SEXTANT

Article

SEXTANT
Masculinities, Sexualities & Decolonialities
Vol. 4(1) 69-85
© The Author(s) 2026
https://doi.org/10.65621/UHRV7470

Denaturalising Desire: An Asexual Lens on Sex Education and Rape Prevention

Ayami Minemura[1]
University College Dublin

Abstract

Consent-based sex education is widely regarded as a primary tool for preventing sexual violence. This article argues that it fails at the level of its premises. Drawing on a critical synthesis of research across K-12 and campus-based contexts, it introduces the love=sex equation: the presumption that an intimate relationship will as a matter of course be a sexual one, and that sex within it is therefore already expected. Resting on heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality, the equation allows consent to appear settled by the relationship in advance of any particular encounter. Read through the analytical lens of asexuality (Przybylo, 2019), it becomes visible as one of the conditions under which coercion is enabled, and under which asexual students are disproportionately exposed to identity-based pressure. An asexual-informed approach is therefore not an accommodation for a minority but a structural intervention, with implications for all.

Keywords: asexuality, consent model, sex education, compulsory sexuality, love=sex equation

[1] Corresponding Author: Minemura, Ayami. Email: ayami.minemura@gmail.com
SEXTANT: www.sextantnotes.com ISSN: 2990-8124
Observatory of Masculinities
University College Dublin, Ireland

This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0). License terms: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Introduction

Represented by the slogan 'No means No', consent-based sex education is widely accepted as a means of preventing sexual violence; however, as many scholars point out, the consent model alone is insufficient (Hirsch and Khan, 2020; Clonan-Roy *et al.*, 2021; Pella and McClung, 2024; Fanghanel, 2025). Hirsch and Khan (2020) demonstrate that sexual encounters among college students are already embedded in power dynamics that precede any moment of consent, and Fanghanel (2025) similarly argues that heteronormative romantic scripts naturalise these very dynamics, supporting patriarchal hierarchies that position women as sexually passive and subordinate to men, thereby rendering coercion invisible. Sexual script theory (Simon and Gagnon, 1999) argues that sexual behaviour is not instinctive but learned through culturally available scripts that shape expectations regarding desire, intimacy, and appropriate conduct. Heteronormative romantic scripts are one example of such scripts, through which relationships reenact the presumptions of heterosexual attraction and sexual desire that, as scholars such as Warner (1991) have shown, are embedded within the social, cultural, political, and institutional systems that organise all life. These scripts do not merely legitimise unequal power between perpetrator and survivor, but also construct a normative subject who is assumed to 'naturally' experience sexual attraction and desires sex. This subject is produced through the 'system of social control' that Gupta (2015, p. 132) terms 'compulsory sexuality'.

Because dominant narratives of sexuality are organised around compulsory sexuality, experiences of asexuality, broadly defined as the absence of sexual attraction (Bogaert, 2004), are erased and invalidated. It is within this framework that rape and sexual violence can be misrecognised as love, care, or simply 'how relationships work'. As long as sex education leaves this structure unquestioned, it risks reinforcing the very conditions it purports to address. Przybylo (2019) develops asexuality as a critical lens through which compulsory sexuality can be identified and interrogated, positioning it not merely as an identity but as a perspective from which the presumed universality of sexual desire can be called into question (p. 26). Building on this concept, this article argues that applying an asexual lens to sex education makes visible the compulsory sexuality premise embedded in consent-based curricula. An asexual-informed approach, therefore, is not simply a reasonable accommodation for a minority, but an intervention that denaturalises the scripts that enable sexual violence, with implications that extend beyond any single group to the conditions that structure sexual life for all.

Drawing on a critical synthesis of research across educational contexts, from K-12 curricula to campus-based prevention programmes, this article demonstrates that compulsory sexuality operates as a structuring

mechanism across all levels of sex education. The article begins by examining the structural limitations of consent-based sex education. The second section develops the central conceptual contribution of this analysis, what this article terms 'the love=sex equation': the presumption that an intimate relationship will as a matter of course be a sexual one, and that sex within it is therefore already expected. Resting on both heteronormativity and compulsory sexuality, this presumption allows consent to appear settled by the relationship in advance of any particular encounter. That section then traces how the equation is reproduced in the educational materials through which young people learn to interpret intimacy. The third section develops asexuality as a denaturalising lens through which the compulsory sexuality assumption can be identified and challenged. The final section considers what truly inclusive sex education must confront if it is to address these foundations. In this way, the article offers a theoretical intervention into the conditions that make sexual coercion, particularly coercion framed as love or care, invisible to the very educational systems charged with preventing it. Throughout, 'the consent model' refers to the approach that locates the prevention of sexual violence in the communicative act of agreement between individuals, rather than to the concept of consent as such.

