that these teaching methods would contribute to the learning experience of her female students. Mike may have used lectures to relay information to his students because, in his view, they were most appropriate for males. Indeed, Thomas (1992) suggests that, because boys are socialized differently than girls, their propensity to engage in discussions which focus on feelings, for example, is somewhat limited. Similarly, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) argue that "women's talk" is different in both style and content to that of "men's talk", and that women, unlike men, tend to focus on "the everyday, the practical and the interpersonal" (p. 17). Thus, the gender of the students may have been a relevant factor, whether conscious or unconscious, in the selection of teaching methods.

The teacher's gender may also have been important in that the teacher may have

chosen teaching methods based on his or her view of knowledge. According to Belenky et al. (1986), women perceive their relationship to knowledge differently than do men. They claim that women, unlike men, enhance factual knowledge by using intuition, personal meanings and self-understanding, and that women view knowledge to be connected with and not separate from experience.

Students expressed mixed views regarding whether sexuality education should be taught in a coeducational class setting. On one hand, students recognised that this class composition would enable them to learn more about the sexuality of the opposite gender. At the same time, however, they (both males and females) were concerned that the "know it all" attitudes of male students and their inappropriate laughing, joking and asking "not so serious" questions would disrupt the class environment. In their view, a coeducational sexuality education class may very well result in a large group of embarrassed, silly people cracking jokes and making fun of the subject matter. Interestingly, the classroom behaviour of female students was not a matter of concern to either males or females.

These student perceptions reflect the lack of consensus in the literature concerning the most appropriate or most effective class composition in which sexuality education should be taught, as researchers have also pointed to the advantages and disadvantages of same-sex and coeducational classes. For example, Went (1985) refers to the benefits of coeducational sexuality education:

"by enabling and encouraging people to challenge the opinions of others with regard to sex and contraception, they may be able to do so more effectively when in more realistic sexual situations. This will not be achieved, however, through the passive techniques of watching videos and

listening to lectures. Improved self-efficacy in the management of sexual activities can be gained through involvement in a participatory [mixed sex] learning opportunities, in addition to the necessary factual information." (p. 36)

Similarly, Woodcock et al. (1992) stress the importance of role-playing and discussing negotiation skills in a coeducational setting at some point. They suggest that self-confidence and self-efficacy learned in a same-sex class may be impaired when newly-empowered teens encounter a "real life" situation such as a sexual partner insisting on sex without adequate contraception.

The disadvantages of a coeducational class setting, also identified by Went (1985), help to explain why males and females may behave differently in sexuality education. He refers specifically to maturity differences between male and female students and states that, because of great differences in the age of puberty between boys and girls, a class may consist of post-pubertal girls and pre-pubertal boys. The girls, being "more mature in every way", may benefit more from learning about sexuality in a same-sex class setting. Went also argues that, if male and female teens are to be helped to talk about their feelings without the need to "show off" or impress each other, this is much more likely to happen in a same-sex class than in a coeducational class. Similarly, some early proponents of women studies have argued that all-female sexuality education classes would provide the climate for fuller exploration of women's experiences. They report that the typical class environment seems to favour masculine patterns of assertive speech, impersonal and abstract styles, and competitive interchanges that inhibit women's full participation (Allen, 1988).

To some extent, the preceding discussion reflects current debates about

coeducation in general. Research suggests that this class composition may advantage males, but disadvantage females (e.g., Eyre, 1992; Shakeshaft, 1986; Tetreault, 1986), raising questions about the relative merits of coeducation and same-sex classes. Given the findings of this study, it may be that a combination of both same-sex and coeducational sexuality education classes is beneficial for students.

## CHAPTER 6

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore, through semi-structured interviews, students' perceptions of their experience in sexuality education. More specifically, this study attempted to examine, from the student's perspective, components of sexuality education such as the content, the teacher, the teaching methods used, the message conveyed to students about sexuality and the relevance to students' lives and concerns. Students' perceptions of the influence of the unit on their sexuality-related knowledge, sexuality-related attitudes and sexuality-related behaviour or behavioural intentions were also sought. Based on this purpose, two research questions were investigated: 1) How do students perceive their experience in sexuality education? and 2) How do students perceive the outcome or influence of their experience in sexuality education?

