

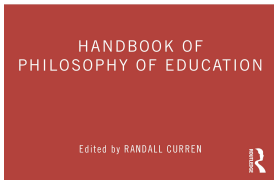
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IS “SEX EDUCATION” AN INTELLIGIBLE CONCEPT?

Lauren Bialystok

There is no sex education in schools. This statement is not shorthand for the liberal’s lamentation that sex education is too shallow, too scarce, or so watered down as to be ridiculous, although these things are all true. In the United States as of 2020, twenty states did not require any sex education, twenty-eight states did not require that any information provided be medically accurate, and thirty-six states allowed parents to opt their children out of sex education entirely (NCSL 2020). These policies translate into unsurprising gaps; for example, in one study, “among sexually experienced female teens, 83.3% ... did not receive formal sex education before first sex” (Cox et al. 2014: 3).

The statement is, rather, intended to be taken at face value. Even when schools conduct “sex education,” they are not teaching sex. Consider that the CDC-published study just cited, which established a glaring deficit of formal sex education among sexually experienced teen girls, defined “sex education” as “information on birth control” and “how to say no to sex” (Cox et al. 2014). How did these narrow forms of instruction come to stand in for knowledge about sex?

When opponents turn up to protest a new curriculum, it is common to hear that sex education will instruct students in sexual positions, invite them to masturbate or expose themselves in the classroom, or encourage them to experiment sexually. These claims are demonstrably false and amusingly absurd, but you could forgive some onlookers for taking the phrase “sex education” literally. When we say that we will teach x in schools, we usually mean that we will teach students to understand and practise x as fully and authentically as possible. Indeed, under the influence of constructivist educational philosophy and the present fervour for “authenticity” in education, progressive educators strive to synchronize the classroom as much as possible with the “real world,” helping students become not just observers, but practitioners, of curricular content. Science education is supposed to involve doing science; Spanish instruction is supposed to involve immersing students in Spanish language and culture. Despite neoliberal imperatives to convert education into testable outcomes, progressives continue to strive for a version of education that resembles Dewey’s ontology of the classroom as a site of genuine discovery, creation, and social life.

The same progressives teach sex education completely differently. The way we teach sex is more akin to Spanish instruction that says, “some people speak Spanish, and one day you will, but right now stay as far away as possible from all things Spanish.” The approach is largely one of fomenting apprehension. Even when we teach young people about sex in more honest terms, the envisioned role of the school is usually to be a buffer between them and the sex-saturated culture we know they inhabit and the activities we know they will pursue outside the classroom. It is analogous to the message, “You may accidentally hear Spanish on television, but you should know that those are

actors and real Spanish speakers don't sound like that. If you must speak Spanish, proceed with the utmost caution."

Most of the tired public controversies over "sex education" can be reframed by attending to the stark contrast between sex and other subjects on the curriculum. Although opponents disagree on some bedrock values and what sex education *should* be, there is little disagreement about what sex education *cannot* be. In the United States and much of the world since the 1990s, the repertoire of approaches to sex education has been construed on a very narrow continuum, with "Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Education" (AOUME) on one end and "Comprehensive Sex Education" (CSE) (which is usually nowhere near comprehensive) on the other. In both cases, the emphasis has been on risk avoidance and keeping most types of sex at bay – the pedagogical antithesis of teaching Spanish; in no case is the practice of sex taught in schools. Although the most forward-thinking and innovative curricula interpret "sex education" to include critical conversations about such topics as gender identity, consent, and social media, there are built-in limits to the presence of sex in schools that no one truly calls into question. "Sex education" is incendiary because adults associate "sex" with sexual activity, and the activity has no place in a classroom. The failure to appreciate the discrepancy between referent and signifier stifles some debates over how to teach sex education almost before they can get started. In reality, schools can do very little to impart meaningful knowledge about sex. Nor can they do much to shelter students from unwanted information about sex; that ship has long sailed, with the current school-aged generation accessing any content they want (and a lot they do not) with the touch of a screen. What we are arguing about is not sex in school, but something else.

