

SEX ED

IS
OUR

RIGHT!



Contents

Land Acknowledgement	1
Opening	2
Who we heard from	4
What youth have to say	6
<i>Relevant</i>	7
<i>Standardized</i>	9
<i>Knowledgeable & Safe</i>	11
<i>Fun!</i>	13
Our Take	15
Glossary	17

Land Acknowledgement

YouthCO is located on the unceded, ancestral, traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm, Skwxwú7mesh and səliłwətaʔt peoples.

Unceded means that the land YouthCO occupies was never surrendered by these Indigenous nations.

Throughout this project, we travelled to the unceded, ancestral, traditional territories of Secwépemc, K'ómoks, Éyá7juuthem, Okanagan, Nlaka'pamux, Qayqat peoples.

As Indigenous youth continue to resist colonization, we must listen. It is necessary that our education system engages Indigenous knowledge and leadership.

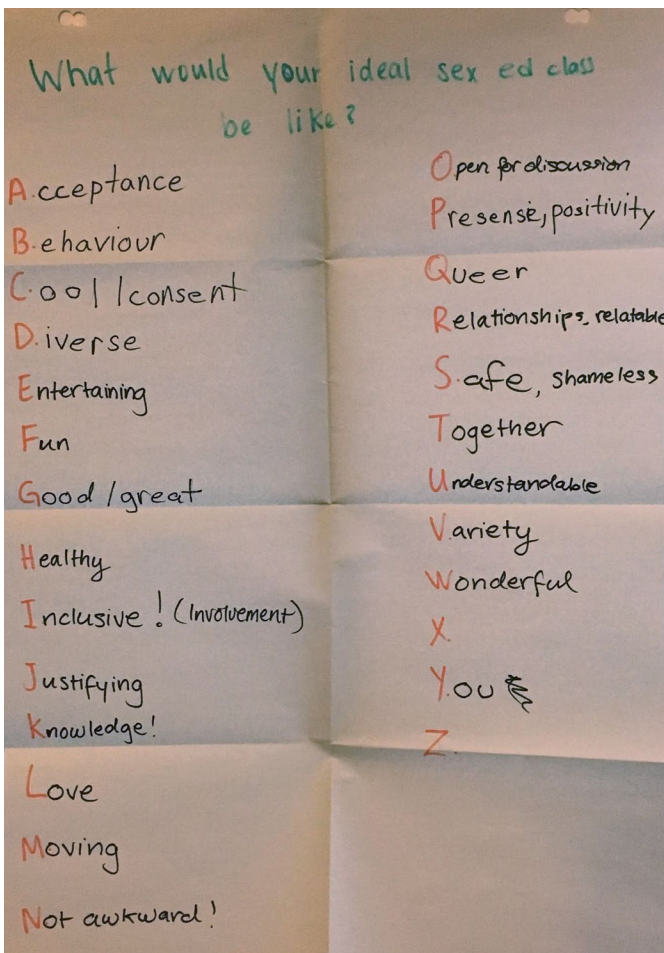
Opening

This report is part of the ongoing process of bringing youth voices to this table

Between November 2017 and March 2018, YouthCO HIV & Hep C Society (YouthCO) has connected with more than 600 youth across BC through focus groups and an online survey to hear what they have to say about the sex ed curriculum, and what they'd like to see change. We visited six cities, and our survey was answered by youth in 83 cities and towns. This project emerged from a conversation at a Safer Schools Working Group meeting hosted at the Community-Based Research Centre for Gay Men's Health (CBRC). This group included youth and adults invested in sex ed across British Columbia, and took place on March 31st 2017. The consensus from the meeting was that the sex ed in schools throughout British Columbia is not working for all LGBTQ+/2S youth. From the priority actions devised, YouthCO initiated a provincial sex ed curriculum review with a focus on connecting with LGBTQ+/2S youth currently in high schools.