The Limits of Consent-Based Sex Education

Although comprehensive sex education (CSE) has been shown to produce positive outcomes across a range of health and social indicators (Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021), the premises of the consent model embedded within it are rarely subjected to scrutiny. Consent education proceeds on the assumption that consent is a neutral and transparent act of communication, and that a clear 'yes' or 'no' can be given and received straightforwardly. However, this supposition treats consent as if it occurs in a social vacuum, unaffected by the structural conditions in which sexual encounters take place. Building on Beres's (2014) critique of consent as disconnected from young people's actual communication practices, this article argues that the concept obscures the social and relational contexts that shape whether genuine refusal or agreement is possible at all. In other words, the model diagnoses the problem of sexual violence as a failure of communication, while leaving unexamined the conditions that make certain communications possible and others impossible.

The structural limits of the consent model become apparent when examining how pre-existing social power imbalances inform the distribution of 'sexual citizenship', a concept Hirsch and Khan (2020) redeploy to denote 'a socially produced sense of enfranchisement and right to sexual agency' (p. xvi). Their research demonstrates that access to and control over physical space, together with disparities in social and material resources, structure power relations within sexual encounters. These relations are not incidental; they are rooted in broader inequalities

of race, socioeconomic status, and age, which bear directly on an individual's capacity to exercise sexual citizenship. Such structural conditions are embedded in sexual life and precede any particular moment of consent. By focusing on the communicative act of agreement, the consent model addresses that moment while leaving intact and unexamined the conditions that determine whether meaningful consent is possible.

For example, dominant sexual discourse positions sexual desire as an expected attribute of a healthy subject, such that its absence is rendered as a problem in need of correction (Przybylo, 2019, p. 18). Deboeck (2026) shows how this norm shapes media representations of consent. In her analysis of the absence of asexual characters across twenty-six seasons of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, she argues that consent can only be scripted in limited ways because it is assumed that anyone in a sexual encounter could have wanted it. She further argues that greater asexual representation would produce 'a wider variety of "no" scripts' (p. 212). To carry this point into education, where asexuality is erased from curricula as well as from the broader sexual culture, students are left without the language to name nonsexual intimacy, or to decline sex on the basis of non-desire rather than of an externally legible circumstance. Where compulsory sexuality remains the unexamined baseline of sexual citizenship, these inequalities are not merely left unaddressed by the consent model. As Fanghanel (2025) argues, consent that operates heteronormatively 'sustains dominance and subordination at a socio-cultural and legalistic level' (p. 17): the model does not simply fail to disturb these hierarchies but writes them into the terms on which sexual justice is adjudicated.

The structural gap of the consent model is not merely a theoretical flaw; its practical failures are laid bare in recent campus data. Pella and McClung (2024) surveyed 291 students at a mid-sized public university in Northern California, all of whom had completed the state-mandated online consent training 'Not Anymore'. While 97% of participants correctly identified that silence does not equal consent, comprehension dropped to 49% on items evaluating contextual cues such as the removal of clothing (p. 423). Crucially, repeated training did not produce meaningful improvements in understanding: the number of times students had completed consent education showed no significant correlation with most of their scores. These findings suggest that the problem lies not in the quantity of consent education, but in the assumptions on which it is built.

Of particular note is that heterosexual men and asexual students recorded the lowest levels of consent understanding in Pella and McClung's (2024) study (p. 425). Fanghanel's (2025) account of heteronormative romantic scripts, which cast men as active initiators and women as passive respondents, offers one way of reading this result: the two groups stand

in different relations to the same script, the former as its presumed compliant subject, the latter as the position it does not anticipate. The study was not designed to test that relationship, and its findings do not establish it. They do, however, raise the possibility that current consent education is least responsive to students positioned at either edge of the script it presumes. Mollet and Black's (2021) study of asexual college students gives this reading particular weight. They report that '[n]early 1 in 4 students experienced coercive rape, over half experienced unwanted sexual contact, and 70% experienced non-contact unwanted sexual experiences' (p. 526). In their later work, Mollet and Black (2023, pp. 96-97) argue that research on campus sexual assault has tended to centre cisgender white women, to emphasise individual risk factors, and to foreground alcohol-related contexts. On their account, an underlying assumption of compulsory sexuality constrains what such research is able to see: it limits understanding of intimate relationships not organised around sexual desire, and it can obscure the identity-linked coercive tactics that perpetrators may use against asexual students. The asexual subsample in Pella and McClung's (2024) study was small (n = 19, p. 426). That figure is a limitation of the study, not in itself evidence of a wider pattern. The wider pattern is documented elsewhere: Mollet and Black (2021, p. 527) show that asexual students have often been absent from quantitative studies of collegiate sexual violence, or aggregated with other identities, practices that reproduce their invisibility. Where prevention research proceeds from this incomplete record, it risks offering only a partial account of the coercive tactics asexual students encounter. This methodological gap has theoretical consequences: it leaves compulsory sexuality intact as the background norm against which both sexual citizenship and sexual violence are interpreted.