Philosophers have contributed to our thinking about the relentless controversy over sex education, with its obvious connections to ethics, philosophy of education, and political philosophy. Behind the strident positions of parents, community activists, religious leaders, and other stakeholders lie normative commitments that are amenable to philosophical analysis and argumentative testing. Most philosophers of education have argued for a classically liberal approach to sex education, in which the promotion of student autonomy and respect for sexual diversity are paramount (Archard 2000; McKay 1998; Reiss 1995). These values typically advise a comprehensive curriculum based on evidence and delivered in a non-ideological setting. More granular debates concern the details of negotiating between competing values and interest groups. These debates highlight that even liberal-minded philosophers can disagree about the ethics of how to broach this touchy subject in schools, while still largely adhering to the structural parameters of schools, curriculum, and political culture that generate our meagre options.

I want to enter the philosophical debates from a different angle here. Drawing on Foucault and the work of many contemporary sex education scholars, I want to dwell on the question of how to combine sex and education in the context of 21st Century Western schooling. Where and how do young people learn about sex? What do we want from school-based sex education? Or, as philosopher of education Alan Harris asked in a 1971 article that has aged disturbingly well, "Is sex education an intelligible concept?" (Harris 1971: 8).

"Two Great Procedures for Producing the Truth About Sex"¹

In his intellectual genealogy *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1976) identified two primary approaches to thinking and teaching about sex. The first, *scientia sexualis* (the science/knowledge of sex), views sex as a series of facts and injunctions (Foucault 1976: 58). Emerging in the 18th Century in Western Europe, this approach to sexual knowledge emphasized the identification and monitoring of sexual norms, the discursive control over sexual "truths" (especially through the process of confession), and the pathologization of sexual types. Although these impulses have obvious roots in Western Judaeo-Christian morality and especially the hierarchical Christian institutions of the

Renaissance, they were amplified by the vast social and political changes that followed the Enlightenment: urbanization, industrialization, rapid scientific progress, the early codification of Western medicine, and new state apparatus for engineering and disciplining populations. In this era, for the first time, “[i]t was essential that the state know what was happening with its citizens’ sex, and the use they made of it, but also that each individual be capable of controlling the use he made of it” (Foucault 1976: 26). Public health and epidemiology were born. Along with scientific and philosophical breakthroughs came new hierarchies of expertise, their sexist and racist conceits conveniently deflected by the assertion of objectivity. Contrary to received wisdom, Foucault argues, Victorian sexuality was not repressed so much as it was policed.

By explaining the origins of modern Western attitudes toward sex, Foucault revealed that the attitude of *scientia sexualis* is a cultural aberration. Most civilizations have conceptualized sex in more private and less clinical terms. In *ars amoris* (the art of love), which Foucault associates with ancient Eastern traditions, the value of sex is precisely its refusal to submit to public circulation (1976: 57). Pleasure is regarded as its own purpose, “not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility” (Foucault 1976: 57). In this paradigm, sexual knowledge is a “masterful art” that is learned through sexual activity itself, “understood as a practice and accumulated as experience” (Foucault 1976: 57).

Common schooling originates in the same time period and social context as *scientia sexualis*. In the 18th Century, the “ponderous silence” (Foucault 1976: 29) about sexuality in schools was ominously accompanied by design choices intended to thwart children’s sexual curiosity and inculcate docility (Foucault 1976: 27–29). Foucault (1976) refers to this as “a pedagogization of children’s sex” (104). When sex made its way into formal curriculum in the 20th Century, it still obeyed the principles of *scientia sexualis*: sexual “truths” were linked to prohibitions and conveyed in the moralizing language of medicine and middle-class White values. To learn about sex was to learn about society’s strictures and expectations. The earliest efforts to introduce sex education in schools came from advocates of social hygiene, “an area of study that ... focused on the diagnosis and reporting of sexually transmitted infections, genital and bodily cleanliness, eugenics, and [preventing] masturbation” (Bialystok & Andersen, 2022).

Sex education has evolved since the mid-20th Century, but the parameters in which it is delivered are effectively the same. Students learn about “sex” in rigidly organized classrooms under the glare of fluorescent lights – an environment that is itself designed to be as unsexy as possible – where a designated adult, who has the “knowledge,” imparts and then tests students on a predetermined battery of facts. Regardless of how parsimonious or comprehensive a curriculum may be, our conception of schooling requires sexual content to be funneled into a curricular model with limited inputs and outputs.² It is about as epistemically distant from *ars amoris* as one could imagine. Reduced to propositional knowledge, sex, like other subjects, is construed as something that students can get “right” or “wrong.” In our contemporary audit culture, in which educational programs must be amenable to widespread standardized testing in order to be judged valuable, sex education must sometimes contort itself into a species of science education or risk being eliminated completely.