YouthCO hired two queer young adults to speak with high school aged youth across the province about their experience with sex ed, including the curriculum, how it is being delivered, classroom experiences, and what they are learning. At the core of the project was listening to the voices of youth as agents and leaders of change in our schools and communities. To do this, YouthCO invited participants from all health authorities, and hosted a total of six focus groups and reached 556 youth in our online survey.

Here, we will outline what we did, who we spoke with, and what we heard from high school students. We received a lot of information and exciting ideas from the youth we spoke to, and the results shared in this report reflect key themes that came up in the focus groups and the survey and in which there was consensus. There are so many more ideas that youth want to contribute to what sex ed looks like across British Columbia than what we are able to capture here: for us, this report is part of the ongoing process of bringing youth voices to this table. As we continue this conversation about what sex ed looks like in British Columbia, we will carry the feedback we heard forward.



ABC Race

Each focus group started with an activity called the 'ABC race'. In this activity, youth were asked to come up with an answer to the question "What would your ideal sex ed class be like?" starting with each letter of the alphabet. This activity structure provides youth with an interactive and visual way of talking about sex ed, and is part of our Sexual Wellbeing workshop.

Who We Heard From

We heard from youth in January, February and March 2018. We used two approaches to hear from youth: 1) in-person discussion groups in youth settings, and 2) an online survey promoted widely on social media. The focus groups aimed to reach as many queer and trans youth as possible: we approached Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in every health authority, promoted this opportunity through the Safer Schools Working Group, and via social media. The focus groups were planned to be eighty minutes, and included thought-provoking activities, and a question and answer period facilitated by staff. The activities used were adapted from YouthCO's Sexual Wellbeing workshops to provide youth with a creative way to share their thoughts on sex ed. Like all YouthCO workshops, the discussions were facilitated to allow youth to lead the discussion. GSA sponsor teachers and LGBTQ+/2S community advocates helped us organize these groups.

There were a total of six focus groups completed for this project; two in Fraser Health, two in the Interior, one in Vancouver Coastal Health, and one in Island Health. While we invited participation from schools in Northern Health, we were not able to host a focus group in Northern communities during this project. In total, 47 youth participated in these groups. Our focus groups at schools had a significantly higher percentage

of LGBTQ+/2S students than a typical classroom setting, because LGBTQ+/2S youth in schools were also especially keen to take part in our focus groups. In every session, LGBTQ+/2S youth made up at least half of the focus group participants. In comparison, the *Canadian Community Health Survey - Cycle 2.1* reported that Canadians surveyed (ages 18-59) who self-identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual only made up 3% of citizens (Statistics Canada, 2015).

The survey was designed to reach more youth from across BC than we were able to connect with in-person, including queer and trans youth who may not want to out themselves by participating, youth in places we weren't able to travel to, and straight and/or cis youth who were not connected to GSAs in the places we did visit. The survey included 27 questions ranging from demographic-based questions to more in-depth questions about classroom experiences, and hopes for the BC sex ed curriculum. Questions were varied in style, and always gave youth the opportunity to leave a comment on each question. The survey was promoted through GSAs, teachers, the Safer Schools Working Group, and social media.

Where Were They From?

Abbotsford	Kelowna	Prince Rupert
Burnaby	Kimberley	Qualicum Beach
Campbell River	Ladysmith	Quesnel
Castlegar	Langford	Richmond
Chilliwack	Langley	Rossland
Colwood	Maple Ridge	Saanich
Comox	Merritt	Salmon Arm
Coquitlam	Mission	Sechelt
Courtenay	Nanaimo	Squamish
Cowichan	Nelson	Summerland
Cranbrook	New Westminster	Surrey
Dawson Creek	North Vancouver	Terrace
Delta	Oak Bay	Trail
Duncan	Parksville	Vancouver
Enderby	Penticton	Vernon
Esquimalt	Pitt Meadows	Victoria
Fernie	Port Alberni	West Kelowna
Fort St. John	Port Coquitlam	West Vancouver
Gibsons	Port Hardy	Whistler
Hope	Port Moody	White Rock
Kamloops	Powell River	Williams Lake
	Prince George	



What Youth Have to Say

Youth shared their ideas and opinions about sex ed with us via focus groups and the survey. During focus groups, one staff facilitated activities, while the other staff documented the information shared by youth. This included taking photos of written activities, and typing out comments shared in response to verbal and movement-based activities.

