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# **What they wish they would have known: Support for comprehensive sexual education from Mexican American and White adolescents' dating and sexual desires**

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## **Abstract**

Focus groups were conducted to assess what Mexican American and White male and female adolescents wished they had known about romantic and sexual relationships. Relevant gender and ethnic differences emerged in adolescents' desires and findings across all groups supported a need for comprehensive sexual education that contextualizes sexual activity within a framework that emphasizes socio-emotional skills and well-being. Adolescents' desires were emotional, relational, physical and interpersonal in nature. Youth preferred parents and school educators as key sources of information and support. Recommendations for prevention programming and policy are discussed.

## **1. Introduction**

The initiation of romantic relationships in adolescence is a significant developmental milestone that launches youth into a lifelong pattern of intimate partnerships. The importance of these relationships is increasingly recognized by the scientific community as studies demonstrate that the quality of early romantic experiences may lay a foundation for subsequent patterns among cohabitating couples, marital partners, and parental relationships with children (Capaldi & Clark, 1998; Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000; Dion & Dion, 1993; Furman & Flanagan, 1997). The developmental unfolding of relationships across the lifespan is influenced by cultural norms, which affect romantic expectations (Crissey, 2005), timing (Regan, Durvasula, Howell, Oreno, & Martha, 2004), and sexual activity (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009a). Thus, while research pertaining to adolescent romantic relationships has accumulated rapidly over the course of the last decade, it is concerning that there remains a paucity of research comparing ethnocultural group emic perspectives (Collins et al., 2009). Specifically, studies have largely been survey-based and descriptive. More research is needed to gain insight into teen's lived romantic and sexual experiences, and both within and across diverse cultures. Asking teens themselves about their relationships affords researchers the ability to inform prevention programming and education by presenting relevant material that is salient and impactful and uses terminology they are familiar with. The present study seeks to narrow a gap in the literature concerning cross-ethnic comparisons of youth's romantic and sexual experiences (Collins et al., 2009), and specifically focuses on socio-emotional considerations central to sexuality. Recommendations to improve educational curricula and prevention services stem from adolescent dialogue. Mexican American and White adolescents ages 15 to 17 participated in focus groups that were conducted as a means to articulate their needs and desires both within and across gender and ethnicity. Findings highlight the need for holistic programming that integrates socio-emotional components of intimate partnerships with sexual education.

### **1.1. *Abstinence-only education***

The federal government recently signed into effect an additional

\$50 million dollars for five years of continued support of abstinence- based education (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010a). Federal support for such education has grown increasingly since its establishment in the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 and it continues to be the primary source of sexual education in schools after evaluations have demonstrated little efficacy in delaying initiation of sexual intercourse, lowering teen pregnancy rates, or reducing the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs; for a review, see Santelli et al., 2006). In order to qualify for the funds, educators must teach that sex before marriage is likely to have negative psychological consequences (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011), although there is no empirical evidence to support that consensual intercourse is mentally harmful (Santelli et al., 2006). Abstinence must also be taught as the only way to completely avoid undesirable sex-related outcomes (Santelli et al., 2006; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Such programming assumes that adolescents need a threat of punishment to make healthy sexual choices, but studies suggest that youth are motivated to learn about the formation of healthy relationships, especially when messages are framed positively (Wolfe & Feiring, 2000).

The Sexual Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) supports abstinence as the most effective and preferred method to avoid unwanted pregnancy and STI exposure, yet calls into ethical question some of the key theoretical assumptions of abstinence-based programming. It is argued that such curricula alienate gay and lesbian youth and their experiences and are extremely ambiguous in the way that “abstinence” is defined (SIECUS, 2004). In fact, most teens believe that non-coital experiences are still allowed under this umbrella, uninformed of the risks involved with such experimentation (Halpern-Felsher, Cornell, Kropp, & Tschann, 2005). Teens are experimenting with perilous sexual behavior such that approximately half of the newly acquired cases of STIs reported each year are among adolescents and young adults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009b). The majority of sexual experiences end in intercourse such that by age 20, seven of ten adolescents have had sex (Finer, 2007). Given that youth tend to marry now in their mid to late 20s (Goodwin, McGill, & Chandra, 2009), they are risking for almost a decade the chance of unwed pregnancy and exposure to STIs (Santelli et al., 2006; Singh & Darroch, 1998;

Weinstock, Berman, & Cates, 2004).

In addition to the staggering negative physical outcomes associated with uninformed sexual experimentation, it is important that researchers and program planners view adolescence as a critical developmental period during which other important socio-emotional skills are learned and practiced — skills that may predict the quality of relationships they will have in the future. Data from the National Survey of Family Growth indicate that approximately half of first marriages end in dissolution (Goodwin, Mosher, & Chandra, 2010), evidencing the fact that many adults struggle in their romantic partnerships. In a review of outcomes among adolescents of divorced parents, Tasker and Richards (1994) found higher levels of discouraged attitudes towards marriage. This was especially true among adolescents that had witnessed increased conflict, suggesting that many adolescents have learned maladaptive communication styles in the home. Indeed, it has been suggested that dysfunctional ways of negotiating conflict and communicating are established and practiced in adolescent dyads (Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Furthermore, research with troubled adult couples indicates that knowledge and skills shown effective in marital therapy (e.g., demonstrating emotional support, repair attempts to buffer negative emotionality during conflict, balancing autonomy with interdependence) may be imparted in a preventative manner during adolescence (Tabares & Gottman, 2003). Given the centrality of emotional experiences during adolescence (Larson, Clore, & Wood, 1999), providing youth with healthy coping and negotiating strategies within sexual education curricula may be especially timely.

Although socio-emotional skill sets are imperative to making healthy relationship and sexual choices, few schools integrate this information into sexual education curricula. SIECUS advocates that comprehensive sexual education go beyond a discussion of sexual behavior, STIs, and pregnancy to contextualize psychological/emotional considerations, individual and family values, societal messages, communication skills, developmental considerations, and adolescent dating experiences (SIECUS, 2004). It is an opportune time for researching adolescents' educational needs pertaining to relationship and sexual health, as federal administration is exploring new directions in policy that finance innovative and more comprehensive programs.