If the meaning and place of sex in our social epistemology looked more like what Foucault calls *ars amoris*, sex education would look completely different – and perhaps much closer to what staunch opponents fear we mean by “sex education” today. The transmission of knowledge about sex in *ars amoris* is indivisible from sex itself, and indeed, sex has, in some civilizations, been used as a medium for broader relationships of education.³ Where sexual pleasure is its own truth, “only [the master], working alone, can transmit this art in an esoteric manner and as the culmination of an initiation in which he guides the disciple’s progress ... ” (Foucault 1976: 57). This might mean that there is no collective or formal instruction about sex, but also less anxiety about young people pursuing their own sexual awakening through informal and private channels.

By comparing these two very different regimes of sexual knowledge, Foucault offers some macro perspective on the day-to-day battles over sex education that may seem all-important in a particular context. Whatever the relative merits of each of these two (and there are probably more than two) paradigms for producing sexual knowledge, we can be fairly certain that North American schools are still largely in the grip of a regime that resembles *scientia sexualis*. In spite of significant liberalization at the level of policy and culture, ours is still a society in which the modern European concern for population health and general Judaeo-Christian morality conditions most approaches to youth sexuality. This observation need not lead us to bemoan our epistemic heritage, much less to appropriate the attitudes of *ars amoris* – which, undoubtedly, can be linked to sexism and worrying opportunities for abuse. Rather, the point is to appreciate how beliefs about sexual knowledge correspond to particular attitudes about the meaning of “sex education” – who can provide it, what it entails, where and when (or whether) it should occur. Our debates remain surprisingly confined by the premises of certain modern Western attitudes to sexual knowledge and the function of schools.

Let’s (Not) Talk About Sex

So, is there sex education in schools? What we designate as “sex education” in schools is perhaps intelligible only as a product of a civilization in which sex is categorically different from other potential subjects of education. It is intelligible as an exception, a warning, a grudging inclusion in the otherwise G-rated curriculum. Although it exists – often under the umbrella of “health education” or a more general course title – the epistemology of its role in education stands apart from most other subjects. As alluded to earlier, in a climate of progressive educational theory still under the sway of constructivism, pre-service teachers are taught to believe that good teaching requires immersing students in first-hand discovery of a subject. The value of the subject is taken for granted, as is the desire for students to become competent practitioners of it. The classroom, further, is supposed to be made as seamless with the rest of the world as possible in order for student learning to be “authentic.”⁴ But when it comes to sex, the classroom is conceived more as a bulwark against the rest of the world than a microcosm of it. “Authentic” sex education that mirrors the pedagogical tenets of Spanish and other subjects would have to involve explicit exposure, guidance, and perhaps in-class practice – a nightmare to adults of all persuasions.

The place where young people receive such explicit guidance about sex is undoubtedly pornography. In the Western tradition, sexually explicit artefacts have of course always been circulated, along with sex work and erotica; but, in keeping with Foucault’s analysis of power and knowledge, they have been policed and stigmatized, at least in public, despite being an open secret among men. The Comstock Act of 1873 outlawed sending “obscene” or “lascivious” materials, including medical information about contraception and any images depicting gay sexuality, through the mail – a prelude to the Nazis’ destruction of “degenerate” art. Through the 20th Century, American boys’ first exposure to sexually explicit information may have come from a *Penthouse* or *Playboy* magazine surreptitiously shared among friends, or, perhaps, cribbed from their father.

The advent of global digital culture and smart phones has rendered all such attempts to regulate unofficial sex education pathetically moot. It is not only that young people have easier access to pornography now than ever before. The material itself is increasingly varied, violent, and designed to generate “clicks” for profiteering platforms. Studies show that young people are accessing pornography younger and more frequently than ever, with traceable impacts on their sexual beliefs (Horvath et al. 2013). Moreover, pornographic tropes are affecting young people’s sexual behaviours: young women in particular are liable to take them as instruction manuals and to judge their sexual normalcy in reference to them (Goldsmith et al. 2017; Rogala & Tyden 2003). This is what experts mean when they declare, non-hysterically, that pornography *is* sex education (Orenstein 2016). It is mostly very

bad education, but it provides young people in particular with the unmediated access to sexual knowledge that they evidently crave.⁵

