Exploring Sex Education Memories: Insights From UPenn GSE Students

Susan Huang

EDUC 6460 Qualitative Methods: Principles and Techniques

Dr. Nicole Mittenfelner Carl

December 14, 2025

Introduction

In the United States, sex education is not implemented as a systematic or uniform educational field. Substantial variation exists across states, school districts, and school types with respect to curriculum content, educational goals, and instructional approaches. Currently, only 37% of U.S. states require school-based sex education programs to provide medically accurate information (McKoy, 2025). Moreover, among adolescents who report having engaged in penile–vaginal intercourse, fewer than half received formal guidance prior to their first sexual experience—43% of females and 47% of males (Anderst, 2009). These statistics suggest that, for many students, sex education during formative years is often fragmented, inconsistent, and may lead to potentially emotionally charged.

Importantly, such educational experiences do not simply fade with the transition into adulthood. Rather, they persist in shaping individuals' understandings of their bodies, relationships, and sense of self through enduring memories, emotional responses, and value judgments. Existing scholarship underscores that sex education extends far beyond the transmission of physiological knowledge. Holland et al. (1998) argue that educational experiences play a central role in identity formation and self-authoring, while also shaping emotional orientations and personal agency. Similarly, Halstead and Waite (2003) contend that sex education should move beyond narrow informational models toward a comprehensive approach that emphasizes critical reflection, emotional development, and the construction of values. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) further emphasizes that sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and relationships, free from coercion and discrimination—an outcome that is deeply contingent upon how sexuality is framed and mediated within educational contexts.

Against this backdrop, this study adopts a retrospective perspective to examine how sex education experiences are remembered and interpreted in adulthood. Specifically, it seeks

to address the following research question: **How do UPenn GSE students describe their personal experiences with sex education, and which aspects of these experiences do they perceive as most memorable or significant?**

By centering students' retrospective narratives, this research aims to illuminate how early sex education continues to influence identity formation, values, emotional experiences, and perceptions of autonomy later in life. In doing so, the study seeks to expand current understandings of sex education's long-term significance and contribute insights that may inform more comprehensive, reflective, and empowering approaches to sex education in the future.

Research Methods

Data Collection and Data Analysis

To explore participants' personal experiences and meaning-making processes in depth, this study employed semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews are particularly well suited to qualitative inquiry because they balance systematic structure with flexibility, allowing participants to share nuanced, subjective, and emotionally grounded perspectives while still addressing core research questions (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Given the highly personal and sensitive nature of discussions surrounding sex education, one-on-one, in-person interviews were conducted in a private study room at the GSE main building to ensure confidentiality and participant comfort. Conducting in-person interviews allows me to observe nonverbal cues—like body language, pauses, and tone of voice—which enrich the interaction and enable me to employ responsive follow-up questions when appropriate.

Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. Prior to data collection, a semi-structured interview protocol was developed to guide discussion around participants' early sex education experiences, emotional responses, cultural, religious, and societal influences, and their visions of ideal sex education. A full list of interview questions is provided in Appendix A. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded using the iPhone Voice Memos app. Audio recordings were transcribed using Otter AI and subsequently reviewed and manually edited. This revision process involved removing non-substantive filler words, annotating pauses and tonal shifts, and noting salient emotional cues such as laughter or hesitation, supporting more accurate and contextually grounded data analysis (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

This study employed a thematic analysis to examine the interview data through a multi-stage analytic process. First, all interview transcripts were read chronologically to develop a holistic understanding of each participant's narrative. Next, inductive coding was conducted to identify salient patterns, recurring ideas, and emotionally significant moments within the data. These initial codes were then organized into broader deductive coding categories aligned with the research focus, including emotions, educational structures, sociocultural influences, and participants' imagined futures. Related codes were subsequently clustered into preliminary themes, followed by repeated comparison across the dataset to refine and consolidate the analysis into three final themes.