Fanghanel (2025) offers a legal critique of the consent model, arguing that it relies upon heteronormative romantic scripts and rape myths to function. The concept of rape myths, first theorised by Burt (1980), refers to widely held cultural beliefs that serve to deny, minimise, or justify sexual violence. Within the heteronormative romantic script, in which men are positioned as active pursuers and women as passive gatekeepers whose role is to initially resist and eventually permit sexual encounters, rape myths provide the terms in which courts and institutions read ambiguous encounters as consensual (p. 2). Building on Fanghanel's (2025) argument, the ostensibly progressive 'yes means yes' model could be seen as reinforcing this dynamic: by absolutising the verbalised 'yes', it renders legally invisible the grey areas in which consent is given under coercion, offered strategically to avoid harm, or produced in circumstances where refusal is not genuinely possible. The result is that the rape myth that 'she said yes, therefore she consented' is not dismantled by the consent model, but legally legitimised by it.

The supposition that consent alone prevents rape not only ignores structural power imbalances; it also normalises heteronormative sexual activity while marginalising everything outside of it. Clonan-Roy and colleagues (2021) demonstrate this in educational materials. Analysing sixteen health education textbooks for grades five through twelve, published in the United States between 2005 and 2020, they found that eleven of the sixteen emphasised refusal skills over affirmative consent, reproducing a female-gatekeeper framework in which the responsibility for preventing sexual violence is placed on the potential victim rather than the potential perpetrator (p. 242). Clonan-Roy and colleagues (2021) note that their critique is directed not at consent as a concept, but at its near-total absence from actual classroom materials. Furthermore, even those curricula that explicitly incorporate consent frequently limit their illustrative examples to heteronormative and cisgendered scenarios, illustrating how consent education, when provided, often serves to reify rather than interrogate the heteronormative script. Thus, the problem is twofold: the absence of consent education sustains rape culture, while consent education conducted within a heteronormative structure perpetuates the very power imbalances it claims to address (Beres, 2014; Fanghanel, 2025). This female-gatekeeper framing, in which women are constructed as responsible for managing male desire, creates the discursive conditions within which coercion can be misrecognised as love, the subject of the following section.

The Love=Sex Equation and Its Reproduction in Education

The structural failure of the consent model rests upon a deeper discursive premise: the equivalence of love with sex, and of sex with a single, privileged act. This article introduces the term ‘the love=sex equation’ to name the presumption that an intimate relationship will, as a matter of course, be a sexual one, and that sex within it therefore requires no particular occasion or invitation. The equation is not a description of how people relate but a belief about how they are supposed to. In this it functions much as Burt's (1980) rape myths do, as a widely held presumption through which encounters are read and judged; it differs in operating at the level of the relationship rather than the individual encounter. It rests on the two structures set out in the introduction: heteronormativity, which supplies the roles of initiator and gatekeeper, and compulsory sexuality, which establishes that a person will desire sex at all.

Its consequence for consent is direct. Where sex is presumed to follow from intimacy, consent ceases to be something established on each occasion and becomes something the relationship is taken to have granted already. What the consent model treats as the decisive moment of communication has, in effect, been settled in advance of it. The model's difficulties are therefore not failures of implementation. The equation

determines the conditions under which the model is asked to operate at all.

The equation carries a second dimension. In presuming that intimacy entails sex, it also presumes a particular understanding of what sex is. For example, Carpenter (2001) argues that defining virginity loss exclusively in terms of vaginal intercourse is not a neutral description of a physiological fact, but a discursive act that constructs heterosexual penetration as 'real sex' (p. 136), against which all other sexual practices are measured and, by implication, found lacking. This definition reproduces sexual norms as much as it describes them, marginalising diverse sexual practices and denying recognition to those whose sexuality falls outside the heteronormative script. More than two decades after Carpenter's (2001) analysis, the discursive construction she identified continues to govern contemporary sexual practices. Andrejek, Fetner, and Heath (2022) demonstrate that both men and women continue to engage in what they term 'gender labor' (p. 193), the performance of sexual acts that conform to a narrow, penetration-centred definition of sex, confirming that this heteronormative script remains structurally embedded in contemporary sexual practice. Its influence extends into educational settings: if sex education programmes assume homogeneity in beliefs about sex, Carpenter (2001) warns, they are likely to fail, systematically restricting the cultural toolkit available to students for constructing their sexual identities. This implication is empirically borne out by Clonan-Roy and colleagues (2021), whose textbook analysis confirms that school curricula indeed adhere to this homogeneous, heteronormative model. For instance, one textbook advises students to 'go out as a group', 'avoid alcohol or other drugs', and 'communicate your limits to your date before you go out' as strategies to prevent date rape, directives addressed at the potential victim, with no corresponding instruction on how not to perpetrate (p. 240). Another exercise asks students, 'Why are males getting mixed signals from females?', framing acquaintance rape as a consequence of women's communicative failure rather than of men's acts of violence (p. 242). Such examples demonstrate that textbooks not only assume heteronormativity but also actively place responsibility for rape prevention on the potential victim while omitting lessons on how not to perpetrate.