The ineluctable difference between the sex education we provide in formal settings and the education afforded by pornography can be mapped, approximately, onto the difference between *scientia sexualis* and *ars amoris*. In official sex education, no matter how comprehensive, knowledge is the mastery of social rules and biological information, with the aim of self-regulation – *scientia*. In pornography, knowledge is pleasure, with the aim of self-abandon – *ars*. The problem, as any progressive educator or feminist scholar will be quick to point out, is that the “pleasure” that is featured and normalized in mainstream pornography is what a massive industry takes to be pleasurable for heterosexual cis-males. This regularly involves the domination of women, degrading and at times painful activities, and a preoccupation with male orgasm – the “money shot” – in a de-contextualized narrative where consent is never explicitly attained (Bridges et al. 2010; Williams 1989). Pornography is perhaps the closest thing that most young people have to *ars amoris*, though it is corrupted and limited at every turn by the pathologies of patriarchy and capitalism.

Nor is pornography the only medium that gives young people unfettered exposure to sex acts and invitations to be sexually active. Mainstream culture, including cable television, music videos, and advertising, inundates young people with references to and depictions of all kinds of sexual activity and sexual relationships, from the profane and abusive to the erotic and queer. Words that could never be spoken out loud in a classroom are blasted into students’ earbuds within the walls of the school. Although students are sanctioned for exposing a shoulder or thigh, pop stars pose nearly naked and discuss their sexual escapades in public. Surely this is closer to learning about sex than what the average embarrassed gym teacher can provide.

And, lest it be forgotten, students are *having sex*.⁶ Formal sex education since the early 20th Century has been imagined as pre-empting young adults’ sexual debut. Under the sexual epistemology of *scientia*, pleasure is to be accessed only within a regime of power and scientific expertise: children learn from authority figures, enter into socially sanctioned intimate relationships, and only *then* experience sexual pleasure. Of course, it’s never worked reliably in this order. Importantly, the amount of teen sexual activity has actually declined, but the amount of sexual information exchange is climbing, largely thanks to social media and cell phones. In one study, “twenty percent of [middle-school] students [grades 6–8] with text-capable cell phone access reported receiving a sext and 5% reported sending a sext” (Rice et al. 2014). These forms of sexual exchange are increasingly the norm among tech-equipped adolescents. In a study of Dutch 12–18-year-old, many participants described doing something sexual in front of a webcam or sharing porn with peers as “arousing,” “funny,” “fun,” or “informative”; the majority considered such activities “normal” or positive (Naezer 2018: 720).

In a bizarre homage to constructivism, students are actually learning about sex by using the educational tools at their disposal to experience, create, and share sexual knowledge. (Imagine if they studied all their subjects so diligently!) Ironically, sex education *is* happening in school, right under teachers’ noses; but students are learning from each other more than from officially sanctioned instructors. Their sexual knowledge, as in *ars amoris*, is “understood as a practice and accumulated as experience” (Foucault 1976: 57).

In response, formal sex education is already shedding some of its traditional naiveté. Many educators recognize that we need to equip young people to navigate this unprecedented panoply of sexual opportunities and misinformation, offering positive models of sexual pleasure and ethical relationships. “Porn literacy,” consent education, and other frontiers in progressive sex education are developing methods for talking to young people about this brave new world, using insights from ethics, media education, and gender studies, among other lenses (Jones 2018; Lamb 2010). These types of education buffer and contextualize student learning about sex. They belong on the explicit curriculum. But, to press my point, they are not teaching students sex itself, in the way that erotic

materials and lived experience teach them. Besides, most curricula still shy away from anything remotely as honest as porn literacy.

Furthermore, as Foucault also reminds us, students receive myriad lessons from school alongside, and sometimes despite, the curriculum – especially about sex. Educational researchers today call this the “informal curriculum” or the “hidden curriculum” (Connelly & Connelly 2010). In the tradition of *scientia sexualis*, schools remain institutions in which information and behavior are regulated through everything from architectural layout to the rhythmic ringing of bells, from dress codes to choices made about topics for special assemblies and announcements. Even at institutions where students might be lucky enough to encounter something like a pilot program in porn literacy, they are inundated with messages about the place of sex in their lives and the expected comportment of their sexed bodies.