Specifically, under the 2010 “Personal Responsibility Education Program” (PREP), \$55 million dollars will be awarded per year (through 2014) to states for evidence-based education that includes adulthood preparation components and information on contraceptives. Beyond a narrow definition of sexual education, this law allots monies for marriage-strengthening activities that specifically include relationship education in high schools as a permissible component. The funding announcement encourages programs directed towards at-risk minority populations to apply (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010b). Furthermore, another \$25 million dollars has been allocated for yet-untested sexual education programs that demonstrate promise (Landau, 2010). This is in addition to a continuation of abstinence-only funding, which states must decide whether or not to opt into through their own contributions. These governmental changes may allow for sexual education to move past a constricted definition of what constitutes one's sexuality and demonstrate an increasing federal and state interest to improving the psychological, sexual, and relational health of this nation's youth. This calls for critical and evaluative answers to the question, what constitutes an effective and promising program?

## **1.2. *Towards holistic programming***

Support is building towards more inclusive programming that strengthens the life skills necessary to build self-efficacy (deemed necessary to follow through with reasoned decisions; Bandura, 1993), and make vital connections between sexuality and lived romantic experiences. Gillmore, Archibald, Morrison, Wilsdon, Wells, Hoppe et al. (2002) tested the theory of reasoned action and found that sophisticated cognitive processes contribute to the prediction of sexual behavior, such that outcome beliefs, normative beliefs, attitudes, and intentions are important behavioral indicators. A large number of adolescents felt that sexual intercourse would help them to feel loved, and that condom use may thwart intimacy, both significant predictors in this larger model of cognitive reasoning (Gillmore et al., 2002). Indeed, teens often express romantic affection sexually and feel that sexual intercourse is part of an intimate relationship: if not now, then at some point (Miller & Benson, 1999). Similarly, when adolescents are asked to reflect on advice they would offer to other teens, sexual readiness is emphasized

(especially by females) and contributes to a perceived efficacy to handle emotional hardships associated with romantic relationships and the ability to wisely choose a romantic partner (Adams & Williams, 2011).

Abstinence-only advocates are concerned with the potential negative psychological outcomes of premarital intercourse, but curricula do not connect lived emotional experiences to sexual activity. Adolescent romantic and sexual relationships are complex, and have been deemed one of the most stressful developmental processes (Larson & Asmussen, 1991). For example, more than fifty percent of adolescents involve themselves in sexual relationships with non-romantic partners (i.e., “hook-ups”) but desires for a more committed romantic partnership characterize fully one-third of these encounters (Manning, Giordano, & Longmore, 2006). In addition, teens in romantic relationships experience more conflict (Laursen, 1995) and greater emotional highs and lows than their peers (Larson et al., 1999), and a first romantic breakup has been linked with an onset of major depressive disorder (Monroe, Rohde, Seeley, & Lewinsohn, 2002). Tumultuous romantic experiences may be tied to perceived sexual pressure for females and stress resulting from emotional vulnerability (Adams & Williams, 2011). Being in a romantic relationship has positive developmental consequences as well. It is closely tied to feelings of self-worth (Connolly & Konarski, 1994), and a perceived ability to be a successful romantic partner is associated with global competence by late adolescence (Masten et al., 1995). Furthermore, romantic relationships during adolescence influence identity development, family and peer relationships, and academic and career planning (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

Although recent policy has allocated money for relationship-strengthening activities, Adler-Bader, Kerpelman, Schramm, Higginbotham, and Paulk's (2007) thorough review of the literature found only two published studies pertaining to relationship and marriage education programming targeting adolescents (i.e., Gardner, 2001; Gardner, Giese, & Parrott, 2004). In Gardner and colleagues' evaluation of the program entitled “Connections: Relationships and Marriage”, small, yet significant effect sizes were obtained among an urban sample of White and Latino adolescents on outcome measures including future-optimism of marital relationships, communication with parents, and the likelihood of obtaining counseling if needed. Perhaps most

importantly, while the use of violent tactics among the control group increased across the duration of the study, those enrolled in the curriculum reduced their use of verbal and physical aggression and increased their perceived ability to resist sexual pressure (Gardner et al., 2004). Adler-Bader et al.'s (2007) evaluation of a comparable program, "LoveU2: Increasing Your Relationship Smarts" found decreases in verbal and physical aggression tactics among a sample of African American and White high school students, along with increases in relationship knowledge (e.g., healthy vs. unhealthy relationship behaviors, communication skills). Since their review, a recently published study (Antle, Sullivan, Dryden, Karam, & Barbee, 2011) also evaluated the effectiveness of the "LoveU2" curriculum among a primarily African American sample of youth. The authors added a module specifically targeting a reduction in dating violence and found significant increases in perceived ability to resolve conflicts in a healthy manner and a decreased acceptance of violence in relationships. Evaluative studies concluded with recommendations to conduct further research pertaining to ethnic and gender considerations among youth populations so as to more completely understand their diverse relationship needs.

### **1.3. Ethnic considerations**

Latinos comprise approximately one-sixth of the total United States population, and 66% are of Mexican origin. As compared to the population at large, Mexican American youth are more likely to be under the age of 18 (24.3% and 37.3% respectively; United States Bureau of the Census, 2009). Mexican American adolescents represent a unique group that is under-studied, and their viewpoints on relationship and sexual behavior are especially desired by scientific and policy communities (Frost & Driscoll, 2006). Adolescence marks an important time for ethnic identity development (Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997) and assimilation into mainstream culture presents unique challenges for youth exposed to conflicting romantic and sexual norms. In traditional Latino culture, for example, marital and family goals are stressed (Flores, Eyre, & Millstein, 1998; Oropesa, 1996), and it follows that Latino adolescents aspire to marry and rear children earlier than other ethnic groups (East, 1998). Acculturation to U.S. sexual norms has been associated with earlier sexual debut (Afaible-Munsuz & Brindis,



2006), and parents tend to more vehemently protect females from sexual socialization and activity (Raffaelli, 2005; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001; Villaruel, 1998). The delay of sexual activity among Mexican American adolescents has been associated with setting educational goals, religiosity, and congruity between the sexual values of parents and their youth (Liebowitz, Castellano, & Cuellar, 1999). Ethnic considerations are imperative for the success of programming aimed at impacting the relational and sexual well-being of adolescents.

#### **1.4. Gender considerations**

Gender also affects the ways in which romance and sexuality are experienced in adolescence. In general, females are more likely to emphasize the importance of care and attachment (Shulman & Scharf, 2000), self-disclosure and support (Feiring, 1999), and unconditional acceptance (Williams & Hickie, 2010) as part of their conceptualizations of romantic love. They also tend to qualify appropriate conditions for sexual intercourse (e.g., within a loving relationship; Aarons & Jenkins, 2002) and to share anxiety-provoking relational experiences with their peers (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Adolescent males, on the other hand, are less likely to discuss relationship difficulty (Hill & Lynch, 1983), likely due in part to a felt social pressure to appear aloof about romantic relationships in front of other males (Feiring, 1999). In conversations with same-sex peers, adolescent males are more apt to brag about the sexual nature of their relationships (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Although males tend to feel less comfortable communicating with the other sex (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006), they are more likely to report feeling love at first sight, and falling in love more times and at earlier ages (Montgomery, 2005).