Such educational approaches prepare the conditions under which coercion becomes invisible. Gupta (2015) theorises that compulsory sexuality rests on the assumption that 'normal and healthy romantic relationships involve sexual activity' (p. 140). This proposition operates not merely as a cultural belief but as a normative standard against which relationships are measured: those that do not centre on sexual activity risk being judged as deficient or incomplete. As a result, being in a romantic relationship comes to imply sexual availability, regardless of whether either partner actually

desires sex. In Beres's (2014) exploration of college students' conceptualisations of consent, a narrative emerges that sexual violence cannot occur within intimate relationships, linked to the belief that consent does not need to be actively confirmed within committed or legally recognised partnerships. Furthermore, Fanghanel's (2025) analysis of court cases involving women's deaths during allegedly consensual rough sex with men shows that heteronormative scripts may function as proxies for consent, positioning the male as the initiator and the female as the gatekeeper who bears final responsibility for whether sex occurs. Here, the script works not merely as a replacement for consent, but also as a legitimising system for sexual coercion that renders violence invisible (pp. 12-13).

Critically, as Fanghanel (2025) notes, the existence of this script redirects institutional attention away from the perpetrator's exercise of control and towards the affective exchange between the two parties. The result is that the victim's fear and confusion are rendered invisible, while the perpetrator's coercive behaviour is recast as romantic passion. This rationale is not confined to legal settings. Hlavka (2014), in her study of young women's accounts of harassment and abuse, finds that girls routinely normalise sexual violence by interpreting it through precisely these heteronormative scripts describing coercive behaviour as 'just how boys are' or as evidence of romantic interest (p. 344). By reproducing rather than interrogating these scripts, sex education actively participates in this normalisation. The impact of this normalisation is experienced not only by those who adhere to heteronormative scripts but also by those who fall outside of them. Mollet and Black (2023, p. 100) show that asexual college students face specific coercive tactics that weaponise the love=sex equation itself, and include threats to end the relationship, repeated asking, and emotional pressure, demonstrating that relationship status is used as a lever for compliance.

The reproduction of heteronormative scripts in sex education reaches beyond those in heterosexual relationships. Warner (1991) coined the term heteronormativity to describe the institutional and cultural processes through which heterosexuality is constructed as the natural and unmarked norm. Heteronormativity renders all non-heterosexual lives and relationships as deviant or invisible. McCann and Sharp (2023) demonstrate that this single-axis model of power, in which cisgender men dominate cisgender women, structures not only educational materials but institutional responses to sexual violence more broadly. Analysing cases of LGBTQ+ sexual violence on campus, they show that organisational and media responses consistently presuppose a perpetrator-victim dynamic that maps onto a heteronormative gender binary, an assumption that makes sexual harassment within same-sex or queer relationships difficult to recognise. This difficulty is not confined to childhood and adolescence: as McCann and Sharp's (2023) study of university campuses

demonstrates, it persists into higher education. In the cases they examine, harassment perpetrated by those in positions of institutional power, such as by faculty members toward students, was reframed as queer intimacy or goodwill within the community. This label simultaneously concealed the power imbalance and repositioned the victim's complaint as a misreading of queer social norms. As McCann and Sharp (2023) argue, the discursive categories of love, intimacy, and goodwill function not merely as descriptions of relationship dynamics but as institutional tools that neutralise accusations of sexual violence and suppress survivor testimony. Sex education's failure to address power within non-heterosexual relationships, its premise that the relevant axis of power is always male-over-female, reproduces precisely the conditions that McCann and Sharp (2023) identify. A curriculum that presents sexual violence exclusively through a male-over-female lens renders same-sex and queer coercion unrecognisable, while also actively teaching students that power in intimate relationships maps onto gender difference: a premise that compulsory sexuality depends upon.