Sample code example:

Emotional Coding:	Shame, Fear, Anger, Defiance	Identifies the internal emotional experiences and reactions expressed or implied by individuals
Cultural Structural Coding:	Religious Pressure, Social Norms, Gender Expectations	Identifies the external, systemic sociocultural frameworks and rules shaping individual beliefs and behaviors

Subjectivity Coding:	Agency, Empowerment, Proactive Information-Seeking	Indicators of an individual's demonstrated autonomy, capacity for choice, and power to act within structural constraints

The coding process combines research question-driven deductive coding with inductive coding that emerges naturally from the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Participant Selection and Recruitment

This study employed a purposeful sampling strategy, selecting participants based on accessibility and willingness to share personal experiences. All four participants were master's students at UPenn GSE, ranging from their early to late twenties. Participants were American and represented diverse backgrounds, including varied states of origin, religious affiliations, genders, and sexual orientations. This diversity aimed to enrich the data and reduce potential bias. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout the study.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the small sample size restricts the generalizability of the findings. Second, given the highly personal nature of the topic, participants may have selectively shared their experiences. Third, retrospective accounts are subject to memory bias. To enhance credibility, I employed two validity strategies: dialogic engagement, involving ongoing refinement of research questions and analytic perspectives, and reflexive memo-writing, which documented my positionality and potential biases throughout the study. Reflective memos are provided in Appendix B. These strategies strengthen analytical transparency and interpretive rigor (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

Findings

Through analysis of the interview data, this study identified three primary themes reflecting the multifaceted significance of sex education in the respondents' memories.

Theme: Fragmented educational structures elicited emotional responses of shame, fear, and defiance among participants

According to participants in this study, their experiences of sex education were marked by pronounced fragmentation. Instruction was often abstinence-oriented, discontinuous, and unsystematic, supplemented by whispered peer conversations and independent internet searches. Rather than providing clarity or security, this disjointed educational structure produced enduring emotional consequences.

Several participants described lingering feelings of shame and fear that persisted into adulthood. Annie reflected, “I still feel a bit scared or ashamed of myself… it really frustrates me” (Interview, 10.16.25), indicating that the emotional imprint of sex education does not dissipate over time but becomes embedded in personal memory and self-perception. Notably, all female participants referenced fear or shame when recalling their sex education experiences. Even the sole male participant, Jackson, observed gendered differences in emotional impact, stating, “Women are much more ashamed about sex than men are” (Interview, 10.14.25).

These findings resonate with Tolman’s (2002) argument that fragmented sex education fails to offer adolescents a sense of safety or legitimacy around sexual subjectivity. When adult discourse avoids addressing girls’ sexual experiences directly, sexuality is constructed not as a comprehensible or discussable aspect of life, but as something dangerous, shameful, or unspeakable. In this sense, participants’ emotional responses should

not be understood as individual vulnerability, but as predictable outcomes of institutionalized silence.

In addition to fear and shame, participants also expressed defiance. Jackson articulated resistance to rigid, prohibition-based instruction: “People, kids, students are going to have sex whether teachers say to or not… if anything, that might push them to do it more” (Interview, 10.14.25). His account highlights a psychological backlash effect, wherein simplified moral directives provoke mistrust and resistance rather than compliance. This resistance may reflect students’ attempts to reconcile contradictory messages—such as abstinence-focused curricula alongside media-saturated sexual discourse—within educational structures that fail to engage with their lived realities. In this way, defiance emerges not as deviance, but as a response to the erosion of trust in educational authority.

Theme 2: Participants’ sexual values were shaped by the intersecting influences of culture, religion, and society

The second theme illustrates how participants’ sexual values were shaped through the intersecting influences of culture, religion, and broader social norms. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, this finding underscores that sexual values do not develop in isolation; rather, they emerge through individuals’ ongoing negotiation of multiple, overlapping identity structures, including family background, religion, gender, and sociopolitical context.