In other words, schools need not articulate everything in the language of curricular expectations to enforce various norms about sex and gender (Gilbert 2014; Kendall 2013; Fields 2008; Pascoe 2007; Trudell 1993). There is always a parallel curriculum that may reinforce or undermine whatever the designated “sex” teacher communicates. Whether a teacher intervenes upon hearing homophobic epithets in the hallway is part of this curriculum. How girls are censured for, or complimented on, their sartorial choices is part of this curriculum. Whether interactions are coded as “sexual assault” or “horseplay” is part of this curriculum.⁷ The availability (or unavailability) of condoms is, too. At school, the overriding project of cultivating particular kinds of members of society invokes sexual embodiment and sexual values at every turn (Murray 2019).

Therefore, although the structure of schools and the formal curriculum – the functions and parameters of formal education in our contemporary society – make some sex education impossible, and even unthinkable, they also insert learning about sex into the places where we are trained not to look for it. These unacknowledged sources of (mis)education usually escape philosophical and public arguments about what belongs in “sex education,” even as they work on students’ developing beliefs and knowledge.

Sex, Para-Sex, and Meta-Sex Education

The preceding considerations complicate my initial assertion that there is no sex education in schools. Rather than a surprising absence, there is a contradiction: schools never teach sex, and constantly teach sex. Real learning about sex does not, and cannot, happen in schools as they are currently conceived. Yet, schools do have an obligation to help students acquire a meaningful sex education that is compatible with ethics, pleasure, and liberal democracy. Put differently, teaching about sex is both impossible and unavoidable. When we refer to “sex education” as the embattled object of curriculum policy, we are imprecise about what we mean by both “sex” and “education.”

I propose that we clarify “sex education” in a way that makes it more intelligible and more conducive to progress in the interminable political debates that the subject seems to generate. There are two kinds of learning in schools that are adjacent to sex education: *para-sex education* and *meta-sex education*. Together, they form a penumbra around the kind of sexual knowledge that remains properly bracketed from schools. Para-sex education is the learning about topics relating to sex that can and ought to be delivered in a conventional school setting. This includes most of the topics on the curricula designed as “comprehensive” and advised by the likes of UNESCO (2018) and the WHO (2010): growth and sexual development, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy and reproduction, and gender equality. It also includes things that have nothing intrinsic to do with sex, such as democratic citizenship, critical thinking, respect for others, mental health, and general self-care. These topics deserve the prefix “para” because they surround knowledge of sex itself. They are essential to lifelong sexual health and the collective well-being of a liberal society, but they do not immerse students in the practice of sex.

“Meta-sex education” refers to the learning that students need to make sense of their extra-scholastic sex education and personal sexual experiences. It is “meta” because it is education about the practice of sex. This type of learning has until recently played but a sheepish role in even the most comprehensive and liberal of programs. Inviting young people to reflect on where they receive actual sex education and the messages contained therein requires trespassing on some of the universal taboos of teaching in our *scientia*-inspired school culture. It requires naming the limits of school even as it uses schools to counteract and complement other institutions’ influences on young people. It also translates into precisely the kinds of learning that feminist, queer, and critical sex education researchers have long called for: critical media literacy, including pornography literacy; inclusive explorations of gender identity and sexual orientation; practical strategies for negotiating consent and reducing violence; and discussions about sexual pleasure and desire – including how they are produced and manipulated by cultural norms. These lessons acknowledge that students already are learning about the mechanics, politics, and cultural tropes of sexuality outside the classroom, and that no amount of testing on the transmission of STIs will set them on a path of lifelong health and fulfilment. Meta-education comes as close to sex education as possible while respecting its distinctiveness as an academic subject. Rather than teaching students about sex in the manner of constructive developmental pedagogy, progressive educators should aim help students approach their own sexual practice thoughtfully, autonomously, and ethically. The outcomes of such lessons will never be explicitly recognizable or assessable within the formal education system, but potentially decisive in young people’s lives.

Neither of these types of education – “para-” or “meta-” – is sex education in the strict sense.⁸ They are intelligible as educational projects only because they put sex in relation to topics, and into pedagogical forms, that we believe (maybe) can be taught and learned in schools. They provide a structure into which students can insert their own, most intimate, sexual learning and development.

They also highlight that students receive education pertaining to sex regardless of what we put on the formal curriculum. Not all para- or meta-sex education is *good* education, and much of it may in fact undermine the very goals to which para- and meta-sex education should be oriented. As sex education researchers have pointed out, protocols at school dances, body-shaming in gym class, the selection of novels in language classes, and countless other events in school life contribute to the learning that conditions and surrounds students’ first-order sexual learning. Para- and meta-sex education cut across the formal and implicit curricula. Until we stop thinking about sex education as a specific category on the curriculum that can be cordoned off from everything else, we will fail to grasp the penumbra of sex education and our obligations regarding it.