#### **1.5. Parental involvement**

Adolescents' emerging sexuality and the importance placed on romantic relationships is often difficult for parents (Gray & Steinberg, 1999) and especially so for minority parents whose values may differ from those of mainstream society (Barkley & Mosher, 1995). Indeed, sexual concerns are frequently central to conflict among Latino mothers and adolescent daughters due to acculturation strains that popularize myths

depicting U.S. females as exceedingly promiscuous (Espin, 1984). Perhaps unbeknownst to many parents, sexual values and attitudes are often transmitted indirectly to their children (Yarber & Greer, 1986) and perceived norms and expectations are likely to influence sexual decisions, especially concerning the use of contraceptives (Baker, Thalberg, & Morrison, 1988). Likewise, parents who are open to discussing sexuality with their teenagers and do so frequently create households where teens are more likely to view talking about the subject as easy and cover the topic less shallowly (Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand, & Ham, 1998). Early and ongoing discussion is important since teens tend to experience decreased feelings of closeness to parents before and after first-intercourse (Ream & Savin-Williams, 2005). Focus groups with Latino mothers and adolescents in the United States revealed barriers to effective parent—child discussions; mothers desired to communicate safe sexual practices with their daughters but had been largely reared in conservative families where discussion of sex was taboo. Daughters concurrently desired more information about sex from parents but feared punishment for sexual behavior (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2006). The majority of research has focused on mother—adolescent communication, yet one study revealed that Latina youth desire more information from fathers, especially pertaining to how to resist male sexual pressure and towards understanding the male psyche (Hutchinson, 2002).

Given the importance of adolescent romantic and sexual experiences both developmentally and as predictors of subsequent relationship quality, the following is a needs-based assessment of what Mexican American and White youth wish they would have known about dating relationships. This study enhances the literature on adolescent romantic relationships by gaining the perspectives of youth themselves in a manner that allows for cross-ethnic comparison.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Sample**

A total of 75 Mexican American ( $n= 41$ ) and White ( $n= 34$ ) youth ( $M= 16.04$  years,  $SD=.83$ ,  $n= 40$  females) were recruited from a large Southwestern state to participate in focus groups on adolescent romantic relationships. Twelve groups (6 to 8 participants;  $M= 5.86$ ,  $SD= 1.55$ ) were divided by ethnicity and gender to form three of

each type, at which point saturation was met. All students were transitioning into the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades ( $M= 11.09$ ,  $SD=.76$ ). Participants were selected across 25 different high schools and were recruited during the summer months via meetings with community program leaders (e.g. Boys and Girls Clubs, Big Brothers Big Sisters) and summer camps (53% of sample), high schools (32%), and word-of-mouth (15%). Mexican American adolescents differed from White adolescents on key family characteristics such that their homes were less likely to be English-speaking only,  $\chi^2(2)=35.61$ ,  $p=.001$ , to include their biological father,  $\chi^2(1)=3.72$ ,  $p=.05$ , to have American-born parents (mother,  $\chi^2(3)=19.66$ ,  $p=.001$ ; father,  $\chi^2(3)=18.98$ ,  $p=.001$ ), and to have parents with an education beyond high school (mother,  $\chi^2(5)=31.96$ ,  $p=.001$ ; father,  $\chi^2(5)=27.24$ ,  $p=.001$ ). The majority of Mexican American youth (90%) were born in the United States.

Following a phenomenological study design, youth identified their own ethnicity rather than be assigned (e.g. by language use, country born, or acculturation status). Padgett's (2008) guidelines were followed to recruit "typical" youth in order to highlight common lived experiences. The sample was purposefully collected by age (15–17) and ethnicity (Mexican American and White) in order to make meaningful comparisons across a relatively homogenous developmental time period. Adolescents represented diverse geo- graphic urban and rural neighborhoods that varied by crime rate, population density, socioeconomic status, and languages spoken.

Before starting the focus group discussion, each participant completed a short survey about their dating experiences. Over 80% of participants had at least some romantic relationship experience in the past, and the average length of their longest relationship ranged from six to nine months. Teens reported an average of three lifetime dating partners and fell in love an average of one time. No significant differences were identified among Mexican American and White adolescent dating experiences. Over 90% of youth preferred to date the other sex, rendering findings in this study primarily applicable to heterosexual youth.

## **2.2. Procedure**

The local Institutional Review Board approved this research. Following initial

recruitment to gather interested participants, adolescents (N= 90) completed a brief telephone-screening questionnaire to determine whether they self-identified as Mexican American or White and were to enter the 10th, 11th, or 12th grade in the fall. All targeted participants met these criteria and were asked to participate. Adolescents and parents were told in an introductory letter sent home that the purpose of the study was to understand the meaning of dating relationships from the perspectives of high school students. The second author spoke to all participants and their parents, and all parents provided verbal and written consents. Five youth were unable to be scheduled to participate in a focus group, and three adolescents did not show up and were not able to be rescheduled. Technical difficulties resulted in a loss of two focus group audio files. Two additional groups were scheduled, resulting in a total sample size of 75 youth. All participants brought signed permission forms to the data collection site (i.e. youth center or the research lab), and after confidentiality of other group members' information and respect for all perspectives were emphasized, all adolescents assented to participate. Some of the focus group participants knew each other prior to participating and some did not. Regardless, adolescents created pseudo names that were used throughout the session to protect their identity. Focus groups lasted approximately 1.5 h, and adolescents were provided refreshments, food, and \$10 for compensation. Youth were also given a debriefing handout that provided information on healthy dating relationships and local resources.