In order to develop the themes presented here, the two queer staff who led the project and participated in data collection independently reviewed the survey results and the focus group results, and created broad themes. Working with other YouthCO staff, these themes were refined to develop the four overlapping themes shared here that reflect what youth want when it comes to sex ed.

Youth want sex ed that is relevant, standardized, delivered by knowledgeable educators, and fun!

**Youth want
sex ed that is**

Relevant

Youth need sex ed that is relevant to the sex they are having, or may have in the future.

Youth declared that sex ed needs to be more comprehensive so that it is relevant to the sex they are currently having, or may have in the future. Most youth expressed that their sex ed classes only provided information about penis in vagina sex, and did not recognize the full spectrum of sexual activities that youth may be curious about, from masturbation to anal sex. Overlooking this spectrum of sexual activity leaves out essential information that youth need to make informed decisions. In Vancouver Coastal, one youth put it this way: *“I never got the sex ed I need to be healthy with the individuals I have sex with.”* At the same time, youth recognized that some of the current content being delivered (e.g. pregnancy) was relevant, even if they themselves didn’t expect to have that experience. Another issue youth shared about the mismatch between current sex ed content and what they find relevant is the assumption that all bodies are cisgender. As one youth in the Interior explained, sex ed should *“acknowledge that the hormones your body makes aren’t the hormones you are stuck with”*.

Youth who were not having sex felt left out of classroom conversations that only discussed the bodily functions of having sex, without addressing the social and relational aspects. For youth who are not having sex, sex ed

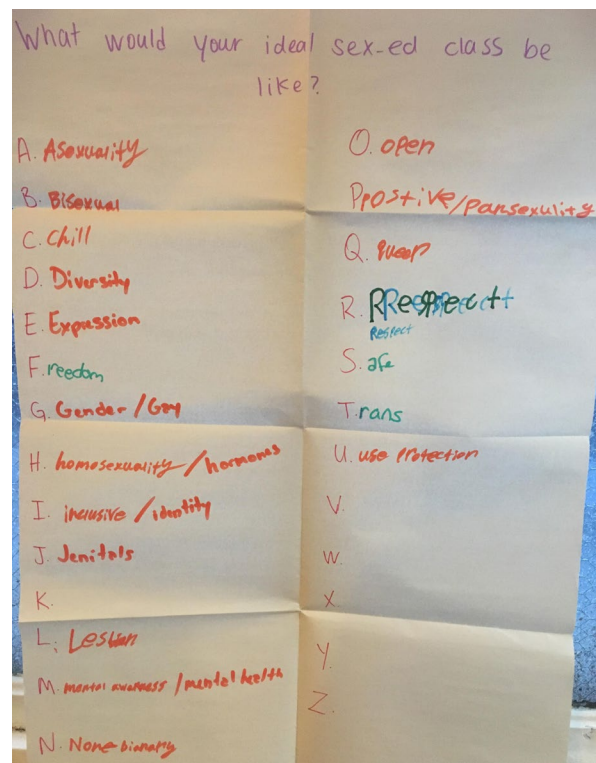
classes that do not cover sexual decision making may leave them feeling alone in navigating if and when to have sex. As a youth from Vancouver Coastal stated, *“obviously, we need to learn about the science side, but we also need to learn about consent and the feelings side of [sex].”* Youth also believe that leaving topics out, whether relating to sexual decision making or transition, leads to these topics becoming a taboo. In some cases, youth shared they are scared to ask questions about such topics in classrooms or among friends for fear of judgement.