As Linsey noted, “Sex education, religion, and politics are inevitably interconnected” (Interview, October 16, 2025). This observation highlights the role of institutional power in shaping sexual values. Religious ideologies are often embedded within political systems and educational policies—such as state-level curriculum standards—which collectively delineate what is considered legitimate or acceptable discourse about sexuality. Within these macro-

level structures, sexuality is frequently framed through narratives of restriction, discipline, or denial.

However, participants' narratives demonstrate that individuals are not passive recipients of these dominant discourses. Instead, they actively negotiate, resist, and reinterpret them. Sophia described a persistent internal tension: "I left New York. I'm not religious anymore, and I don't live in that community, but I still feel that tension" (Interview, October 23, 2025). Her reflection illustrates how deeply institutionalized norms can continue to shape individuals' emotional landscapes even after physical or ideological separation from those contexts.

Importantly, some participants described family environments that countered dominant institutional messages and provided alternative frameworks for understanding sexuality. Jackson recalled his mother's pragmatic and care-oriented approach: "She was like, 'I know you'll do it eventually—the important thing is staying safe and not hurting yourself or others'" (Interview, October 14, 2025). This stance contrasted sharply with school-based abstinence narratives and exemplifies how family discourse can buffer institutional pressure and support the development of autonomous, health-oriented sexual values.

Together, these accounts reveal sexual value formation as a dynamic process shaped by the tension between macro-level structures of power and individuals' lived negotiations of meaning.

Theme 3: Participants reimagined sex education as a pathway to greater agency and empowerment

When reflecting on what they considered ideal sex education, participants consistently emphasized empowerment, openness, and student-centeredness. Rather than focusing on moral judgment or behavioral control, they highlighted autonomy, respect for curiosity, and the development of practical decision-making skills. This finding aligns closely with

Schalet's (2009) framework of adolescent sexual empowerment, which argues that sexual health should not be evaluated by whether young people engage in sexual activity, but by whether they develop agency—the capacity to understand their bodies, assess risks, communicate boundaries, and make informed choices.

Sophia's reflection exemplifies this perspective. She explained:

> "If you teach kids what will protect them or possibly hurt them, it's much more helpful than saying, if you do this it's good, or if you do that it's bad… leave room for their curiosity, and let them lead the discussion."(Sophia, Interview, 10.23.25)

Sophia's statement explicitly rejects binary frameworks of "good versus bad" behavior and instead advocates for an educational approach grounded in harm reduction, open dialogue, and student-led inquiry. In line with Schalet's critique, she challenges dominant sex education models that frame adolescents as subjects in need of regulation, rather than as developing agents capable of responsibility and care. As Schalet notes, such control-oriented approaches often rely on fear and shame, paradoxically undermining the very safety and well-being they aim to promote.

A particularly vivid illustration of empowerment through education is found in Linsey's narrative. She described a long-term transformation—from early fear surrounding menstruation, to advocating for tampon access in her high school graduation speech, to eventually becoming a trusted provider of menstrual products within her professional community:

> "I went from being so afraid about my period to wanting feminine hygiene products accessible in high school… and now being known as a resource. That makes me feel really proud." (Linsey, Interview, 10.16.25)

It is noteworthy that Linsey was the only participant who received continuous sex education across elementary school, middle school, high school, and college. She also grew

up in what she described as a small, close-knit community characterized by strong conservative and religious values.

Her trajectory illustrates how agency is not innate, but socially cultivated through access to information, material resources, and shame-free discourse. Her experience underscores that empowerment emerges over time when education affirms bodily knowledge, normalizes care, and invites participation.

Taken together, these narratives suggest that participants did not merely critique past sex education practices, but actively reimagined what sex education could be. Their reflections indicate that empowerment emerges not from restricting behavior, but from equipping individuals with the knowledge, emotional language, and social support necessary to make informed choices. In this sense, sex education becomes a site where agency is cultivated through access, dialogue, and the normalization of curiosity, rather than suppressed through fear and silence. These findings reinforce the argument that empowering sex education is not an abstract ideal, but a lived and attainable outcome shaped by educational structures that prioritize students' subjectivity and autonomy.