The primary aim of the present research was to elicit youth's lived experiences and to assess what youth wished they had known about dating relationships. Similar to their everyday interactions with peers, focus groups allowed youth to discuss thoughts and experiences, and to influence and be influenced by others. Adolescents were able to openly engage in conversation, allowing the researchers to assess first-hand the types of information that youth may discuss in relationship/sexual health courses if given the opportunity. The second author moderated all focus group sessions, along with an assistant moderator (matched so as to represent the gender and ethnicity of the group). The second author asked questions while keeping conversations on track with minimal verbal prompts (Krueger & Casey, 2000) in order to allow for natural dialogue by listening and making sure everyone had the opportunity to converse. A series of

questions were developed a priori from a review of pertinent literature, and key questions were consistent to allow for comparisons across groups. After an in-depth discussion of dating and sexuality, the participants were asked: *Is there anything no one ever told you but you wish you had known about romantic or dating relationships?*

### **2.3. Plan of analysis**

Focus groups were audiotaped and transcribed before being entered into a qualitative software program (QSR Nvivo; Gibbs, 2002). Written dialogue was analyzed via a form of content analysis whereby the researchers considered participants' responses on the basis of frequency, emotionality, specificity, and extensiveness (Krueger & Casey, 2000). The researchers sought themes by analyzing dialogue from within each focus group; the group, rather than the individual, was the unit of analysis. Themes did not emerge from a preexisting conceptual framework, but rather from group dialogue. Several careful readings of verbatim transcripts yielded meaningful categories of similar concepts, resulting in the formation of a reliable coding scheme. Confirming examples of each theme and subtheme were sought to support each theme, and the final coding scheme was the result of several codebook reiterations. Documentation was kept for each reiteration, and the final coding scheme demonstrated excellent reliability as verified by a third researcher ( $K=.90$ ). The results are outlined below along with brief summaries of each category. Meaning is sought in order to develop a consensus within, and make comparisons across, gender and ethnicity.

### **3. Results**

Four major themes emerged, each representative of a different category of desire: emotional, relational, physical, and interpersonal. Subthemes emerged under each category. Themes and subthemes are presented in order of saliency, and each quotation represents a different person speaking in the group. Participants spoke freely about what they wished they had known and were encouraged to discuss personal experiences. Youth were not asked directly about their desired sources of information; rather, specified sources are highlighted within each theme when they were unreservedly mentioned. Generally, adolescents desired more information from parents pertaining to

emotional, relational, and physical desires and from school pertaining to physical desires.

Adhering closely to a phenomenological interpretation of adolescents' dialogue, subthemes within each category are delineated using actual quotes from participants. Pertaining to emotional desires, adolescents wished they had been better prepared for the emotional turmoil they would experience as part of romantic relationships. They also wished they had known not to become emotionally involved too quickly, and that breakups are painful. Pertaining to relational desires, adolescents wished they had known that they would have to learn about romantic relationships largely through personal experiences, and that there are differences between males' and females' behavior and expectations. They also desired more information on how to communicate more effectively with the other sex, and wished they had been more aware of the level of commitment necessary to maintain a relationship. Pertaining to physical desires, adolescents desired more information about pregnancy, sexual intercourse, and about their bodies. Finally, adolescents wished they had known that romantic relationships had the potential to negatively affect their relationships with other people in their lives, such as family and friends.

### **3.1. Emotional desires**

Dialogue was coded as an emotional desire when adolescents referenced personal feelings pertaining to romantic relationships that they wished they had been more prepared to encounter. This was the most salient category. The majority of the dialogue coded under this category referred to emotional pain, although such pain often followed periods of pleasure in the relationship. Females were the only groups to wish they had known that they would experience so many emotional highs and lows, and males were the only groups to specifically address emotional attachment. Both genders and ethnicities wished they had known more about the emotional pain resulting from a breakup.

#### **3.1.1. *I wish I would have known that... “sometimes you can feel sad and sometimes you can feel happy”***

Both White and Latina females expressed that they wished they had been more prepared for the emotional turmoil resulting from involvement in romantic partnerships. Females often felt vulnerable, and experienced abrupt and powerful changes in mood within the relationship. Emotional oscillations were a result of unpredictable experiences:

“...like some of your experiences are good and you're like, ‘Aw, this is cute.’ And some of them like blow up in your face.” White female

As females discussed the ups and downs of relationships, they agreed that “falling in love is hard” because of the emotional pain that is so often a part of the process. White females wished they had known that “it's so easy to get hurt. Like, that it's inevitable to get hurt...”. Females wished their parents had prepared and shielded them more from the emotional pain in romantic relationships:

“It's funny because your parents usually like, they don't protect you from that, but like when you're little and you're like, you know biking or whatever, you put on the helmet and all the pads, so you're ok, so you don't get hurt. But, your parents don't give you that for relationships. They should.” White female

Latina females specified that they would like for parents to “be more supportive”, and to teach them more about “what to expect” pertaining to powerful emotions associated with romantic involvement. Latinas felt that emotional pain was the predictable underside of happiness:

“You have to feel really bad and then something good happens and it's like you appreciate it more.” Latina female

Another Latina agreed and analogized that relationships are “like a house”, built up over time and not truly appreciated until the hard work is put in. While this group of Latina adolescents wished they had known that relationships would result in inescapable emotional pain, other Latinas felt that dating older males entailed an additional layer of emotional risk:

“He had a girlfriend like in high school with him and I was just stupid to think that he actually was serious about me or something. I wish someone would have told me, ‘He's in high school, come on, he doesn't care about you...’”  
Latina female

The provided example was characteristic of other Latina females' experiences, and peer approval was briefly discussed as an incentive for dating older males.

### **3.1.2. *I wish I would have known that...“it's painful when you break up with someone”***

Adolescents of both ethnicities and genders wished they had known that, in addition to emotional pain *while in* relationships, grief was almost always a result of its termination. A group of White females and Latino males contextualized breakups as especially difficult when the relationship had been long-term:

“...it's painful when you break up with someone you actually care about.” “Yea, like let's say you date someone for like about a year or so, and somehow you just breakup . . .” Latino males

“You're like, ‘Okay, I just dedicated like two years of my life to you....What the



heck?' Then, there's definitely like something to be like, 'oh!' (gasp)...freak out about!" White female

A large conversation among White females revolved around the temporal nature of high school romance. One particular adolescent wished she had known not to become emotionally upset at the termination of a relationship that was bound to end:

"Like they come and they go...maybe at one point in your life you will find the perfect guy...but it will take like awhile for that to happen and so... you shouldn't cry over spilt milk. Like you know, if you really don't feel a connection for a guy, it shouldn't really like hurt you or affect you if you guys are like, 'Hey, this isn't working.'" White female

Latino males desired "steps to cope with a breakup", but White males debated whether there was an alternatively "good way to go about it" and felt that "you're going to feel crappy either way."

### ***3.1.3. I wish I would have known not to... "get attached too soon"***

While only females discussed desires to be more prepared for the emotional mountains and valleys of romantic involvement, males explicitly stated that they wished they had known not to become too emotionally involved at too quick a pace. Latino males wished they had known to "...have a good time ya know, don't get too serious too fast" and White males agreed that when it comes to relationships, it's important to "take your time."