For youth, relevant sex ed means classes need to go beyond the biological and physical aspects of sexual health like pregnancy, puberty, and penis in vagina sex, to include the mental, social and emotional aspects that are vital to our health and wellbeing.

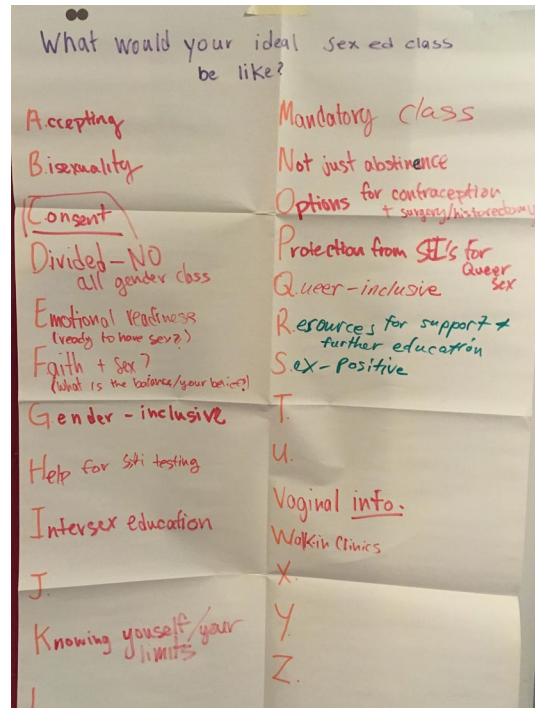
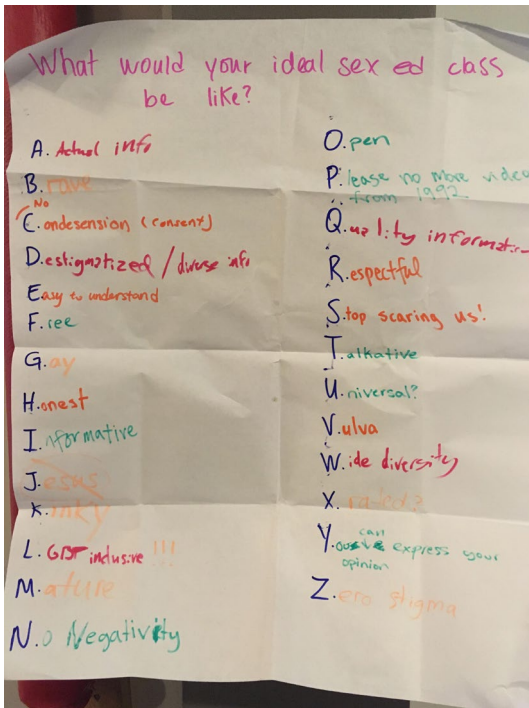
To be relevant to today’s high school students, sex ed must also include more explicit LGBTQ+/2S content. As a youth from Island Health shared, *“Queer stuff in sex ed makes people feel more comfortable in their skin.”*

Youth provided a number of ideas about how to incorporate more relevant content, including adding conversations around sexual orientations, gender identities, how to prevent STIs in sexual acts other than penis in vagina sex, readiness for sex, consent, personal values, bound-

aries, attraction and communication. One youth in Fraser Health shared they would like to *“have a whole part about relationships (consent, being respectful, identifying if you’re in a toxic relationship).”* Some youth shared



that they needed more specific information, such as where to access condoms, birth control, emergency contraception, STI tests, and sexual health resources, and how to use internal condoms. Youth consistently said they wanted more opportunity to focus on communicating boundaries when it comes to sex, navigating substance use, what to do if you or a friend is sexually assaulted, and ways to take care of ourselves if we are living with HIV, now or in the future.