Beyond the Liberal Debates

In the face of unremitting public controversy and vexed decisions by policy makers and educators, philosophers have proposed rational bases for adjudicating disagreements about how to teach sex in schools. Rarely, though, is the possibility of teaching sex called into question, either in public discourse or in academic philosophy. Most of the controversy over “sex education” assumes it is possible and dwells on the details of what to include or omit, what to make optional and what to make mandatory. The implied premise is that students may not learn what they are not formally taught. Likewise, the structure of contemporary curriculum is treated as a non-negotiable framework into which sex education must be fitted.

Approaching the controversies over sex education through the filter of intelligibility and para-sex education may enable us to reframe, or possibly transcend, some of the conventional sticking points. In this section I will briefly revisit three of the major philosophical questions about sex education to show what they miss about the intelligibility of the practice. These questions concern the content of sex education (abstinence-only or more), authority over sex education (the state vs. parents), and value neutrality in sex education. The liberal perspectives that are standard fare among philosophers

of education still provide the best answers to concrete questions of educational policy and curriculum. But, as I hope to show, they remain devoted to a conception of the place of sex in education that we should regard as contingent and incomplete.

AOUME vs. CSE

Judging by media coverage and policy battles in the United States and elsewhere, one could easily conclude that “sex education” must be either exclusively committed to preaching abstinence until marriage, or cautiously “comprehensive” about birth control and select other topics related to sexual health. This false dichotomy between AOUME and CSE is reflected in some of the defining philosophical debates about sex education curriculum – whether it should be “restrictive” or “permissive” (McKay 1998), whether it should cover only “plumbing” and “basics” (Archard 2000: 28) or “the full range of possible sexual behaviour” (Harris 1971: 9). Contemporary disagreements turn on the inclusion of more specific components of so-called CSE, such as information about abortion and the inclusion of trans or non-binary gender identity. It is important to articulate the rationale for providing students with information about any of these topics in schools, as well as the ethical criteria by which we may make decisions about the timing and content of such instruction in an environment where some people are hostile to the very prospect of teaching children the proper names for their genitals (Shahzad 2016). Some medical agencies and non-governmental organizations have identified CSE as a requirement of children’s rights, arguing that anything less deprives young people of their human right to bodily integrity and self-determination (UNESCO 2018; WHO 2010; Malone & Rodriguez 2011). Liberal philosophers have, characteristically, stressed the connection between the aim of autonomy and the necessity of providing young people with the information to make choices about their sexual behavior and reproduction, thus favoring more comprehensive approaches to curriculum content (Archard 2000; McKay 1998; Reiss 1995). As Harris (1971) argued more than half a century ago, “*The more educated a person is the better he [sic] is able to make a responsible and informed choice between possible courses of behaviour. The more aware he is of these possibilities, the more freedom he has in the way he conducts his life*” (7; original italics).

These philosophers of education and broadly liberal-minded organizations are right to insist that young people are entitled to information that supports healthy and autonomous sexual behavior.⁹ But such ideals overestimate the significance of curriculum content, assuming that “sex education” can be transmitted via the top-down pedagogical methods enshrined in modern Western institutions. As we have seen, this is a peculiar conception of sexual knowledge – as a set of facts and propositions – that is regularly overshadowed by students’ engagement with more explicit sexual materials. Furthermore, beholden to *scientia sexualis*, advocates for comprehensive curriculum construe the possibilities for “sex education” within existing education structures that are intrinsically incompatible with sex and, at times, autonomy: the formal curriculum, vertical governance structures, and the surveillance of students’ bodies, among other things. Regardless of what they are told in sex education classes, students experience school as a series of constraints on their physical freedom, as well as on what they can say, ask, and learn.¹⁰ A truly autonomy-promoting and comprehensive vision of sex education would have to think outside these boundaries and, indeed, acknowledge the “freedom” that young people already have outside the classroom, for better or for worse.

Whose Job is It?