### ***3.2. Relational desires***

Dialogue was coded as a relational desire when adolescents referenced things they wished they had known about navigating the relationship itself. Adolescents of both Latino and White ethnicities commonly discussed the notion that many relationship lessons must be personally experienced, as well as dialogued about specific qualities they wished they had been aware of within the other gender's expectations or behaviors. While some generalizations were prefaced with the notion that every person is different,

many statements pertaining to the other sex had a tone of warning to same-sex peers. Additionally, males desired more information about communicating with members of the other sex, and adolescents of both genders and ethnicities wished they had known the level of commitment and hard work necessary to keep a romantic partner happy.

### **3.2.1. *I wish I would have known that... “you will never know until you do it yourself”***

A repeated theme across genders and ethnicities was that teens have to learn about romantic relationships through personal experiences. When asked what they wished they had known, many retorted with statements exemplified by the following: “Most of the stuff...you gotta experience for yourself”, “You gotta wait till it happens to you”, and “You have to live and learn.”

Numerous groups debated the role that advice from others had in their romantic lives. Without negating the importance of personal experience, some felt that more information on dating nevertheless would have been helpful. White females felt that one reason they had not been told much about relationships before was because their parents “actually don’t really care.” Teens often felt that their relationships were minimized by teachers and parents, and expressed that they wished adults would take their relationships more seriously:

“Adults keep saying ‘Oh they’re kids, they don’t know anything’ — then teach us!”

Latino male

However, the majority of teens across groups agreed that “...no matter what anybody tells you, you’re going to try it out”. White females felt this was especially true when information stemmed from their parents, whom they viewed as out of touch with current dating experiences. Latina females, however, commented that not having listened to family’s advice had resulted in belated regret:

“When they tell you something, you will think it is not true...you wish, like you would have listened to it.” “Then you get depressed...” “You are like, ‘Oh, I wish I had listened.’” “And the next time hopefully you will learn and you will know.”

Latina females

Some teens even went so far as to say that there is a natural tendency to “do the opposite of what someone tells you”, and some advised against listening to others' advice: “I think you shouldn't ruin your life just doing what other people tell you”.

A common theme was that “everyone is different”, so relationship experiences with one dating partner may not apply to another. In sum, many adolescents wished they had known that hardship was necessary in order to learn and experience personal growth. In any case, teens reported that it would have been nice to know that this would be a difficult process:

“I guess it just would have been nice to have been expecting that I have no idea what's going on ninety nine percent of the time, to just have been warned that I was going to be clueless...” White male

### ***3.2.2. I wish I would have known that...“boys are bad” and “girls are confusing”***

Adolescents of both genders and across ethnicities wished they had known more about a large number of negative attributions pertaining to the other sex. Although raised by both ethnicities, name-calling and negative other-sex appraisals (e.g., “Girls are born without souls”, “Guys are deceitful”, “Guys are lying bastards”) were more common among White than Latino adolescents, and often reflected a grappling with painful relationship experiences. Furthermore, White adolescents were more likely to discuss negative partner characteristics alongside reasons for dating. For example, White males generalized that “girls seem to need to have that other someone, like a guy, more than a guy needs to have a girl.” Males felt that females sometimes entered into relationships to use them as a tool for making other males jealous, to increase their self-esteem, and to become more popular. Likewise, males themselves reported that selection of a particular female partner was often to secure “bragging rights”. Females, on the other hand, were more likely to discuss wishing they had known that males need to appear “macho” and do not “want to appear vulnerable”, especially in front of their friends. A large conversation among White males resulted from the initial statement, “Girls don't

understand the whole third wheel concept". These males discussed the tendency for females to bring friends along on their dates, and for this to result in her friend's exclusion and in not being able to "work it" (sexually).

Much dialogue reflected a desire to simply understand the other sex better, as summarized by a White female who stated, "There are different things that chicks expect and there are different things that guys expect." Adolescents desired to know what the other sex expected in relationships, and even asked the moderator at times to disclose what the other sex groups had discussed. Conclusions were often drawn that all people "have different feelings and expectations and it's never the same."

### ***3.2.3. I wish I would have known... "how to talk to them"***

Males of both ethnicities were more likely than females to discuss the avoidance of conflict in a relationship, and expressed that they would like "drama avoiding tips". Males wished they had received more information on how to effectively communicate with the other sex so "she doesn't get mad at you". Angering a female partner was a reoccurring theme across four male focus groups (two White/two Latino) and reflected a desire to understand female "sensitivity issues". Males wished they had known "things not to say to her" and "what not to talk about" since "...certain things piss off certain people and knowing before that it's going to piss her off will kinda stop you from saying that."

Similarly, one Latina female group wished they had known how to communicate effectively in spite of their anger at a male partner:

"Because, I mean, it's hard to be pissed off at somebody and like try to talk to them about what happened or stay with them."

The above dialogue was also coded in the following category for a simultaneously expressed desire to have realized the amount of commitment necessary to continue with the relationship in spite of conflict.

### ***3.2.4. I wish I would have known... "how committed you have to be"***

Two White male groups and one Latina female group expressed that they wished

they had known how much work relationships are. White males discussed the importance of pleasing a partner by remembering important events in their life and keeping in regular communication:

“Well something I found out was that you definitely have to keep up with everything that's going on with your girlfriend and boyfriend. Like you have to know when their birthday is and when their dance recital is and like you have to call them and keep up with them just to talk and like see how they're doing . . . I didn't know that when I first had a girlfriend.” White male

Males also felt pressure from their partners to please their friends and family:

“If she has a friend you do not like or never liked, you have to try — try to be nice to them.” White male

Latina females wished they had known the high level of commitment necessary to preserve the relationship when angry at one's partner.

### **3.3. *Physical desires***

Dialogue was coded as a physical desire when participants wished they had been given more information about sexual activity, consequences of sexual activity, and sexual anatomy. One White female group offered the majority of dialogue under this category; these White females held a lengthy and emotionally-charged conversation about the negative impacts of unintended pregnancy, the tendency to become swept away in sexual desire and curiosity without knowing how to establish and maintain desired boundaries, and retrospective confusion about sex and anatomy. They offered a number of suggestions to improve sexual education in schools and both White and Latina females desired more information from parents as well.