**Youth want
sex ed that is**

Standardized

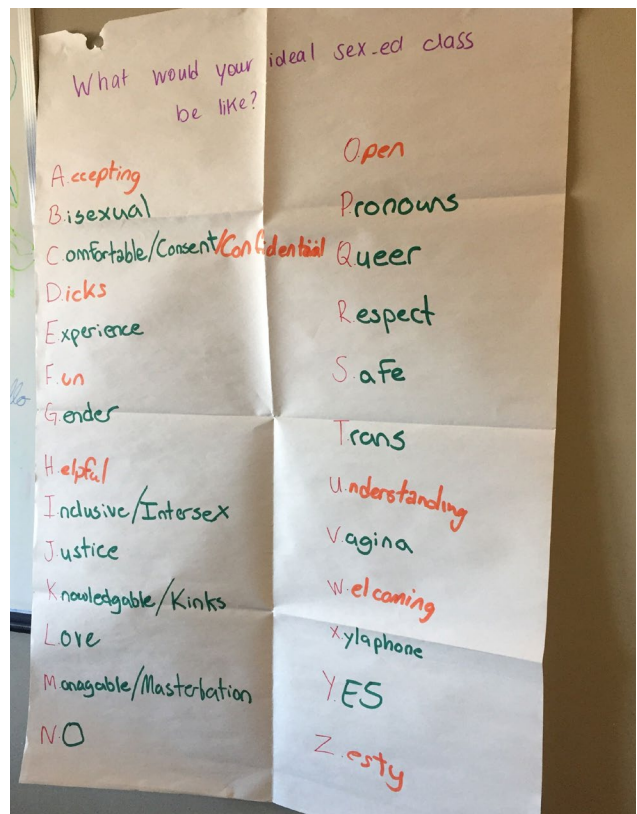
Wherever they are in the province, youth want to be getting the same ongoing, comprehensive sex ed as their friends

Most youth expressed that school is an important place for them to get sex ed, even though they are not always currently getting everything they need from school. We heard the same thing in the survey: 57% of participants said that school is an important place for youth to receive sex ed. Students expressed concern that when sex ed in school does not meet their needs, they are not always able to find what they need on Google, YouTube, Wikipedia, etc. Many students shared that when they had unanswered questions after sex ed classes, they went online to find information. While some students had success finding what they needed, some students encountered disappointment or inaccuracies in their searches. In sharing these experiences, youth made it clear they wanted to have standardized sex ed so that all youth are getting the information they need.

While many youth said school is an important place for sex ed, experiences in sex ed classes varied widely for youth. For example, some youth had received LGBTQ+/2S content, but noted that they had friends “*who have no idea of anything outside of heterosexual sex*” as one youth in Fraser health noted. Some youth started sex ed classes in grade five, while others began in grade nine. There was also a wide range in the amount of sex ed programming youth received in schools.

Youth shared it was important for them to have sex ed that starts in the early grades and offers new, and relevant material throughout the years. Youth explained that it is important to talk about sex in school to normalize this part of their lives, give them the skills to talk about sex within their relationships, and not make sex taboo. One student in Interior Health said, “[Sex ed] shouldn’t just be on certain days and if you don’t show up, you don’t get the education.” Youth emphasized that sex ed needs to be ongoing, rather than the one or two sessions that many of them reported receiving in our survey.

Youth used the words “standardized” and “uniform” to highlight the need for consistency in the amount and type of sex ed content being taught across classrooms. As one youth in the Interior put it, “school means everyone who is there is given standard info, equipped with the same info and easier to navigate through the world”. Just as Grade Nine math content is the same across classrooms, youth emphasized the need to have the same type and amount of content in their sex ed classes wherever they are in the province.