Violence against LGBTQ+ individuals further illustrates how the love=sex equation functions as a form of heteronormative role coercion. Meyer (2012) analyses the discourse surrounding anti-lesbian violence, focusing on cases in which perpetrators frame their actions through the belief that masculine lesbians are ‘converting’ feminine women into lesbians, which is a construction that positions women's sexuality as passively determined by the influence of others rather than as a matter of individual subjectivity (p. 859). This framing is not incidental. It reflects a heteronormative understanding of women's sexual identity as something done to them, not something they possess. Building on Meyer's (2012) study, the love=sex equation can be viewed here as operating as a coercive demand: the proposition that love naturally produces sex, and that resistance to this equation requires correction. When sex education frames women's sexuality as a site for management or protection, it actively reproduces the logic Meyer (2012) identifies: a construction that positions female desire as the product of external influence rather than individual subjectivity, such that coercive behaviour directed at women's sexuality is institutionally legible as correction rather than violence. Therefore, the love=sex equation is not a cultural accident. It is an institutionally reproduced script, which has been historically reinforced rather than questioned by sex education. What remains to be asked is what it means to stand outside this equation: to experience neither the compulsion to desire nor the social recognition that comes with it. That question is the subject of the following section.

Asexuality as a Denaturalising Lens

If the love=sex equation is a heteronormative construction, then asexuality, broadly defined as the absence of sexual attraction, exposes

the compulsory sexuality that renders this construction invisible, rather than simply naming a minority identity. The concept of compulsory sexuality builds on Rich's (1980) identification of compulsory heterosexuality as a social system that compels women into the institution of heterosexuality (Gupta, 2015). Gupta (2015) formally extends this concept, defining compulsory sexuality as the assumption that all people are sexual, and the set of social norms that marginalise various forms of non-sexuality while compelling individuals to experience themselves as desiring subjects, take up sexual identities, and engage in sexual activity. Under this system, the absence of sexual desire is treated not as a legitimate form of human experience, but as evidence of moral, medical, or psychological disorder. Przybylo (2019) similarly describes compulsory sexuality as the presumption that sexuality is 'original, primary, prevalent, preferred, and superior, and thus socially rewarded and bolstered, to the detriment of other sexualities' (p. 15). Crucially, asexuality within this framework does not denote a rejection of sex per se. As Pella and McClung (2024), citing Hille and colleagues (2020), note, many asexual individuals enjoy touch and romance, and some engage in sexual activity for reasons unrelated to sexual attraction, such as emotional intimacy or partner satisfaction (Pella and McClung, 2024, p. 428). Rather, asexuality is the absence of sexual attraction, and it is this absence that compulsory sexuality cannot reconcile without pathologisation.

Existing campus sexual assault prevention models remain flawed because they are built upon the normative assumption that all people are sexual and inherently desire sexual activity (Mollet and Black, 2023). Consequently, current prevention programmes fail to address the forms of coercion that asexual students encounter and the coercion that occurs, not through stranger violence, but within intimate and complex relational contexts (Mollet and Black, 2023, p. 100). Mollet and Black (2023) contend that the consent model is structurally incapable of accounting for asexual experiences. It proceeds on the supposition of a desiring subject whose only task is to delineate the boundaries of that desire. Those whose non-desire is itself the target of identity-based coercive pressure are thereby rendered invisible (pp. 96-97, 100). They find that perpetrators do not simply disregard the boundaries of asexual students; they weaponise their identity, using asexuality as leverage and justifying coercion through the rationale that the victim will become sexual if sufficiently persuaded or pressured. Because existing prevention systems are premised on the idea that everyone should be sexual, they are structurally ill-equipped to address the dynamics of identity-based coercion that asexual students face (pp. 100-101).

Drawing on data from 8,752 participants across 109 countries, Chan and Hung (2025) found that two-thirds of participants (67.4%) had experienced sexual violence at least once in their lives (pp. 1810-1811). The sample included those identifying as asexual (65.9%), greysexual

(12.2%), defined as experiencing sexual attraction rarely and occupying a grey zone between asexuality and allosexuality, and demisexual (10.5%), defined as experiencing sexual attraction only after forming a strong emotional bond with another person. Chan and Hung (2025) attribute this elevated vulnerability in part to prejudice against asexuality itself (p. 1807): perpetrators may seek to invalidate an individual's asexual identity or exploit their need for emotional intimacy as a means of pressuring them into sexual activity. Notably, greysexual and demisexual individuals showed higher rates of sexual victimisation than asexual individuals (p. 1812), a finding the authors attribute to how the fluidity of their sexual attraction and their capacity for emotional intimacy can be misread and weaponised by partners (p. 1816) who interpret these qualities as signs of latent sexual availability.