### 3.3.1. *I wish I would have known about “getting pregnant”*

Contrary to “don't have sex class”, a common theme was that adolescents are having sex and desire more information about how to protect themselves from unwanted consequences, and for the provision of the information to be timely:

“You know, like this year, I just recently learned how to protect myself after the fact. Kind of bad when you think that I didn't even know how to.” White female

Teens wished that their parents had been accepting of their sexual activity and offered them information and resources:

“My parents always drilled sex into me, you know like, ‘It's ok you're sexually active.’ You know. ‘Just wear a condom.’ They were always like, ‘You want birth control? You can be on birth control.’ And like . . . I always have been on it. It was never, like, a problem for me...it was a lot better.” White female

The prevention of sexually transmitted infections was only lightly addressed (i.e. “Herpes spreads with one kiss”); a much more common theme in conversations revolved around undesired pregnancy, discussed briefly by Latino males and at length by White females.

“Yeah, like instead of saying ‘Don't have sex’, they should say, ‘If you are going to have sex use a condom.’” “Cause every kid is just going to go behind your back and what if they don't get condoms, then they'll...just get a girl pregnant.” Latino males

White females offered personal stories and discussed the consequences of undesired pregnancy in greater depth than did Latino males. For example, they conversed about having to grapple with the decision of whether or not to have an abortion:

“You know, they get pregnant or whatever and they're not ok with abortion... the rest of their life is, like f@#\$ed.” White female

These White females also hypothesized about improved outcomes for children

coming from teen pregnancies, and did so within the context of an expressed desire for modified sexual education:

“It's like, they just need to have their separate programs because like, I bet you anything, we wouldn't have such a problem with kids being in adoptions and foster homes and stuff like that, you know?” White female

One adolescent disclosed that she was very thankful that her mother had talked to her about sex, and had provided her with condoms and birth control. She stated that, otherwise, she “could have had a kid by now” like some of her other friends. Finally, females connected sexual with emotional and relational desires:

“Because people think they are in these relationships, that they are actually going to last and then they go have sex and someone gets pregnant and they split up and then it's all over. You are screwed for life.” White female

Females hypothesized that parents and school educators did not teach them more about sex to discourage them from engaging in it. To the contrary, they wished they had known how to protect themselves from pregnancy, which these White females viewed as a detrimental event.

### **3.3.2. *I wish I would have known...“about sex”***

A statement made by a White female catalyzed a large conversation pertaining to an expressed physical desire: “I wish someone had taught me more about sex, so I would have known . . . I found out about sex after the fact.” This group of White females wished their questions about sexual activity and intercourse had been addressed, and both White and Latina adolescents explicitly stated they would like parents to serve as a source of sexual information:

“And then if it doesn't come up, you know, from your mom or your dad, you are going to learn it from somewhere else. And what you may learn from someone else is probably different from what your parents want to teach you.” White female

“I wish my mom would have been like more supportive and would have talked to me about it, you know. I would know kind of what to expect.” Latina female

White adolescents wished that their parents had discussed the full range of sexual activities and the inclination for one type of activity to lead to another:

“The thing is. . . I don't want to do it until later on.” “There is temptation...” “We make out. But that will lead to it easily....that was the thing. I didn't want to be doing stuff I shouldn't have done. . . I wish someone had told me...my mom thought by not telling me, it would help.” White female

White females also wished school sexual education courses would validate their curiosity instead of simplifying discussion to nothing more than, “Not good. Don't do it.” Adolescents felt that messages to not engage in any type of sexual activity were “just going to push more people to do it.” Conversely, they desired for school educators to go beyond teaching about abstinence:

“I just like finished my last thing of health and you know doing sex ed for six years and not learning about sex at all...It's just like the abstinence thing.” White female

As evidenced, some females desired to not engage in sexual intercourse with their partners, but felt that they had not been given enough information about the progression of sexual activity. These adolescents recognized that sexual activity could quickly escalate beyond their comfort level, and felt unprepared to define clear boundaries for themselves.

### ***3.3.3. I wish I would have known... “about my body and another person's body”***

White females discussed how they wished they had known more about male and female anatomy “instead of just going through the dark about it”. These females desired anatomical information from school educators, and specifically desired to be grouped into mixed- sex classrooms to be taught the same things:

“It's ridiculous how they separate the guys from the girls because, you know, girls



may know one thing, but guys may not know another and visa versa and we all need to learn the same thing.” White female

In addition, these females desired well-timed information as the things that were taught were often taught too late. For example, one teen described how the female menstrual cycle was a topic addressed long after she had started hers:

“Hello, I don't need to know about my period. I already had it. I don't need to know this.” White female

In sum, White females felt that their sexual education courses had the potential to serve as impactful sources of sexual information pertaining to their developing bodies. Without the proper timing and structure, however, they considered such courses “useless”.

### **3.4. Interpersonal desires**

Latino males and females wished they had known that romantic partnerships had the potential to negatively impact relationships with other important people in their lives, such as family and friends. Dialogue coded under this theme largely reflected personal stories of regret that resulted from romantic involvement.

#### **3.4.1. I wish I would have known that...“it can ruin a lot of your relationships”**

Two groups of Latina females and one group of Latino males felt that involvement in romantic relationships had the potential to negatively impact the quality of other important relationships, such as those with family and friends. One Latina stated that romantic relationships can “ruin the rest of your life” by negatively affecting relationships “with that person” and “with everyone”. Latino males also wished they had known that a shift from friendship to romantic involvement may change the nature of that partnership indefinitely: “I mean maybe in a while you'll be friends again but it still will never be the same.”

Latinas discussed the tendency to spend too much time with their romantic partner “so that you kind of lose your friends”. They reported difficulty at trying to re-establish old relationship ties upon the termination of a romantic relationship, especially when they had been warned of the downside to romantic involvement:

“Because you go hang out with your friends again. They will be like, ‘I told you so.’” Latina female

Latinas also discussed a number of premises under which their relationships with their parents changed for the worse as a result of romantic involvement, one of which was as a result of rule breaking:

“Like, I snuck out of the house to go with him and stuff and my dad and family caught me and it was a big ol’ drama or whatever. And like, after that me and my dad... like he lost so much trust in me.” Latina female

Latinas felt that they were more emotionally distant from their parents as a result of “less time at home” and wished they would have known the negative impact that

romantic involvement could have on other important relationships in their lives.

#### **4. Discussion**

The findings of this study are consistent with literature highlighting the saliency of romantic and sexual relationships during adolescence (Collins et al., 2009). Dialogue pertaining to what adolescents wished they had known about dating relationships resulted in conversations about four major types of desires: emotional, relational, physical, and interpersonal. Emotional and relational desires were the most salient, highlighting the importance of taking a closer look at policies and programming that focus most heavily on sexual (physical) components of intimate partnerships.