**Youth want
sex ed that is**

Knowledgeable & Safe

**Youth need sex educators who are confident
and comfortable talking about sex and identity**

Youth want to be confident that the person teaching them sex ed is in the know, whether it is a professional sex educator, a peer who has been trained as a sex educator, a nurse with knowledge of queer and trans health, or a teacher with a breadth of knowledge about sex and identity. Youth said sex educators who are trained and confident make for a safer and more comfortable classroom experience, and have better answers to their questions.

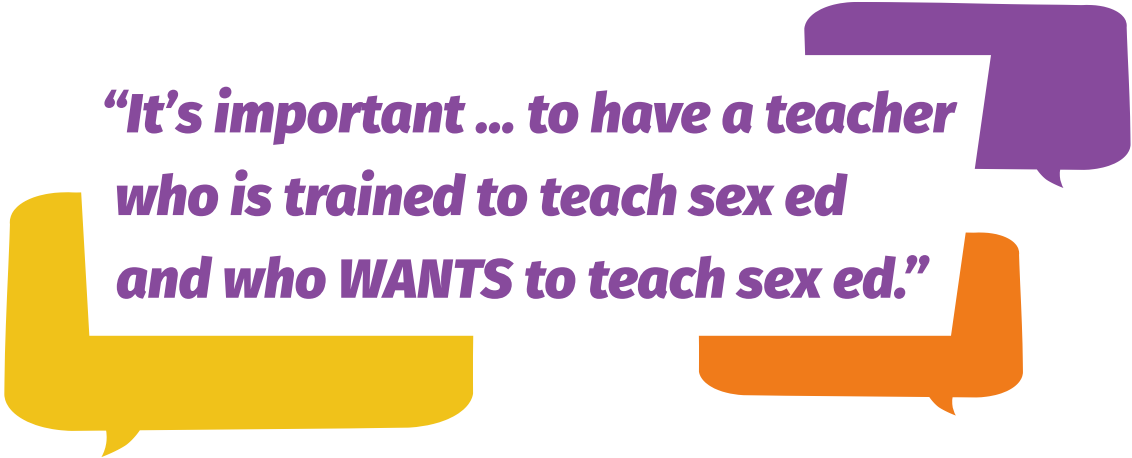
Youth shared that people teaching sex ed weren't always comfortable with the topics. In our survey, one youth shared, *"It's important, I think, to have a teacher who is trained to teach sex ed and who WANTS to teach sex ed. A teacher who is willing to get to know students and make them feel comfortable asking questions."* Additionally, one participant in Fraser Health reflected, *"I feel like [sex educators] provide accurate information because that's their specialty, instead of math or science"*.

Youth shared that sex ed was most LGBTQ+/2S affirming when delivered by sex educators, nurses, peers, and teachers with specific sex ed training. Youth observed that people teaching sex ed without training often relied on gendered language (e.g. conflating body parts and gender) and didn't have the knowledge necessary to include all youth. It was clear from

our conversations that the experiences youth are having in sex ed are deeply shaped by the knowledge and comfort of the educators in their classrooms.

Many of the youth we spoke with are not able to ask questions or be curious about their sexual health in classrooms because they are worried about outing themselves or their friends. As one youth in Vancouver Coastal mentioned, school *“needs to be a safe space because I’m not just going to out myself in front of the whole class”*. When we asked if youth felt capable of asking questions in sex ed classes, most of them said they did not, with one youth in Vancouver Coastal sharing that the *“discomfort of the instructor just adds to not asking”*.

From these youth, we heard that work towards an inclusive sex ed curriculum in BC must also include measures to ensure the safety of LGBTQ+/2S students in classrooms, within and beyond sex education. Safety for LGBTQ+/2S youth includes normalizing LGBTQ+/2S topics in school curriculum, making sure teachers promptly and appropriately respond to transphobic, homophobic, and biphobic comments made in classrooms, and having counsellors who are LGBTQ+/2S-competent in schools. These steps are necessary to erase the stigma around the lives of LGBTQ+/2S students as one youth we spoke to in Fraser Health put it, *“the stigma is where (y)our anxiety is coming from.”*



“It’s important ... to have a teacher who is trained to teach sex ed and who WANTS to teach sex ed.”