A second longstanding controversy over sex education concerns the question of educational authority. Across educational domains, there are important ethical questions about which adults can decide what children should be exposed to or protected from, what they should or should not learn to believe, to do, and to be. Invoking the famous Supreme Court decision in *Mozert v Hawkins* (1987), American scholars have typically parsed curriculum controversies as a tension between parents and the state, with

the task being to set appropriate limits on each. Unsurprisingly, sex education has provoked substantive debate about educational authority, with philosophers debating the justification of state-mandated learning and the pros and cons of allowing parental opt-outs from controversial curriculum (Bialystok 2018; Gutmann 1987). Liberals are divided on the ethics of using state force to override parental objections. As long as we are steeped in a formal schooling model where sex education must be incorporated into the curriculum, these choices have consequences.¹¹

Nonetheless, these positions are conditioned by what we think schools can actually accomplish without parental interference and whether we think parents can control what happens outside of schools. As I have been arguing, school-based “sex education,” and especially one-off lessons in a brick-and-mortar classroom, are not where students learn *sex*. Rather than haggling *ad nauseam* over which adults and state institutions have the honor (or burden) of teaching young people about sex, it would be more productive to proceed from the recognition that young people are already learning about sex, whether the adults in their lives approve or not. What they need is para- and meta-sex education. The education that most liberals would like to see guaranteed in schools would then better complement the types of sexual knowledge and modes of learning that are actually precluded by schools, and which young people access without either parents’ or teachers’ blessing. Adult authorities have far less control over young people’s sexual learning than is typically believed, rendering the old “state vs. parents” debate something of a red herring. At the same time, the recognition of how we do not and cannot provide young people with most of their sex education helpfully illuminates what we can and must provide them with. Both the family and the state have important roles to play in scaffolding young people’s learning about sex.

Value Neutrality

A third longstanding area of philosophical work with evident applicability to sex education concerns the value of neutrality. Liberal theorists disagree on the limits of state neutrality with respect to views of the good life in the context of irreducible pluralism, and educational philosophers have wrestled with the ethics of addressing such pluralism in the classroom. Although most philosophers writing about sex education adhere to generally liberal values, there is ongoing debate about the scope of neutrality in such a context (Corngold 2013; Archard 1998; McKay 1998), including whether hot-button issues, such as homosexuality should be taught as controversial (Hand 2007), what role religion should play in sex education (Halstead & Reiss 2003), and whether the fact-value gap is as clear-cut as it has been claimed to be (Lamb 2013).

The familiar lines of disagreement over whether and how to teach “controversial” topics relating to sexuality rest on a mistake. The disagreement arises from an unintelligible conception of “sex education.” Once we recognize that the classroom is not where students are really learning *sex*, and that sheltering them from such learning is hopeless, we can re-assign these debates to less inflammatory areas of the curriculum and ask what is necessary from the perspective of citizenship and social belonging. Some options rapidly lose any currency in this light. First, the posture of silent avoidance is simply untenable; in many cases, students now know more than their teachers about sexual politics, culture wars, reproductive rights, sexual diversity, and other “controversial” topics. Second, the classical liberal pretension to neutrality, where this means “unbiased ... accounts of evaluative views about various sexual practices (with no tendentious asides about their prevalence or which cite features strictly irrelevant to their defensibility)” (Archard 1998: 445–446), may express liberal values but places too much confidence in the role of the school as a gatekeeping institution.¹² By the time students are considered old enough to debate complex social issues in class, they have absorbed countless ideas about sexual practices that are anything but neutral.

Only some thick version of controversial issues education survives the reality check. Recognizing that school is the place for para- and meta-sex education, rather than first-order sex education,

clarifies the necessity of teaching students critical thinking, media literacy, and ethical reasoning, among other skills, in order to negotiate the controversies and challenges to their value systems that they will inevitably confront in their personal lives. None of these topics amounts to learning *sex* or results in young people having sex that they would not otherwise have had; still less does it change anyone's sexual orientation or gender identity. Without such learning, however, the sex education that students access on their own time is far more likely to be bewildering or harmful. Once again, the general liberal intuitions regarding sex education are right, but this is best appreciated by problematizing the premise that schools are offering "sex education" in the first place.

Conclusion: What's in a Name?