Conclusion and Implications

This study examines the long-term significance of sexuality education through retrospective interviews with UPenn GSE master's students, with particular attention to how early educational experiences shape emotions, values, and personal agency in adulthood. The findings demonstrate that sexuality education is not a discrete instructional event that fades after adolescence, but a formative educational practice that becomes embedded in individuals' memories, emotional repertoires, and self-understanding. Participants' narratives

reveal how institutional gaps in sex education continue to influence adult perceptions of the body, relationships, and autonomy.

First, the study found that fragmented, abstinence-oriented, and discontinuous approaches to sexuality education often elicit and reinforce emotions such as shame, fear, and distrust. These emotional responses should not be interpreted as individual vulnerabilities, but rather as predictable outcomes of institutional silence and avoidance. When sexuality is excluded from open, affirming discourse, it is implicitly framed as dangerous, unspeakable, or in need of discipline. Such framing undermines the sense of security and cognitive support that education is meant to provide.

Second, the findings indicate that sexual values are produced through complex interactions among cultural norms, religious beliefs, family discourse, and broader sociopolitical structures. Participants' accounts illustrate that sexuality education does not occur solely within classrooms, but is situated within overlapping systems of power that shape what is considered acceptable knowledge and behavior. At the same time, individuals are not passive recipients of these norms. Rather, participants described ongoing processes of negotiation, resistance, and reinterpretation as they reconciled institutional messages with personal experience. This highlights the importance of understanding sexuality education within its broader sociocultural context and recognizing the potential of family and informal discourse to buffer restrictive institutional narratives and support subjectivity.

Most notably, participants actively reimagined what sex education could and should be. Across interviews, empowerment, openness, and student agency emerged as central educational goals. This vision closely aligns with Schalet's (2009) framework of sexual subjectivity, which emphasizes autonomy, communication, and informed decision-making

over behavioral control. Participants' reflections—particularly those related to menstrual education and access to resources—demonstrate that empowerment is not abstract, but socially cultivated through sustained access to knowledge, material support, and shame-reducing practices.

Taken together, these findings suggest several implications for future practice and research. Sexuality education should move away from disciplinary and moralistic models toward comprehensive, student-centered approaches that prioritize emotional safety, relational competence, and agency. Educators should foster dialogic, shame-free learning environments where curiosity is treated as a legitimate foundation for learning. Policymakers, in turn, must recognize sexuality education as a long-term developmental intervention rather than a narrowly defined public health tool.

Future research could expand this work by including more diverse populations, employing longitudinal designs, and examining how empowerment-oriented sex education can be implemented within institutional constraints. Ultimately, this study underscores that sexuality education is not only about what is taught, but about how students are positioned as subjects with feelings, judgment, and agency. Only when sex education affirms these dimensions can it fulfill its educational and social potential.

References

Anderst, J., Kellogg, N., & Jung, I. (2009). Reports of repetitive penile-genital penetration often have no definitive evidence of penetration. Pediatrics, 124(3), e403–e409. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2008-3053

Halstead, J. M., & Waite, S. (2003). “Love and trust”: Making space for feelings in sex education. Education and Health, 21(2), 23–28.

Holland, D., Lachicotte, W., Skinner, D., & Cain, C. (1998). Identity and agency in cultural worlds. Harvard University Press. https://www.infoamerica.org/documentos_pdf/holland02.pdf

McKoy, J. (2025, August 21). Only 37% of U.S. states require sexual education in schools to be medically accurate. Boston University School of Public Health. https://www.bu.edu/sph/news/articles/2025/only-37-of-us-states-require-sexual-education-in-schools-to-be-medically-accurate/

Ravitch, S. M., & Carl, N. M. (2021). Qualitative research: Bridging the conceptual, theoretical, and methodological (2nd ed.). Sage.