Youth want sex ed that is

Fun!

**Youth want sex ed classes to be fun
and led by their interests and discussions**

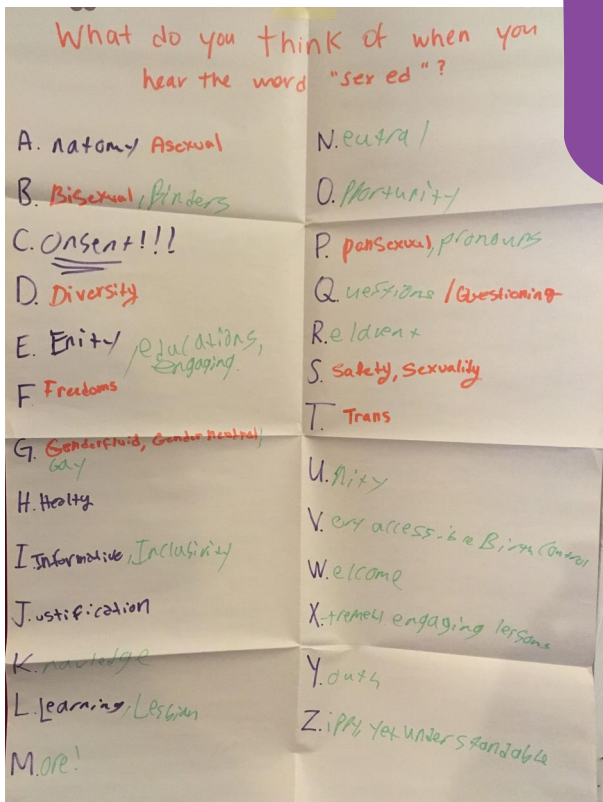
Youth across focus groups expressed their need for sex ed classes that are more engaging, fun and interactive where they are “given the chance to giggle if they need to”, as a youth in Fraser Health told us. Youth said they learned and remembered information more in classes that included visuals, pop up books, interactive exercises, and opportunities for group discussions. Youth want their sex ed classrooms to feel different from their other classes, and more relaxed. One youth in Fraser Health gave us their own take on what a sex ed class would look and feel like if they got to design it: *“I would make sure the environment isn’t a lecture environment. I would ... let them know that they can ask the most ridiculous thing they can ask anything. I have to let them know I am there for them. There needs to be a lot of safety and trust in that classroom”.*

To make discussions more enjoyable and comfortable, youth stressed that sex ed classes should be a chance for everyone in the class to contribute. Youth want a chance to lead the discussion based on their own interests and questions, and believe that *“sex ed shouldn’t be a class where teachers talk and students listen”* as one youth in Fraser said. Youth want to learn something new each year instead of receiving similar content, talk about it in a more casual setting, and learn information in a fun way that’ll make it stick.

Youth who answered our survey had a lot of ideas to share with us about what kind of space a sex ed class should be like. They included the following:

“It would look more like people sitting in a circle, people of all orientations and genders, rather than in rows/desks. I think we would learn how everything someone feels is normal and that no one is alone. It would teach everyone the importance of being safe. It would make everyone more aware of things about people of other genders and orientations”

“Different setting than than standard, usual classroom. Friendly, allow for appropriate humour. Engaging. Allows anonymity. NOT divided by perceived gender/anatomy. Ongoing education: not just a few sessions, not just certain years; comprehensive”



Our Take

Through this project, YouthCO was able to reach more than 600 youth through focus groups and an online survey. What we heard from youth is clear: too many youth are not getting the sex ed they need to make informed decisions when it comes to sex. Overall, the youth we heard from shared that sex ed content they are receiving needs to be better: more relevant, more standardized, more affirming, and more fun.