Of particular theoretical significance is Chan and Hung's (2025) finding that aromantic individuals, those who do not experience romantic attraction, recorded comparatively low rates of victimisation (p. 1812). This pattern suggests that romantic attachment, rather than sexuality per se, may function as the primary gateway through which sexual coercion is legitimised. The heteronormative logic that love naturally entails sex creates the conditions under which a partner's non-desire can be reframed as an obstacle to be overcome rather than a boundary to be respected. Read in this way, the data are suggestive of the argument developed here: that the love=sex equation operates not merely as a cultural script but as one of the conditions under which harm is enabled. This reading calls for direct empirical testing rather than standing in for it. Thus, prevention programmes must actively uncouple romantic intimacy from presumed sexual availability.

The cases examined in this section reveal a consistent pattern that sexual coercion against asexual individuals becomes most visible precisely at the point where the norm of compulsory sexuality is most forcefully applied. When a partner's non-desire is treated as a problem to be corrected through persuasion, manipulation, or force, the mechanism by which the discourse of love perpetuates sexual violence is laid bare in its most transparent form (Gupta, 2015; Mollet and Black, 2023; Chan and Hung, 2025). It is for this reason that Przybylo (2019) positions asexuality not merely as a minority identity requiring accommodation, but as what this article terms a ‘denaturalising lens’: one that makes visible the compulsory sexuality assumption that heteronormative scripts depend upon, and that consent education leaves unexamined. The following section considers what inclusive sex education might look like if it took this assumption seriously, and what it would need to confront to do so.

Beyond Compulsory Sexuality: The Foundational Stakes of Inclusive Education

As the preceding sections demonstrate, compulsory sexuality is inseparable from the conditions that enable rape and sexual violence. Even the most authoritative international guidance on sex education is not free from the assumption of compulsory sexuality. UNESCO (2018) defines sexuality as 'a core dimension of being human' (p. 17). While the guidance meaningfully expands its conception of sexual subjects to include LGBTI youth and disabled young people, it does not question the underlying premise that sexuality itself is a universal feature of human experience. The inclusion of previously marginalised groups is framed as an expansion of who counts as a sexual subject, not as a challenge to the requirement that all people be sexual subjects in the first place. This pattern is not confined to a single case. Fedorchenko (2025), analysing sex education curriculum guidelines in Europe and Germany, finds that even materials that explicitly endorse the acceptance of diversity preserve a binary, biologically determinist system of gender and the body as the unmarked norm, rendering transgender and intersex experiences invisible or positioning them as deviant others. McNeill (2013) identifies the same logic in United States school policy, demonstrating that sexuality education consistently promotes a heteronormative ideal, defined around monogamy, marriage, middle-class values, and white heterosexuality, and that this promotion operates not through explicit instruction but through the structural assumptions that organise the curriculum itself.

The historical trajectory of LGBTQ+-inclusive sex education reveals a consistent pattern: while superficial progress has been made, sexualities that deviate from heteronormativity remain systematically marginalised or erased within ostensibly comprehensive curricula (Elia and Eliason, 2010). Applying this analytical framework, it becomes clear that sex education's treatment of asexuality follows the same structural rationale: a curriculum that presupposes sexuality as a universal human core, what Gupta (2015) terms compulsory sexuality, will inevitably position non-desire outside the boundaries of inclusion, regardless of how many other identities it seeks to accommodate. In other words, the problem is not one of omission, of failing to add asexuality to an otherwise adequate curriculum, but one of foundation. As long as the foundational assumption that all people are sexual remains intact, inclusive sex education will continue to reproduce the very exclusions it claims to address.

School-based sexuality education is built upon the premise that heterosexual activity is a universal and inevitable milestone of adolescent life. That premise does more than describe: it socialises young people, and girls in particular, to accept sexual violence as an unavoidable cultural norm, while placing the burden of prevention on potential victims (Clonan-Roy *et al*., 2021). Reading further into this structure, what becomes apparent is that sexual activity is constructed as the default trajectory: abstinence is presented as a deviation from the norm requiring active management, while non-desire and asexuality do not appear as

possibilities at all. Therefore, the overemphasis on refusal skills that Clonan-Roy and colleagues (2021) criticise is not merely a pedagogical choice, it is the logical consequence of a deeper assumption: compulsory sexuality. Because these materials assume that all people are sexual and that sexual initiation is natural and inevitable, the curriculum's only available intervention is to teach potential victims how to resist. The logic places responsibility exclusively on those who refuse, while the existence of an initiator is taken as given. If sexuality were understood as optional rather than compulsory, sex education would need to interrogate the act of initiation itself, rather than only how to refuse it, and more fundamentally, whether the pressure to initiate is legitimate in the first place. The absence of that question from these texts is not an oversight; it is a structural effect of the compulsory sexuality premise on which they are built.