Pertaining to emotional desires, adolescents wished they had been more prepared to encounter the affectively mountainous terrain of these early experiences. Females specifically desired more support from parents within this category and were more likely than males to discuss the emotional oscillations characteristic of their romantic involvement, a finding that is consistent with some previous literature (Shulman & Scharf, 2000), but that is deserving of further qualification. For example, using individual interviews Giordano et al. (2006) found that males exhibited similar degrees of emotional engagement as females in their romantic relationships, highlighting the importance of the type of research methodology employed. It may be that males are better able to weather day-to-day relationship stressors, especially in the early stages of romantic relationships. This reasoning would be consistent with findings among late adolescents and early adults (Shulman, Mayes, Cohen, Swain, & Leckman, 2008).

Given that males may experience more pressure to uphold masculine stereotypes that render them as unattached (Feiring, 1999), and discuss romance with their peers to a lesser degree than do females (Hill & Lynch, 1983), it is noteworthy that males in this study discussed emotional difficulty stemming from attachment and breakups. Males were more likely to wish they had known not to become attached too quickly to a romantic partner, although in the context of other discussion group questions, this caution was also raised by females. Dialogue concerning attachment among males was brief and couched as especially burdensome in the context of long-term relationship termination. Both males and females across ethnicities experienced

heartache at the conclusion of a romantic relationship, and while some viewed it as an inevitable hurdle, Latino males wished they had known how to better cope. White females, in alignment with research pertaining to more stable educational aspirations (Kao & Tienda, 1998), framed their desire to not get too caught up in high school romance in the context of future goals and aspirations.

Pertaining to relational desires, adolescents across focus groups reiterated the theme that they would have to learn about relationships through personal experience. The extent to which they desired additional information depended somewhat on whether adults were helpful and understanding. Adolescents of both ethnicities and genders felt that teachers and parents often minimized their romantic experiences; some even went so far as to assert that parents did not care. Such attitudes about adults' nonchalance and, in some cases, outright disregard may help explain why adolescents often turn to the media for information about sexuality and dating (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997), and to one another for romantic advice and support (Gould & Mazzeo, 1982). Adolescents across groups debated how much adults would be able to help them through the lessons they inevitably would have to experience on their own; many youth, however, wished they had at least been informed about the learning process itself. This finding runs alongside literature finding that adolescents desire autonomy (Arnett, 2004), and calls attention to their perceived need for adults to be supportive of lessons learned through personal experience (Furman & Shaffer, 2003).

Part of this learning process, especially for White youth, reflected a negatively toned cognitive schema toward the other sex. Derogatory other-sex appraisals were extremely common and reflected frustrations, hurt, and anger over-generalized towards all members of the other sex. This finding highlights a seemingly understood alliance between members of the *same* sex in their attack on the other. It has been said that more research is needed on the association between negative gender stereotypes and lived romantic experiences (Feiring, 1999), and that adolescence represents a unique developmental time period for reshaping attitudes about the other sex (Maccoby, 1990). One study among early adolescents found that youth preferred same-sex peers due to a liking of their own sex, rather than a disliking of the other sex (Bukowski, Gauze, Hoza, & Newcomb, 1993). This research, on the contrary, suggests that adolescents may have

very engrained relationship scripts that ascertain positive other-sex personality characteristics as the exception rather than the rule. More research is needed to understand the effects of negative other-sex stereotyping across adolescent developmental periods, especially as it concerns amorous partnering during adolescence.

In this study, other-sex appraisals highlighted reasons for choosing a certain dating partner; males felt that females did so for popularity, self-esteem, as a tool for jealousy, and for emotional security while females felt that males were more concerned with physical attractiveness and status among other male peers. These scripts largely reflect accuracy in terms of previously documented gender differences (Feiring, 1999), but the fact that romantic experiences elicited such strong descriptions (e.g. "Girls are born without souls") may also reflect a desire for deeper intimate and respectful connection. It is noteworthy that name-calling was more evident among White youth; this may reflect Latino youth's adherence to an upholding of cultural goals including honor and respect for others (Alvarez, Bean, & Williams, 1981).

Gender considerations were also evidenced at the relational level and reflected a desire to communicate in such a way that avoided conflict. Males of both ethnicities evidenced more frustration towards this aim than females and Latina females' dialogue correspondingly supported an expressed difficulty in knowing how to handle anger towards a romantic partner. This finding supports greater discomfort on behalf of males in communicating with females (Giordano et al., 2006) and a tendency for adolescent males to upset females through what they may intend to be jokes or playful banter (Sears, Byers, Whelan, & Saint-Pierre, 2006). Youth's desire to avoid and manage conflict was tied to a commitment deemed necessary to maintain the relationship; males in particular felt that certain forms of sustained effort were necessary to keep a female partner satisfied (e.g., doing nice things for them, being nice to their friends and family). These findings propose important gender differences in the ways in which relationship satisfaction is ascertained in adolescent dyads.

White females dialogued about physical desires at length and provided a number of emotionally charged personal stories pertaining to things they wished they had known about sexual activity, its unintended consequences, their bodies, and a perceived lack

of support regarding dating and sexuality from the adults in their lives. White females, as compared to Latina, were especially concerned about pregnancy as an undesired outcome of sexual activity. White females raised issues of abortion, adoption, and single parenthood in their plea for more knowledge about contraception, and specifically mentioned parents and school programming as sources of potentially useful information. Parallel to future-oriented relational desires, White females' dialogue reflected greater preoccupation concerning the long-term negative effects that pregnancy could have on their lives. White females wished that parents had provided more information on the escalation of sexual activity (e.g. kissing to intercourse), a finding that coincides with a high prevalence of non-coital experimentation (Halpern-Felsher et al., 2005) and suggests that they would look to other sources of information about sex if parents did not provide it (e.g., media; Kaiser Family Foundation, 1997). Finally, White females wished that sexual education in schools had been more informative; they specifically requested that it provide a forum for open discussion and questioning, and that males and females be grouped together to learn about anatomy, sexual activity, and intercourse.

