

# Teaching Consent to Elementary School Students

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April 30th, 2022

## Introduction

Currently in Minnesota, there are no statewide standards for teaching sexuality education in schools. Each district is to decide its own curriculum, and the state simply suggests they refer to the National Health Education Standards. In addition, Minnesota does not require sexuality education to be “medically accurate” (Kats). Last year, bill HF358 was introduced and now currently is in committee in state legislation for comprehensive sexuality education, which would require the state Education Commissioner to design a medically accurate model sexuality education program incorporating themes of consent, healthy relationships, and inclusivity of diverse sexual orientations (Minnesota Legislature). While much of the concern with sexuality education in current conversations is directed towards topics taught to high school students (i.e., abstinence vs. safe sex), this study aimed to focus on the lessons taught in early development that occur before the actual introduction of sex. Specifically, I wanted to focus on how lessons about body autonomy, anatomy, and consent are taught to elementary school students.

Body autonomy, according to Dr. Shalon Nienow, a specialist in Child Abuse Pediatrics at Rady Children’s Hospital-San Diego, is “the right for a person to govern what happens to their body without external influence or coercion.” The report, *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, published by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), states that children ages five to eight should be able to describe body autonomy (otherwise known as ‘body rights’), identify private parts of the body, identify that all people have body autonomy, know that they have the right to decide who touches them and in what way

(consent), describe how to respond if someone's touch is making them uncomfortable, and how to talk to a trusted adult if someone's touch is making them uncomfortable (56). Additionally, UNESCO also says that children should be able to identify their genitalia and their basic function (65), along with Dr. Nienow, who emphasizes the importance of using accurate terms and avoiding ambiguous, "cute" nicknames. Dr. Nienow believes that teaching children about body autonomy, anatomy, and consent will help them better recognize child abuse and sexual abuse, and also make them more likely to confide in a trusted adult in the event that they are abused or violated. With all this in mind, I wanted this study to look at how school districts in Minnesota can implement these learning objectives into their schools to improve the quality of sexual health education.

## **Methodology**

For this project, I wanted to use a case-study approach to understand the circumstances under which these learning objectives are to be achieved. I planned to connect multiple school districts in Minnesota to speak with their elementary school teachers, and to understand what the implementation of the new curriculum would look like in different settings. I used the snowball method and attempted to make the sample both geographically, with urban, suburban, and rural settings, as well as socioeconomically diverse. I was hoping for a few districts with key socioeconomic traits to further understand how they may be impacted by implementing this policy, and would likely be the most substantive interactions for the study. Overall, I reached out to 47 districts, with roughly half being from the Twin Cities and their respective suburbs, and half being rural schools.

Once I recruited participating school districts, I intended to reach out to the teachers who taught health education to complete a preliminary survey and a recorded interview. The survey was intended to collect basic background information (i.e. how many years they had been teaching, how they communicate with parents, etc.), and the interview was meant to collect more particular information. I planned to ask them about their current district guidelines, the effectiveness of their lessons, and the barriers to implementing the current objectives. I would then discuss with them the proposed bill currently in legislation, and ask them how the changes will affect their lessons, and what they predict to be new barriers of implementation along with the change. I also would have inquired about their insight about what ought to be taught to students and at what age. In addition, I hoped to speak with district officials to discuss the administrative perspective on teaching these lessons, as well as the potential barriers they predict.

I also wanted to focus on the multiple external factors to see how they would affect the implementation of the policy. Specifically, I wanted to look at parent response and involvement, school culture, and teacher experience. I see these as crucial subjects to the success of the learning objectives, and predicted they are where some possible barriers lie.

First, when observing parent involvement, I predicted that lack of cooperation from parents, or parents refusing to consent to their children receiving the lesson would be major barriers. Parental involvement plays a huge role in student success, and many parents want to know what exactly their student is learning. In New York, Justine Ang Fonte, who served as the director of Health and Wellness at a private school, found herself in major news articles after receiving notable pushback from parents over her

lessons. One article went so far as to say she was teaching first graders self-gratification, when in reality, she was showing them a cartoon on the proper names of genitalia and how those are private parts of the body. Her philosophy was to “equip them with a way that they can exercise body agency and consent, by knowing exactly what those parts are, what they are called, and how to take care of them.” While her objectives are backed up by the National Sex Education standards, she eventually resigned after that school year (Safronova). This reaction is not uncommon to sexuality education in elementary schools. For example, the Worcester Public School committee received complaints over their proposed sexuality education curriculum, calling it “nasty”, and claiming it should “not expose them to things they’re going to try”(Connor). However, there is still hope; with groups like Sex Positive Families offering resources to talking with their kids, and claim “there are tons of parents who want this kind of education”(Safronova). While lessons of consent are arguably less controversial than other sexuality education topics (abortion, etc.), parental resistance to lessons will present a significant obstruction to the implementation.

Parent involvement also ties into school culture. School culture relies on the fundamental beliefs and assumptions, norms, shared values, and patterns of behavior within the school community (Shafer). Having shared beliefs and values that reflect the community plays a crucial role in the synergy of schools. This could mean parents routinely contacting their student’s teachers to discuss their progress, or making values such as “all students have the potential to succeed” a norm. It is fundamental to consider the landscape of the school to ensure that lessons are effectively delivered. For example: are the parents involved with the school? Studies have shown that

involved parents help improve their student's behavior and engagement with material (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success.”). Students can struggle to understand a new topic like body autonomy, and parents who are unable or unwilling to help them can make it more difficult.