Students' comments revealed a discrepancy between the curriculum document, which reflected a comprehensive approach, and the experience of students in the classroom, which was problem-focused. Although students differed in their feelings about the teaching methods used in the unit on human sexuality, almost all viewed their sexuality education teacher in a very positive manner, referring specifically to his or her high confidence and comfort levels. According to students, the message conveyed to them about sexuality was neither positive nor negative. Although abstinence was presented by the teachers as the preferable alternative to being sexually active, the teachers also recognised that not all teens choose to be abstinent, and, thus, needed to be taught responsible sexual behaviour.

The unit on human sexuality appeared to have limited relevance to the lives and concerns of students who were not yet sexually active. Relevance as a theme was also apparent in the perceptions of some students that the teacher was not aware of what they want and need to know about sexuality. The emergence of gender as a theme throughout interviews indicates that male and female students had a different kind of experience in sexuality education. This difference was apparent not only in the teaching methods used by their teachers, but also in their behaviour in class.

This study contributes to the literature on sexuality education in several ways. First, it has investigated student perceptions of their experience in sexuality education, an area that has received little research attention. Understanding these perceptions is important because they may help us to identify program characteristics that help students to learn, why these characteristics are helpful, and for whom they are most helpful. Only then can the experiences of future participants be improved (Thomas et al., 1993).

Second, this is one of the few studies of sexuality education in British Columbia and, indeed, in Canada. Because education is a provincial matter in Canada, each provincial curriculum differs. Thus, if we are to develop a greater understanding of sexuality education, specific studies will need to be conducted in each province. This study is a contribution to the development of that body of research.

Finally, the findings of this study suggest some areas for future research in sexuality education. As noted in Chapter 3, the findings of interview studies such as this one are not intended to be generalizable. Rather, they are intended to provide insights which can then be used to assist in the interpretation of previous research or to inform

future research. Although some findings of this study appear to be consistent with the findings of previous studies which examined students' experiences in sexuality education, other findings of this study are contradictory or provide new insights. For example, the finding that students in this study found their teachers to have high levels of comfort and confidence in teaching sexuality education contradicts previous studies which suggest that these teachers are often uncomfortable and embarrassed teaching this subject. Given the importance and pivotal role of the teacher in the effectiveness of education (Czaplewski & Jorgenson, 1993; Engel et al., 1993), further investigation of the comfort and confidence of teachers and of student perceptions of these is warranted.

Two themes emerging from the interviews-- relevance and gender-- also indicate areas in need of future research. Findings of this study indicate that relevance is a major issue for students, particularly for those who are not yet sexually active. Relevance is also an issue in student perceptions that important topics were not addressed in the unit on human sexuality. Further investigation of the relevance of sexuality education for a diverse student population is needed in order to provide programs that meet their needs. More also needs to be known about the different experiences of male and female students in sexuality education and how the gender of their teacher influences decisions about content and teaching methods. As well, findings of this study raise questions about the benefits of same-sex vs. coeducational sexuality education classes. Examination of this issue in future research is needed in order to provide adequate information to school administrators and sexuality educators.

This study identified a discrepancy between the first and second order worlds of

curriculum in sexuality education. Although it has been investigated in other subject areas, such as social studies, this appears to be the first study to note this discrepancy in sexuality education. This has ramifications not only for students and sexuality education teachers, but also for curriculum developers, who must recognise that any curriculum they develop will be interpreted differently by others. Findings also identified that students have individual preferences for different teaching methods. Although preferences are not necessarily indicators of learning styles, further investigation of students' learning styles is needed. This might provide information that would assist teachers in being selective in their choices of teaching methods rather than relying on a variety of methods in hopes they will relate to some students.

These suggestions for future research would not only contribute to the body of literature on sexuality education, but would also have significant implications for the development of curricula, for the training of teachers and for the decisions made by school administrators.

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**APPENDIX A**

**INTERVIEW GUIDE**

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

(Note: Research questions are in bold print. Interview questions are in regular print, and italics indicate probes and follow up questions)

### INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

- researcher introduces herself to participant
- researcher reviews general purpose of study, referring to informed consent form given to participants
- researcher asks participant if he/she has any questions or concerns before the interview begins
- researcher reminds participant that he/she can withdraw from the study at any time or choose not to answer specific questions
- aim is to begin to establish level of comfort with participant

### GENERAL INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

- 1) In general, what was it like to be in the unit on human sexuality?
- 2) What words would you use to describe the unit on human sexuality?
- 3) What was your best experience in the unit? What was your worst experience in the unit?
- 4) Tell me about any feelings you had when you were in the unit on human sexuality. What were they? What feelings do you have about human sexuality, both yours and in general, now?

### RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Research Question 1: How do students perceive their experience in the unit on human sexuality?**

**(RQ1a) How do students perceive the content of the unit on human sexuality?**

Name some of the topics that were addressed in the unit on human sexuality.

How much time was spent on each of these topics?

*--was this not enough, too much or just right?*

*--why or why not?*

*--which topics needed more detail? Which*

*needed less detail?*

Which topics seemed to be the most important?

*--do you agree with this emphasis?*

*--how would you change it?*

Which topics seemed to be the least important?

*--do you agree with this lack of emphasis?*

*--how would you change it?*

Which topics do you wish had been included?

*--why do you think these weren't included?*

What about the amount of time allotted to the unit on human sexuality--  
was it enough? too much? not enough?

**(RQ1b) How do students perceive the teaching methods used in the unit on human sexuality?**

Tell me about some of the teaching methods (i.e. videos, lectures, group discussions) used in the unit.

*--what did you think of them?*

In your view, what was the most effective teaching method used in the unit?

*--why do you think this?*

What do think was the least effective teaching method used by your sexuality education teacher?

*--why do you think this?*

**(RQ1c) How do students perceive their sexuality education teacher?**

In general, did you feel comfortable in the unit on human sexuality?

*--What about your classmates--do you think they felt comfortable?*

*--how could you tell?*

How comfortable did you feel asking questions in class?

*--did you often ask questions in class?*

*--why or why not?*

*--if you didn't feel comfortable asking questions in class, why not?*

*--did you feel there were certain topics you couldn't bring up?*

Some people think that teachers don't know enough to teach about human sexuality or aren't comfortable talking about the content. What was your experience in your class?

Did your teacher seem to know what he/she was talking about?

*--can you give me an example of this?*

How comfortable teaching human sexuality did he/she seem?

*--how could you tell?*

How friendly and approachable was your teacher?

*--did you feel you could talk to him/her about your problems and concerns?*

*--did your teacher make himself/herself available to talk to you?*

Do you feel that your teacher was aware of what adolescents want to know about human sexuality?

*--if yes, how could you tell?*

*--why do you think he/she knew this?*

*--if no, how could you tell?*

*--why do you think he/she didn't know this?*

Overall, how do you think your teacher affected your experience in the unit on human sexuality?

**(RQ1d) How do students perceive the message the unit on human sexuality conveys to students about human sexuality?**

What message or messages about human sexuality did you get from the unit on human sexuality?

*--was the program directed toward forming a specific belief, attitude or behaviour among students?*

*--was human sexuality conveyed as being a distinctly positive or negative aspect of your life?*

What do you think about this message?

*--was it helpful, valuable, appropriate, relevant, realistic?*

*--do you agree or disagree with it?*

*--why or why not?*

How well do you think the teacher got this message across to students?

In your view, what message *should* the unit convey about sexuality?

*--what could have been a more helpful, appropriate etc. message?*

**(RQ1e) How do students perceive the relevance of the unit on human sexuality to their lives and concerns?**

How relevant was the unit on human sexuality to your life and concerns at the time?

How well did the unit address the main concerns or questions you had about human sexuality?

*--if not very well, why not?*

Did you find the unit useful (valuable)?

*--if yes, can you tell me about any experiences that show how the class has affected your life?*

*--if no, why not?*

What could make the unit on human sexuality at your school more useful and relevant to adolescents?

**Research Question 2: How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality?**

**(RQ2a) How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexuality-related knowledge?**

What new things did you learn in the unit that you didn't know before?

What things had you already learned before?

What are the most important things you feel you learned by taking the unit on human sexuality?

*--what helped you to learn?*

*--if you don't feel you learned much, why do you think this is so?*

*--what could've helped you learn?*

What questions did you have that didn't get answered in the unit?

**(RQ2b) How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexuality-related attitudes?**

How did the unit influence your attitudes or beliefs about

sexuality or sexual behaviour?

*--if it did, why do you think this happened?*

*--how do you think the unit influenced the attitudes and beliefs of your classmates?*

Tell me about any experiences that show how the unit has affected your attitudes and beliefs.

*--how could the unit have been more effective in changing your attitudes and beliefs?*

How long do you think this influence might last?

**(RQ2c) How do students perceive the influence of the unit on human sexuality on their sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions?**

How has the unit influenced your sexual behaviour or how you think you'll behave in the future?