Notably, Clonan-Roy and colleagues (2021) identify three exceptions among the sixteen textbooks examined in their study. These three texts approached consent not as a matter of refusal management, but as an affirmative and ongoing negotiation of comfort and desire. One text guided students through questions such as whether a sexual behaviour is healthy and fulfilling for the person involved, whether it is safe, and whether it occurs between consenting individuals who are not being exploited. That such texts exist demonstrates that the compulsory sexuality assumption is not an inevitable feature of sex education; it is a choice that can be made otherwise.

Ultimately, the value of an asexual critique lies not in appending a minority identity to pre-existing frameworks, but in interrogating the premise that sexuality is a universal and necessary feature of human life (Przybylo, 2019). Following this conceptual trajectory, what inclusive sex education requires is not the addition of asexuality to an existing curricular system, but the deconstruction of the foundational assumption that all human beings are sexual. This distinction matters because compulsory sexuality and the love=sex equation are mutually reinforcing. As long as the former remains intact, the latter will continue to be reproduced, and the conditions under which coercion is misrecognised as love will remain in place.

Deployed within anti-sexual violence education, the contemporary concept of consent functions merely as a legalistic minimum standard; a threshold below which behaviour is classified as assault, but above which the full complexity of coercive dynamics remains unexamined (Beres, 2014). This article contends that this limitation is a direct structural consequence of a compulsory-sexuality foundation: when sexual activity is constructed as the universal default, consent education can only evaluate whether that default was properly authorised, leaving the systemic pressure toward the default unquestioned. Consequently, superficial institutional responses

that simply expand the category of recognised sexual subjects to affirm that 'everyone is sexual' serve to reproduce rather than challenge the architecture of compulsory sexuality (Gupta, 2015). Even well-intentioned international frameworks fall into this conceptual trap. UNESCO's (2018) guidance, with which this section began, is the clearest case: widening the circle of recognition is precisely the move that leaves the requirement of sexuality in place.

Therefore, denaturalising this premise is a structural intervention with consequences that extend beyond curricular reform. An asexual spectrum lens provides the theoretical vocabulary needed not only to identify compulsory sexuality but to dismantle it. It opens the assumed universality of desire to question, and it establishes non-desire as a legitimate mode of human existence rather than a deficit requiring correction (Przybylo, 2019). Integrating this framework into sex education curricula reorients the discipline's aims away from merely managing the collateral damage of compulsory sexuality and toward a root-cause interrogation of its suppositions. Within the educational domain, this addresses the discursive conditions that render sexual coercion, particularly when masked as love or care, invisible to the very systems designed to prevent it.

Conclusion

Contemporary consent-based sex education fails not due to poor implementation, but because its core premises reproduce the very cultural scripts that enable sexual violence. By treating consent as a politically neutral act, positioning sexuality as universal, and assuming that love and sex naturally coincide, current frameworks legitimise coercion under the guise of romance and render non-normative violence illegible. As this article has argued, an asexual spectrum lens offers far more than a plea for minority inclusion within an intact system; it provides the conceptual means necessary to denaturalise the mandate of compulsory sexuality (Przybylo, 2019).

The political implications of this shift extend well beyond the protection of asexual students. As long as educational prevention models assume that all individuals naturally experience desire, institutions will continue to validate the behavioural scripts upon which romance-veiled coercion depends. Dismantling compulsory sexuality is not an accommodation for a marginalised few, but a systemic exposure of the conditions that keep sexual violence invisible. By rendering these invisible norms explicit, an asexual lens offers a foundational reorientation for the field: sex education must abandon the presumption of universal desire and instead begin with the recognition that desire itself is neither inevitable nor compulsory.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Theresa Schilling for her thoughtful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

ORCID iD

Ayami Minemura https://orcid.org/0009-0008-2381-1558

Funding

No financial support was received for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Declaration of Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Statement on AI Use

The author declares that the artificial intelligence (AI) tools Grammarly and Gemini were used to assist in manuscript preparation. AI was used solely for translation and language editing, and all content, interpretation, and conclusions are the author's own.

Special Issue Funding

Editorial costs associated with the publication of this special issue were supported by the UNITE project, funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Programme – Key Action KA220-HED – Cooperation Partnerships in Higher Education (Project Code: 2023-1-IT02-KA220-HED-000162181). The authors received no specific financial support from UNITE for the research or authorship of this article.

The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Commission. Neither the European Commission nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them or for any use that may be made of the information contained herein.

References

Andrejek, N., Fetner, T., and Heath, M. (2022) 'Climax as work: Heteronormativity, gender labor, and the gender gap in orgasms', *Gender & Society*, 36(2), pp. 189-213. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211073062.