To move towards a standardized sex ed curriculum, centring youth perspectives is necessary. LGBTQ+/2S youth we talked to emphasized the need for sex ed content that affirms their bodies and identities, acknowledges the variety of ways they can experience sexual pleasure, and links them to the care they need around STIs, HIV, and sexual assault. Rather than getting sex ed that addresses this key content, most youth shared that they were learning only about penis in vagina sex. Yet, we know that STIs are passed by oral sex too, and that most HIV diagnoses among young people in BC occur in the context of anal sex.

Youth further expressed the need for safety and affirmation within their sex ed classrooms. While youth themselves did not refer to SOGI 123 policies, these tools are certainly helpful in creating the classroom contexts youth are asking for. Across classroom subjects, LGBTQ+/2S youth need educators who are creating affirming policies and procedures, safer classrooms, and inclusive curriculum; this is all the more true for sex ed.

Yet, many educators delivering sex ed are not familiar and comfortable with the different ways youth express their gender and sexuality. In these cases, educators often continue the assumption that all youth are cis and

straight. One example of this assumption is when sex ed classes are separated by perceived gender, which erases those youth who don't prescribe to this binary. Instead, youth need sex ed that is affirming of their gender and the many ways they choose to express it!

This project showed us that youth are excited and keen to inform and shape their sex ed curriculum, and believe youth should be consulted when developing sex ed curriculum. As one youth in Vancouver said, *“stuff are always changing, youth should be consulted at every point.”* As a youth-led space, YouthCO centers the voices and ideas of youth in our approach to sex ed, and will continue the work of offering accurate, sex-positive programming for youth, within and beyond classrooms.

If adults and educators are shaping sex education content without input from youth—whose health is directly impacted by these lessons—we're setting up our students to fail. Safe and inclusive classrooms with sex ed that reflect the facts and experiences of students today will help build better health outcomes for youth across our province.

“If you want to change the school system, you have to ask the youth.”

— A youth in Island Health

Glossary

Bisexual: an umbrella term for people who recognize and honor their potential for sexual and emotional attraction to more than one gender (Bisexual Resource Center, 2010)

Cisgender: identifying with the same gender that one was assigned at birth (Qmunity, 2013)

Gender: The social construction of concepts such as masculinity and femininity in a specific culture in time. It involves gender assignment (the gender designation of someone at birth), gender roles (the expectations imposed on someone based on their gender), gender attribution (how others perceive someone's gender), and gender identity (how someone defines their own gender). Fundamentally different from the sex one is assigned at birth (Qmunity, 2013)

LGBTQ+/2S: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirit

Queer: a term for individuals whose gender identity/expression and/or sexual orientation does not conform to societal norms. This reclaimed term is increasingly being used as an inclusive umbrella term for the LGBTQ community (Suffolk University, 2013)

Sex: any mutually voluntary activity with another person that involves genital contact and arousal, that is, feeling really turned on, even if intercourse or orgasm did not occur (Laumann et al., 1994)

Sex Positivity: the cultural philosophy that understands sexuality as a potentially positive force in one's life, and it can, of course, be contrasted with sex-negativity, which sees sex as problematic, disruptive, dangerous. Sex-positivity allows for and in fact celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires and relationships structures, and individual choices based on consent (Queen & Comella, 2008)

Straight: meaning heterosexual, is classed as slang by some dictionaries and standard by others; used to describe people whose physical, romantic, and/ or emotional attraction is to people of the opposite sex (GLAAD, 2016)

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms, including transgender (GLAAD, 2016)

Youth: In this project, 'youth' refers to the 600 high school aged youth we spoke to who are under the age of 18. At youthCO, 'youth' means those under the age of 30



This report was housed at YouthCO and led by Ghada Dbouba and Avery Shannon, and produced alongside CBRC's Sex Ed is Our Right! campaign.

We'd like to thank our partners at CBRC for consultation and collaboration at various points in the development of this report.

