SUMMARY

In the introduction to the five chapters that comprise this dissertation, I consider Fine’s (1988) early call for a different kind of sexual education for girls. After reviewing the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of her view, I focus on several discourses that contribute to present day understanding of adolescent and female adolescent sexuality, namely a discourse about raging hormones, about female adolescents in need of protection, discourses around authenticity and sexual subjectivity, and about what comprises empowerment. I then move on to explore the idea of adolescent female sexual empowerment and question whether sexual empowerment for adolescent girls is an aspect of “morally good sex.” I discuss how girls’ personal notions of empowerment and their enacting of what they consider to be an empowered sexuality may be problematically constrained by cultural influences such as the widespread viewing of pornography, ideas about empowerment itself, and notions of female sexuality. In investigating the relationship between morally good sex, empowerment, and adolescent well-being, I propose that mutuality (and care for the self and other) is as much of a requirement of morally good sex as valid consent and autonomy (Steutel, 2009; Steutel & de Ruyter, 2011; Tellings, 2009).

Chapter 1, “Sex Education as Moral Education,” argues for an integration of moral education and sex education curricula. In such an integration, the primary values that would be taught would not be those relating to specific sexual behaviors, but those relating to the general treatment of human beings, suggesting that sex that involves coercion or exploitation as well as sex that causes harm is wrong. I write that sex educators must take as their goal the prevention of abuse, not by placing responsibility on girls to avoid victimisation but by teaching boys how to express themselves sexually in moral – that is, considerate and respectful –
ways. In this chapter I also argue that teaching about fantasy as well as sexual
“deviance” (in terms of the moral behaviors discussed above) may be the most
important aspect of sex education to prepare or retrain boys to be "good" sex
partners rather than perpetrators of abuse.

In Chapter 2, “Feminist Ideals for a Healthy Female Adolescent Sexuality: A
Critique,” I explore recent ideals of healthy sexuality for teenage girls in the U.S.
that have been proposed by feminist theorists and researchers. Current ideals
emphasize desire, pleasure, and subjectivity as parts of a healthy sexuality. This
chapter discusses problems inherent in this view, including the rigid dichotomizing
of subject and object, and the idea that desire, pleasure, and subjectivity may have
different historical meanings for girls from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, using
pleasure as a gauge for whether sex is “good” has moral implications that may
undermine other important goals of feminism such as equal rights and respect for
differences.

With Dr. Zoe Peterson, I attempted, in Chapter 3, “Adolescent Girls’ Sexual
Empowerment: Two Feminists Explore the Concept,” to work out disagreements
among feminists today with regard to the place of girls’ own voices in the concept
of sexual empowerment. If a girl feels empowered, is she thus empowered? We
identify three themes that make answering this question particularly challenging—
age differences in girls under discussion; their exposure to sexualized media; and
the heterosexual pressure to please male partners. Despite these challenges, we
identify several points of agreement (e.g. that girls are not passive consumers of
media and that development needs to be taken into consideration) and argue that
adequate sexual education and media literacy education are vital to optimizing
adolescent girls’ sexual empowerment.

The ability to experience pleasure in sex is viewed as a marker of sexual
empowerment, thus, as the dissertation turns to sexual education, I explore with
two colleagues, what current sexual education curricula have to say about pleasure. Chapter 4, “The Use and Misuse of Pleasure in Sex Education Curricula,” with co-authors Kara Lustig and Kelly Graling, presents a qualitative analysis of the discourse in sexual education curricula in the U.S. The discourses uncovered show that talk of pleasure is often linked to a range of dangerous or negative outcomes including not using condoms, rushing into sex without thinking, regretted sex, and pregnancy or STDs. When the discourse around pleasure is included in sections on “knowing one’s body,” this discourse takes a medicalised, scientific tone. Pleasurable sex is also presented in more positive ways, either linked to marriage in Abstinence Only Until Marriage (AOUM) curricula, or within a more feminist discourse about female pleasure in Comprehensive Sex Education (CSE) curricula. Our research indicates that a discourse of desire is not missing, but that this discourse is often situated as part of a discourse on safe practice and in doing so, continues to equate pleasure with danger.

Chapter 5, “Toward a Sexual Ethics Curriculum: Bringing Philosophy and Society to Bear on Individual Development” presents my growth as a scholar from the initial article (Chapter 1) published in 1997. Here I situate the call for a combined ethics and sexual education curriculum within the context of ongoing debate between progressive sex educators and Abstinence Only Until Marriage advocates. I criticize both AOUM and CSE curricula, and discuss how, in liberals’ accommodation to AOUM objections, ethical dimensions of sexual education may have been neglected in favor of evidence-based practice, i.e. education against coercion, education for care of the other, etc. I also suggest ways in which the current curricula could teach ethical reasoning and make sexual education a form of citizenship education, focusing on justice, equity, and caring for the other person as well as the self.
In the conclusion I review the recent debates between CSE and AOUM advocates and set out and justify eight tenets for a new kind of sexual education that would be based in ethics. These are:

1. Sex education must be ethics-focused, including training in justification of one’s views using ethical principles.
2. Sex education should include academic readings and not appear to be a “dumbed down” curriculum; this would call for de-emphasizing “whether or not to do it” lessons.
3. Inclusiveness regarding sexual identities and practices should be an aim.
4. The curriculum should include a focus on the other person as well as the self, with equal focus on harm arguments as well as rights arguments.
5. An emphasis specifically on mutuality as well as consent as two kinds of litmus tests for ethical sexual practice should be included, along with lessons on empathy, trust, kindness, and conversely, exploitation.
6. Teachings about pleasure, the varied sources of it and problematic pleasures, must be included.
7. A focus on society is needed with lessons on institutions that shape sexual ideologies. The curriculum should teach students a critical perspective on the media, pornography, censorship, prostitution, and the treatment of rape and child sexual abuse.
8. The curriculum should take an especially welcoming stance towards discussions of religious beliefs, as religion provides a foundation for many students’ ethical and sexual beliefs.

I also return to the idea of empowerment by discussing a discourse of “choice” that permeates sexual education in a democratic society. I write that when sexual education engages female students to critique those sources of power that support repressive regulation, they can make informed choices, but that they
need to do this within a framework that incorporates mutuality as a moral requirement. My claim is that mutuality belongs in the teaching of sex in today’s sexual education classroom because 1) care might be no less a moral requirement than respect; 2) the overemphasis or simple emphasis on choice actually supports a worldview regarding sex that is self-centered and might contribute to harming others; and 3) from some feminist perspectives, equality and care should support one another (Gilligan, 1982). Care can almost be seen as a check for equality and is an ethic that is particularly suited to prevention of harm in sexual relationships, harm that feminists have been concerned about.