Schools' connections to their community can also improve cultural competence, and ease the introduction of unfamiliar material. Some parents, specifically under-resourced or minority families, resist meeting their student's teacher because “they feel that staff makes them uncomfortable or shows a lack of cultural awareness” (“How Parent Involvement Leads to Student Success.”). This does allude to a greater issue of a lack of diverse teachers in American schools, where four out of five public teachers in America are White, while over half of students in public schools are students of Color (“NCTQ: Teacher Diversity.”). If teachers are of the same socioeconomic or racial background or come from the same community the school resides in, I predict it can potentially alleviate the opposition from families to the lessons. While the lack of teacher diversity presents a challenge, it would be helpful to observe how teachers would implement culturally responsive tactics to engage parents.

Finally, I wanted to look at the effects of the level of teaching experience on the implementation. Teaching experience is key to the quality of education students receive, and that “Teaching experience is positively associated with student achievement gains throughout a teacher's career. Gains in teacher effectiveness associated with experience are most steep in teachers' initial years, but continue to be significant as teachers reach the second, and often third, decades of their careers” (Kini and Podolsky). If a teacher has higher experience and works closely with their colleagues in

the same subject or grade level, their students are more likely to perform better. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, many teachers are experiencing burnout and retiring early. According to the Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board's 2021 Teacher Supply and Demand Report, "A majority of districts reported being 'somewhat significantly' or 'very significantly' impacted by the teacher shortage (70%) and substitute teacher shortage (88%)" and "nearly a third of new teachers leave teaching within the first five years in the profession". This poses a serious concern for schools. If teachers lack experience, I predict it could be all the more challenging for them to communicate the ideas to students and their parents. This is especially prevalent in "high needs schools", which are made up of predominantly students of Color, and teachers are teaching outside of their fields (Kini and Podolsky). Newer teachers manage to be more concentrated in these schools, which can be especially risky for the overall ability of the schools to effectively teach the students. In addition, these schools are often unable to afford training for teachers, which would be crucial in implementing the material ("Pros and Cons of Teaching in High-Needs Elementary Schools."). Observing this would be important to understand how well equipped teachers are to add in these new learning objectives.

## **Discussion**

Before outreach to the school districts could begin, the study needed to obtain confirmation from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the research was deemed "Not Human Research". In doing so, I submitted an application to the IRB detailing the procedures and purpose of the study. I asserted that all of the data I was going to collect will be from public information about the school, the interviews and

survey feedback from teachers and school administrators, and any other relevant communication between myself and the district. Most importantly, I stated that in order to protect the interests and privacy of the participants, I would not be recording any personal information from any of the parties involved in the study, including but not limited to: teachers, school administrators, district officials, students, and parents. My plan for my final presentation was to only use general, non-specific descriptions (i.e. a fourth grade teacher in a racially-diverse district). I also assured them that my advisor, Professor Abernathy, would have access to and be reviewing everything I collect to ensure no ethical boundaries are violated, and the findings would not be directly linked to any individuals.

In addition to the application, I submitted the consent form that participants had to complete for review. The form detailed the nature of the study, why the teachers were being invited to participate, and what the overall process would look like (survey, recorded interview, etc.). Significant care had to be taken to ensure teachers that any information collected from them was to be confidential to protect their privacy.

Once IRB approval was received, I immediately started contacting districts to participate. While I had identified which districts I was planning to contact, finding who within the district I needed to get in touch with was presenting to be more difficult. For each district, I had to use their website and access their staff directory. For most districts, there was a designated “teaching and learning”, “curriculum and instruction”, or “research and evaluation” professional. From there, I devised a concise letter describing the study and inviting participants and sent it to their respective curriculum liaison.



After waiting a few weeks, and sending out new waves of invites and follow up emails, I eventually heard back from a total of seven school districts. Multiple districts said they were uninterested, or that they did not have the staffing capacity. One said that in order to gain their participation, I would have to go through a formal process of getting letters of approval from principals of each of the schools I would use, along with multiple other steps that I could not perform given the timeline of the project. I was shocked to find out that we could not get a single district to participate, but I believe that the devastating effects COVID-19 has had on schools presented an unprecedented obstacle.

Public schools are still dealing with the extreme impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic; facing issues ranging from teacher shortages and teacher burnout to transitioning back to in-person class. Additionally, Minneapolis teachers went on strike for over two weeks, protesting for higher salaries for teachers and education support professionals, mental health resources for students, and capped class sizes (Shockman and Krueger). The strike symbolized frustrations and exhaustion felt by teachers across the country, and the focus for schools moving forward is to just recover from the past two years.

It was difficult to have my study hindered by real-world factors outside of my control, and I was disappointed that I did not obtain field work experience from this study. At the same time, since most of the research I have previously done in my academic career has been online for class, it was very rewarding to do research in this format. I learned a significant amount about the reality of field work and dealing with sudden challenges. I also got a closer understanding of the formal process of research

and feel that this was overall a very valuable learning experience to aid with my future pursuits.

While the study did not go exactly as intended, I believe that if given the opportunity, I would have waited and tried to conduct the study when the effects of COVID-19 and general tensions in the school environment had eased, and schools felt they had the capacity to participate in research. I anticipated that the interviews would help frame the landscape of how schools will teach sexuality education in the future, and that I could design a proposed policy districts could use as a result. From there, I could see this research being beneficial to helping schools adopt other curriculum on controversial or unfamiliar topics such as Critical Race Theory. Overall, I hope that the work can continue to help normalize the implementation of quality, comprehensive sexuality education in public schools, and improve student welfare.

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