Schalet, A. (2009). Subjectivity, intimacy, and the empowerment paradigm of adolescent sexuality: The unexplored room. Feminist Studies, 35(1), 133–160. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40607936

Tolman, D. L. (1994). Doing desire: Adolescent girls’ struggles for/with sexuality. Gender & Society, 8(3), 324–342. https://www.jstor.org/stable/189709

World Health Organization. (2002). Defining sexual health: Report of a technical consultation on sexual health, 28–31 January 2002. World Health Organization.

Appendix A: Research Instrument

Opening script:
Hello, my name is Susan. This interview is part of my *Qualitative Research Methods* course.
Thank you so much for coming today and agreeing to participate in this study.

The interview will last no longer than 30 minutes, and your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose to stop at any time. If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, you may skip them or end the interview.

All information you share will remain strictly confidential. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym, and your responses will be used solely for classroom instruction and submission to my supervisor.

To ensure accuracy, I would like to record this interview so I can review it later during transcription. If you agree, we can begin now.

Interview questions:

Personal Experiences with Sex Education

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
    a.
2. Can you describe your earliest memory of receiving sex education—whether in school or elsewhere?
    - What aspects of that experience were most memorable to you, and why?
    - How did you feel during your first sex education class or conversation?

"Can you tell me a bit more about that moment?"

"What stands out to you when you think back on that experience?"

"How did that shape the way you thought about sex or relationships afterward?"

Attitudes and Impact

1. Can you recall a time when what you learned (or didn't learn) about sex education influenced a decision or experience in your personal life?
    a. ask for a specific example
2. How prepared do you feel your sex education left you for navigating adulthood and intimate relationships?
    - If you felt unprepared, what topics do you wish had been covered earlier?
    - If you felt well-prepared, which aspects have been most useful in your current life?

"Can you give an example of a specific situation that illustrates that?"

"What impact do you think that had on your confidence or understanding?"

"Has your perspective changed over time?"

Cultural, Religious, and Social Factors

1. How, if at all, did your cultural, religious, or social background influence the way you experienced or interpreted sex education?
2. Did your family or community provide messages about sex or relationships that differed from what you learned in school?
    a. What was that like?
3. Have you ever felt tension between your personal or cultural values and what was taught in sex education?

"How did you navigate those differences?"

“Can you share a time when this tension became particularly clear?”

“How do you think those experiences influenced your current beliefs or comfort level?”

General / Wrap-up Questions

1. Looking back, what was the most useful thing you learned—if anything—from your sex education experience?
2. Were there any topics you felt were missing, avoided, or insufficiently addressed?
3. Based on your experiences, what advice would you give to educators designing future sex education programs?

“If you could change one thing about how sex education was taught, what would it be?”

“Why do you think this topic matters for students today?”

1. Is there anything else you’d like to share that we haven’t discussed but that you feel is important or relevant to today’s topic?

Closing script:
That concludes our interview. Thank you again for participating in this study. Next, I will proceed with data analysis. If I need to follow up with additional questions, would it be okay to contact you via email? I truly appreciate your time and insights. Before we end the recording, do you have any questions for me?

Appendix B: Reflective memos

Reflexive Memo #1:

Introducing Myself and My Background

I identify as a Chinese international student, born in the 2000s, and as a heterosexual woman. I grew up in Shenzhen, one of China's most economically developed first-tier cities. Coming from a middle-class family and being able-bodied, I was afforded opportunities to travel abroad at a young age and to pursue high-quality education. My educational trajectory has been shaped by both Chinese and international systems: I attended public elementary school in China (grades 1–4), studied in international schools following British and American curricula (grades 5–10), and later completed rest of my education in the United States. These experiences have cultivated in me a combination of traditionally Chinese values such as diligence and modesty, alongside skills often emphasized in Western contexts, such as critical thinking and the courage to question authority.