Beres, M. A. (2014) 'Rethinking the concept of consent for anti-sexual violence activism and education', *Feminism & Psychology*, 24(3), pp. 373-389. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0959353514539652.

Bogaert, A. F. (2004) 'Asexuality: Prevalence and associated factors in a national probability sample', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 41(3), pp. 279-287.

Burt, M. R. (1980) 'Cultural myths and supports for rape', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38(2), pp. 217-230. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.38.2.217.

Carpenter, L. M. (2001) 'The ambiguity of "having sex": The subjective experience of virginity loss in the United States', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 38(2), pp. 127-139. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490109552080.

Chan, R. C. H. and Hung, F. N. (2025) 'Sexual violence victimization and substance use among individuals identifying on the asexual spectrum: Differences between asexuality, graysexuality, and demisexuality', *The Journal of Sex Research*, 62(9), pp. 1807-1819. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2024.2351423.

Clonan-Roy, K., Goncy, E. A., Naser, S. C., Fuller, K. A., DeBoard, A., Williams, A., and Hall, A. (2021) 'Preserving abstinence and preventing rape: How sex education textbooks contribute to rape culture', *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 50(1), pp. 231-245. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01816-6.

Deboeck, L. (2026) 'Asexuality inclusion as consent solution: *Law & Order SVU* as case study', in Meek, M. (ed.) *The Ambiguity of Consent: Consent Puzzles in Film, Television, Public Discourse, and the Law*. London: Routledge, pp. 210-224. Available at: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003621935-16.

Elia, J. P. and Eliason, M. (2010) 'Discourses of exclusion: Sexuality education's silencing of sexual others', *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 7(1), pp. 29-48. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/19361650903507791.

Fanghanel, A. (2025) 'Queerying consent: Romantic relationship scripts, rape myths, and the "sex game gone wrong"', *Sexualities* (published online ahead of print). Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607251372223.

Fedorchenko, A. (2025) '"Acceptance of diversity"…but not too much? (Restricted) pathways towards transgender and intersex inclusivity in sex education curriculum guidelines', *The Curriculum Journal*, 36(3), pp. 384-399. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1002/curj.268.

Goldfarb, E. S. and Lieberman, L. D. (2021) 'Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education', *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68(1), pp. 13-27. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036.

Gupta, K. (2015) 'Compulsory sexuality: Evaluating an emerging concept', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 41(1), pp. 131-154. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1086/681774.

Hirsch, J. S. and Khan, S. R. (2020) *Sexual citizens: A landmark study of sex, power, and assault on campus*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Hlavka, H. R. (2014) 'Normalizing sexual violence: Young women account for harassment and abuse', *Gender & Society*, 28(3), pp. 337-358. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214526468.

McCann, H. and Sharp, M. (2023) '#MeToo, cisheteropatriarchy and LGBTQ+ sexual violence on campus', *Sexualities*, 28(1-2), pp. 268-282. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607231170770.

McNeill, T. (2013) 'Sex education and the promotion of heteronormativity', *Sexualities*, 16(7), pp. 826-846. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460713497216.

Meyer, D. (2012) 'An intersectional analysis of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people's evaluations of anti-queer violence', *Gender & Society*, 26(6), pp. 849-873. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243212461299.

Mollet, A. L. and Black, W. (2021) 'A-nother perspective: An analysis of asexual college students' experiences with sexual violence', *Journal of College Student Development*, 62(5), pp. 526-546. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2021.0058.

Mollet, A. L. and Black, W. (2023) 'Coercive rape tactics perpetrated against asexual college students: A quantitative analysis considering students' multiple identities', *Journal of College Student Development*, 64(1), pp. 96-101. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2023.0004.

Pella, R. S. and McClung, N. A. (2024) 'Does yes mean yes? Differences in US college students' understanding of sexual consent', *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, 24(3), pp. 416-432. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2023.2211514.

Przybylo, E. (2019) *Asexual erotics: Intimate readings of compulsory sexuality*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press. Available at: https://doi.org/10.26818/9780814214046.

Rich, A. (1980) 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(4), pp. 631-660. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1086/493756.

Simon, W. and Gagnon, J. H. (1999) 'Sexual scripts', in Aggleton, P. and Parker, R. (eds) *Culture, Society and Sexuality: A Reader*. Oxford: Taylor & Francis, pp. 29-38.

UNESCO (2018) *International technical guidance on sexuality education: An evidence-informed approach*. Paris: UNESCO. Available at: https://doi.org/10.54675/uqrm6395.

Warner, M. (1991) 'Introduction: Fear of a queer planet', *Social Text*, 29, pp. 3-17.