*--why do you think this influence happened?*

*--how do you think it has affected the sexual behaviour or behavioral intentions of your classmates?*

Do you see this influence lasting a long time?

Tell me about any experiences that show how the unit has affected your sexual behaviour and intentions.

*--if it hasn't, why not?*

*--how could the class have been more effective in changing your sexual behaviour and intentions?*

**CONCLUDING QUESTIONS**

- 1) Which other aspects of the unit on human sexuality would you like talk about?
- 2) How do you think other students feel about the unit at your school? Do students look forward to it?
- 3) Would you recommend the unit on human sexuality to a friend of yours who needs more information about human sexuality? Why or why not? Do you think it would do any good? Why or why not?

Thank you for your participation.

**APPENDIX B**

Class Activities

MALE CLASS  
List of Videos

1. *Sexuality* (from the Degrassi Talks Series) (1992)

This video explores topics such as puberty, sexuality, sexual orientation, and relationships. Young people from across Canada discuss their feelings about sexuality with the Degrassi team.

2. *Teenage Father* (1989)

This video package presents three scenarios that deal with the decisions and choices surrounding the issue of unplanned teen pregnancy, primarily from the teenage father's perspective.

3. *Witness: Dr. Peter* (1990)

Through a series of video diary entries and interviews, this moving documentary chronicles the journey of Dr. Peter Jepson-Young. Known simply as Dr. Peter, this man of extraordinary courage made public his personal fight against AIDS to become one of Canada's foremost educators in this field.

FEMALE CLASS  
List of Videos\*

1. *It Only Takes Once* (1990)  
(teen pregnancy)
  
2. *It Won't Happen To Me* (1992)  
(STDs)  
  
An intimate, moving interview with Kimberly Richardz, a young mother who is HIV positive.
  
3. *STDs: What You Should Know*  
(STDs)
  
4. *Power of Touch*  
(sexual exploitation)
  
5. *Acquaintance Rape*  
(sexual exploitation)

\* It was not possible to locate the dates and synopses for each of these videos, despite consultations with the National Film Board, UBC Libraries, SFU Libraries, the Westport Media Library, the Westport School District and Vancouver Public Library. It is possible that the titles provided to the researcher were not accurate.

FEMALE CLASS  
(Sample Small Group Exercises)

2.4 ACTIVITY SHEET - DECISION-MAKING AND RESPONSIBILITY

CASE STUDY 1

Mike has been dating Jenny for three months. Although he knows that Jenny has been sexually active in past relationships, she has told Mike that she does not want another sexual relationship. Mike has agreed to go along with Jenny's wishes.

Mike's friends are pressuring him to have intercourse with Jenny. He finally tells them he is going to go ahead with it, but he doesn't feel right about his decision.

Saturday night Jenny's parents are out and he must now make his move. What should Mike do?

CASE STUDY 2

Keri has been wanting to go out with Paul who is popular, attractive and has a reputation for being sexually active. He also doesn't stay with one girl for a very long period of time. Paul finally asks her out. She accepts the invitation knowing he will expect her to have intercourse with him. She is curious about what it would be like; she likes Paul a lot, but is afraid if she consents that she will lose both Paul and her reputation. What should Keri do?



TEEN PREGNANCY - FEMALE

There are 40,000 Canadian teenagers who get pregnant every year. Imagine what it would be like to be pregnant. Write two or more sentences to answer each question.

1. What would I do if I was pregnant?

---

2. Would I tell the baby's father? Why or why not?

---

3. How would having a child affect my life?

---

4. How would I feel about giving my child up for adoption?

---

5. How would I feel about keeping the baby and raising it?

---

6. Would I marry the father?

---

7. How would my parents feel if I was pregnant?

---

8. How would my friends feel about me if I was pregnant?

---

9. Do I want to keep seeing the father?

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**APPENDIX C**

**LETTERS OF PERMISSION**

PARENT OR GUARDIAN PERMISSION TO PARTICIPATE IN CAREER AND  
PERSONAL PLANNING STUDY AT SOMERSET JUNIOR SECONDARY SCHOOL

Please check one of the following:

\_\_\_\_\_ I wish my child to take part in the study of student perceptions of their  
experience in the unit on human sexuality in the Career and Personal Planning  
course

\_\_\_\_\_ I do not wish my child to take part in the study of student perceptions of their  
experience in the unit on human sexuality in the Career and Personal Planning  
course

Please sign and return this page to the school by June 6, 1996.

\_\_\_\_\_  
June 6, 1996