Biases and Implicit Theories

As a female researcher advocating for gender equity and for women's right to challenge male- dominated narratives, I am aware that I may carry biases. At times, I risk stereotyping men and overlooking the vulnerabilities they experience within a patriarchal system. To counter this tendency, I remind myself that men, like women, are often deprived of comprehensive sex education, and that their perspectives are equally vital to understanding the broader landscape of sexuality education. Furthermore, as a heterosexual woman, I recognize the possibility of overlooking or misinterpreting the experiences of LGBTQ+ communities. I hold a strong commitment to amplifying voices that have historically been marginalized in discussions of sexuality, ensuring that their narratives are valued in my work.

Ideologies, Beliefs, and Political Commitments

Ideologically, I identify as an existential feminist, emphasizing the socially constructed nature of gender and the importance of individual freedom in defining gender identity. My family background includes exposure to Buddhism (through my father) and beliefs in reincarnation (through my mother), but I personally do not adhere to any religious faith. As an international student from China, I have not participated in electoral politics and my understanding of American politics remains limited. Nonetheless, I recognize that the U.S. educational institutions I have attended often lean toward progressive or left-leaning perspectives, which may have shaped my worldview in ways I am only beginning to critically interrogate.

Intended Audience and Rationale

The intended audience for my research is primarily young adults in their twenties. This group represents an age range close to my own, which facilitates empathy and mutual understanding during research encounters. Compared to adolescents, young adults possess more advanced communication skills and a broader capacity for reflection. At the same time, their perspectives are distinct from older generations, offering fresh insights into evolving social attitudes toward sexuality. I believe that engaging with this group will yield meaningful exchanges that not only inform my academic inquiry but also contribute to more relevant and impactful approaches to sex education.

Reflexive Memo #2:

Jackson, male, 26 years old, Jewish

Jackson's narrative represents the experience of white males from Jewish backgrounds in North American middle-class families, embodying a specific social position.

His "rational, practical" understanding of sex education carries a gender-privileged perspective (where males are exempt from shame-based punishment). The interview reveals a trajectory of sex education characterized by "institutional failure—family supplementation—individual autonomy," which can be further compared across different cultural samples to identify similarities and differences.

Reflexive Memo #3:

Annie, female, Chicago, parents are Senegalese

As a researcher, I must acknowledge my lack of religious background, which creates a significant disparity with Annie's religious experiences. Her narrative reveals the multifaceted nature of sex education: it is not merely about knowledge dissemination, but also involves religious control, cultural shame, gender politics, and educational power dynamics.

She emphasizes the importance of “de-stigmatizing” education, aligning with contemporary concepts of “trauma-informed pedagogy.” Simultaneously, her reflections demonstrate the emergence of “critical feminist consciousness”—transitioning from being disciplined to questioning “who defines womanhood.”

Reflexive Memo #4:

Linsey, female, Maryland, “quaint town: very conservative and religious”, 26 years old, queer

Linsey's intersecting identities (mask lesbian/woman/from a conservative religious town) means her narrative simultaneously engages with gender discipline, religious politics, and queer invisibility; caution is needed against generalizing her experience as representative of “all women/queer people.”
I implicitly assumed “scientifically standardized” sex education as an ideal type in my questioning. We must guard against using “scientific neutrality” to obscure power and cultural dynamics. The next step requires actively probing the specific processes and language through which ‘consent’ and “testing” are normalized in daily life, thereby enriching the evidence chain on how ethical practices are incorporated into instructional design.

Reflexive Memo #5:

Sophia, female, New York, 25 years old, queer

Sophia’s narrative exemplifies how religion, fear, and silence intertwine to produce epistemic gaps in sexual knowledge. The Catholic framework functions not merely as moral doctrine but as a disciplinary regime shaping gendered bodies—particularly through the omission of consent and agency. Her description of learning “through experience” exposes the systemic neglect of adolescent sexuality in moralized schooling.