The lack of discussion about pregnancy prevention among Latina females coincides with earlier transitions to child bearing (East, 1998) and generally more favorable attitudes towards the prospect of becoming pregnant (Unger, Molina, & Teran, 2000). Given that Latino (as well as White) males desired more information about preventing pregnancy, perhaps including couples in discussions is an important avenue for future research and programming aims. Latina females may be more likely to hold ambivalent views on early childrearing, and their perception concerning whether a partner desires a child is a strong predictor of pregnancy (Cowley & Farley, 2001). Furthermore, Latina females may be more likely to engage in sexual intercourse as a result of pressure from a boyfriend, whereas Latino males may separate sexual desire from romance in more casual encounters (Aarons & Jenkins, 2002). Finally, as it pertained to interpersonal desires, Latinos were more likely than White youth to wish they had known that important relationships might change as a result of romantic involvement. For example, Latina females expressed regret for breaking family rules, which had resulted in a loss of trust from parents. Latino males and females also wished they had known

that relationships with parents and friends may suffer from less time spent together. An emphasis on interpersonal and family relationships among Latino youth is consistent with cultural norms that prioritize communal and family goals (Flores et al., 1998).

#### **4.1. Recommendations for sexual education**

Despite the established importance of adolescent romantic experiences through the demonstration of both distal (i.e. mental health, peer acceptance, family relationships) and proximal (i.e. quality of subsequent romantic relationships) outcomes (Collins et al., 2009), the formal education that teens receive regarding their sexuality does not entail a discussion of the psycho-social skills imperative to navigating interpersonal experiences within a relationship context. A critical eye towards current programming is necessary when one considers that the United States boasts one of the highest STI and unplanned teen pregnancy rates among industrialized nations (Singh & Darroch, 1998). The current findings lend support to the SIECUS Guidelines for comprehensive sexual education. The criteria use a strengths-perspective within a holistic context that includes developmental considerations, personal social skills, sexual behavior, and sexual health within a society influenced by religion, media, the arts, and gender role expectations (SIECUS, 2004).

The most pressing desires for teens of both genders and ethnicities were emotional in nature, a finding that highlights a severance between the psychological outcomes expressed as important under abstinence-only education but not specifically targeted through its educational curricula. Discussions of sexuality were intricately connected to emotional, relational, and interpersonal desires and accentuate the need for education that considers the whole person as a sexual being and that incorporates findings from marital and counseling literatures. Important gender and ethnic differences emerged, suggesting that overly-simplistic and universal programming may have differential and perhaps even iatrogenic effects for some youth. For example, Latina youth may benefit more from discussions that validate family-oriented values and capitalize on relationships with a dating partner and other important friends and family members. Pregnancy prevention among this group may be more effective if teens, partners, and parents are supported in planning for the future, such as by providing

information and aid in college preparation.

Teens across ethnicity and gender desired more information and support from adults pertaining to their romantic and sexual relationships. According to these youth, an absence of discussion with adults resulted in turning elsewhere for information. This is concerning since media messages are often unrealistic in their portrayal of intimate relationships, context of sexual activity, and consequences associated with such activity (Kunkel et al., 2003). Parents can play an important role by facilitating dialogue that challenges norms and instills realistic expectations and desired values. That some teens expressed a desire to learn more from their parents about sex and dating is in line with research suggesting that parents who are open to issues of sexuality have teens that exhibit less risky behavior. For example, Whitaker and Miller (2000) found that adolescents whose parents discussed sex and condom use were more likely to turn to them for information about sexuality and were less likely to be influenced by peer norms. Educating parents on the important role that they play in the healthy sexual development of their youth and equipping them with information on how to effectively role-model and discuss dating and sexuality is fundamental in progressing towards healthier adolescent relationships. Recommendations in line with Miller et al. (1998) are to include a parent education component covering *how* and not just *what* to talk to teens about, as well as to cover a wide range of topics including the timing of sexual activity, the use of contraceptives, STIs, sexual pressure, and choosing sexual partners. Parents also need to be taught to be open, warm, and honest, and to approach teens in a manner that validates their experiences (Miller et al., 1998).

Although parents have the potential to serve as a portal for sexual and relationship information, they do not always welcome the opportunity to discuss such matters with their youth and minority parents face additional challenges in doing so. Indeed, the Kaiser Family Foundation/ABC Television (1998) found that parents desire more time spent on sexual education in the classroom, and that the education include information on abstinence as well as the prevention of STIs and pregnancy, emotional aspects of sexuality, sexual pressure, and sexual orientation. The findings of the present study point to an openness on behalf of youth to learn from both home and school, and it is suggested that schools work more closely with parents to meet the composite desires of youth. For example, minority



parents may need additional outreach on behalf of school personnel to form meaningful collaborations and to bridge contradictory home vs. mainstream sexual values. Moreover, studies consistently demonstrate the importance of also including peers in educational processes (Romeo & Kelley, 2009). Thus, it is argued that education should attend to the multidimensional needs of the human psyche and body (i.e. emotional, relational, physical, and interpersonal) via collaborative efforts that include youth themselves, peers, family, and school educators.

This study offers a rich amount of information from the perspectives of Mexican American and White youth pertaining to their romantic and sexual relationships. However, it is not without its limitations. There is limited transferability to other populations, as the sample was not chosen randomly and the findings represent the views and experiences of a specific demographic population of the Southwest. Adolescents were grouped in a homogenous manner (i.e., by gender and ethnicity) in order to make comparisons across groups and facilitate unconstrained dialogue. It is possible, however, that dialogue would have been different if the environment had reflected heterogeneity that is more characteristic of their daily lives in a classroom setting. Also, gathering individual data about sexual experiences may have helped in the interpretation of dialogue. Asking youth about how peers, family, school education, and the media had specifically shaped their current knowledge may have resulted in additional pertinent information in order to better contextualize what they wished they had known. While not feasible given limited time and resources, multiple methods (e.g., prolonged engagement, member checking, observation) may have strengthened the validity and reliability of findings (Padgett, 2008).

As a final point, Mexican American youth vary extensively in their romantic and sexual experiences as a function of religiosity, acculturation, and educational aspirations. For example, higher levels of acculturation have been associated with the experience of dating violence (Sanderson, Coker, Roberts, Tortolero, & Reininger, 2004). Moreover, it has been suggested that adolescent romantic partners of differing levels of acculturation may experience conflict resulting from a female shift towards egalitarian relationship desires (Ulloa, Jaycox, Skinner, & Orsburn, 2008). Future studies should divide groups by levels of acculturation to gain more within-group understanding.

This study sought to inform the literature via a cross-ethnic comparison of romantic and sexual experiences from the perspectives of youth themselves. Asking adolescents what they wished they had known yielded important insight concerning the interconnectedness of emotional, relational, physical, and interpersonal desires among Mexican American and White youth. Findings suggest that in order for future programming to *demonstrate promise*, there is a need to expand sexual education into the realm of the household by providing culturally-appropriate information and support to parents, and to re- conceptualize school-based education within a holistic framework that attends to teens' socio-emotional relationship desires and experiences.

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