The problems I have laid out here regarding our conceptualization of sex education are not merely semantic.¹³ It might be appropriate to replace the term "sex education" with other labels – and in official curriculum documents, many jurisdictions have. "Relationships and Sex Education" (formerly "Sex and Relationships Education") was made statutory in the United Kingdom in 2020; in the United States, "Teen Pregnancy Prevention" replaced federally endorsed AOUME in 2010; in Ontario, Canada, a years-long debacle concerned a sub-unit of the Physical Education curriculum called "Sexual Health and Human Development." Scholars tend to favor the term "sexuality education" because it provides a more holistic perspective on the place of sex in a person's life (Fields et al. 2015). Each of these terms has advantages, and all are more accurate than the blunt phrase "sex education," while not yet correcting widespread confusion about what is and can be taught in schools. Regardless of the name used in a given school system, and regardless of the intentions of the educators within it, we tend to revert to the misleading concept of "sex education" as a placeholder for all adult anxieties about what students learn – or do not.

Due to the constant tension between the subject and the institution, sex is different from other subjects we find on the curriculum. "Sex education" is not intelligible in the way that, for instance, Spanish education is intelligible. It is, rather, a convenient proxy for some subject matter and educational goals that are intelligible, and in some cases necessary. But it elides the type of sex education that may matter most to young people (Allen 2005) – better para- and meta-sex education – and encourages endless controversy and distortion.

I have argued here that we must be clearer about what students actually learn about sex in schools and elsewhere. Schools deliver para- and meta-sex education, both in formal curriculum and in all the other features of the institution. Such education is not always intentional, productive, or consistent, but it follows from the conceptions of knowledge and sexual truth that are descended from *scientia sexualis*. Meanwhile, sex education that more closely resembles *ars amoris* occurs outside of institutional education, increasingly with the assistance of digital communications, and with similarly mixed effects on young people. Understanding this context can guide us in improving what happens at schools under the auspices of "sex education." I have elsewhere argued for a school-based model called Democratic Humanistic Sex Education (Bialystok & Andersen 2022: ch. 6). Among other things, this form of para- and meta-sex education would be cross-curricular, ongoing, unflinchingly informed by students' real lives, and separated from most formal assessment processes.

One might hope that a paradigm shift of this nature will help to deflate the high-pitched discourse over sex education in schools. After all, once we recognize that sex is not like Spanish and no one ever pretended it was, some anxieties about schools corrupting young people should abate. I am not optimistic that our political discourse will realign itself so rationally. Nonetheless, philosophy can help societies better define areas of disagreement over the role of schools in sex education and imagine more inventive alternatives.

(Related Chapters: 3, 6, 7, 8, 14, 16, 26, 27.)

Notes

- 1 Foucault 1976: 57.
- 2 In some cases, sex education is provided in schools by outside instructors – whether sex education specialists, medical providers, or religious/abstinence-only leaders – and thereby sidesteps some of the constraints of formal curriculum, especially where assessment is concerned. However, the lessons remain ensconced in an institutional environment that perpetuates the model of *scientia sexualis* and may exacerbate the pedagogical tensions explored here. For more discussion, see Bialystok and Andersen (2022), Chapter 6, and Andersen and Bialystok (forthcoming).
- 3 We see evidence for this in the Platonic dialogues, especially *Symposium*. As Foucault (1976) explains, “[i]n [ancient] Greece, truth and sex were linked, in the form of pedagogy, by the transmission of a precious knowledge from one body to another; sex served as a medium for initiations into learning” (61).
- 4 On the tension between constructivism and authenticity, see Bialystok (2017).
- 5 Pornography, of course, is intended to be sexually *stimulating* more than (or as well as) instructive. The fact that it may be stimulating does not detract from its efficacy as a means of instruction; on the contrary, “we learn better using images than words” and “we also learn better when aroused” (Layden 2010: 57).
- 6 About 40% of high school students report having had sex (NCSL 2020). The imprecision of the phrase “having sex” and the fallibility of self-reporting are well-known to researchers.
- 7 On this distinction, see Trudell (1993): 51–53.
- 8 These two categories are not intended to be rigidly delineated or mutually exclusive; certain types of learning will no doubt count as both. The exact relationship between para- and meta-sex education is a topic for another time.
- 9 There are also good reasons to be skeptical of autonomy as the overriding value in sex education (McAvoy 2013).
- 10 Moreover, these constraints are unequally enforced and regularly overlaid with sexist and racist values, especially when it comes to sex (Kendall 2013; Fields 2008; Allen 2005).
- 11 The consequences matter symbolically even if, as my analysis suggests, they have less direct practical effect than is commonly assumed. The state’s choices about opt-out policies and mandatory curriculum communicate its values and priorities.
- 12 For another liberal defense of neutrality in sex education, see Reiss (1995): 381.
- 13 See Fields et al. (2015): 371.

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