



Exploring
Contemporary
Issues in Sexuality
Education with
Young People

Theories in Practice

Kathleen Quinlivan



Palgrave Studies in Gender and Education

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*To all the researchers, teachers, and young people, who together,
experiment and grapple with what more sexuality and relationships
education can become.*

Foreword

In this Foreword for Kathleen Quinlivan's broad and deep look at sex education as it is practiced, I don't want to re-describe what she is doing, as she has clearly provided that roadmap in her introduction. Nor will I explain her approach in each chapter, depriving the reader of any glorious discoveries herself. Instead I will follow Quinlivan's own urging to focus on affective interconnections and assemblages, and to speak to what I've learned and what I too have experienced and felt in the everyday lives of students in sex education classes. I do so as a psychologist, with all the limitations of that particular formal training, but also as a sex educator, a theorist, and – why not? – as someone who listens to jazz. There is something about Quinlivan's take on rhizomatic education and her openness to what is referred to as “molecular flights” – the need to always leave open a plot of land – that has reminded me of jazz. And, as Quinlivan invites the reader and her students to follow this kind of flight as well as any spontaneous connections, I find myself taking that particular path.

A book needs to be organized, sentence following the sentence before, paragraphs bridged by transitions, chapters logically sequenced. No poetry. Perhaps a few images, snuck in if the press will permit because they are indeed expensive. The Foreword fits into the structure of a book as a guard at the gate, the emcee, the hostess opening the door at a dinner party and taking your coat, the welcoming committee. But if we understand Quinlivan's urgings towards reconsidering and then opening up

normative practice, this author of the Foreword might do none of those or all of those.

Jazz pieces have structure, and within them, from start to finish, bits of structure, performed and undone. A jazz melody has a beginning, middle, and end, although it doesn't have to end or begin as planned, but at the heart of jazz are the riffs. These become the piece and take you to unexpected places, returning you to a theme that can be heard differently having taken the journey sideways and sometimes backwards – and then again, forward. A jazz riff surprises like when affect evoked and even felt in the body of a student or a teacher in a sex education class, felt in a way that could disrupt the structure of the class. Riffs invent new tunes sparked by a melody, evoke contrasting feelings or perspectives as they draw attention to a bass line here, and a chord structure there. The uncertainty in improvisation is itself an affect that I sense Quinlivan is urging us to embrace. And so my first riff will be on affect, affect in the classroom, and affect around “failure.”

Affect and Failure

Affect is positioned in this book and then questioned as something forgotten and forbidden, something to be controlled, especially in schools. Sex Education is presented as the subject in schools that is most likely to arouse affect. Every morning my “google alert” based on the words “sex education” sends me 3 or 4 articles from all over the world that either tells me that sex education is dangerous, or that it is necessary but at risk of being forbidden. It is well known that sex education arouses fear in administrators and parents. So let's riff on fear.

While we tend to see adolescents as brave explorers in this world, projecting our utopian hopes and delights in sex on them, we must be careful not to deny them their fears, disappointments, and other negative affect. They are – must be – afraid, also. Consider the boy Justin who appears in an early chapter and how he might have been afraid. In other words, when we call bullies “cowards,” we might have something there. Justin, after a course questioning heteronormativity, a course meant to enlighten and change youths towards a more just and inclusive attitude with regard

to their non-heterosexual peers, makes a bullying statement to a presumed gay peer. Quinlivan interprets this moment, at first, as a reversal, a disappointment, a failure. The teachers, including Quinlivan, are demoralized, angry, fearful that their approach hasn't worked. The students deny the affect that is palpable to the teachers. They are dismissive of Justin's statement which only serves to reinforce the feeling of failure in the teachers. But if one follows all affects into new territories and old, Justin might have been afraid. He might have been afraid of the feelings evoked by the almost nude man in the ad the class considered, curiosity, perhaps even desire. Isn't that what an advertisement seeks to evoke in an underwear ad when using oiled and buff men? Desire? To have him (the man in the ad)? To be him? And then to buy some underwear? And might Justin also be afraid that in the kill-or-be-killed jungle high school, that if he did not attack first, he might be attacked? Might he also have been afraid of the affects evoked in analysis, of a boy taking this seriously, of being interested. If a boy is too interested, too eager, is he not a girl? A generation of Harry Potter readers know that the girl is supposed to be the eager student, the Hermione.

I know the tension Quinlivan speaks of well. In my own sexual ethics class, after lessons on coercion and consent, a girl of color led the class in blaming a young woman or girl featured in a story for her own rape given she had been drinking. She was not respectable, she should have known better, she will learn a good lesson from this. Why hadn't she learned the message of solidarity with other girls? Why was she holding herself and inviting the other girls in the class to position themselves in a superior position to the hypothetical drunk girl at a party. In the end I understood that to talk about rape in a co-ed classroom was to make the girls feel vulnerable. They needed to reassert themselves as invulnerable, and not rapeable, particularly in front of the boys in the class.

This "failure" is revisited in Chap. 4 where Quinlivan maps the students' conversations through a process that elucidates the affects, exchanges, and molecular "flights" between them. Rather than returning to a power dynamic which always places girls on the bottom and boys on top, positioning teachers as all knowing or inept, she steps out of these constructions and discusses the affect produced by the boys, the girls, and in herself. Rather than presenting the classroom as chaos, she follows and

alerts the reader to various affective flows, the spontaneity, and the surprise, foreshadowing her Chap. 5 in which the Rhizome becomes the metaphor for all that happens within the classroom and all that is felt within.

Bodies and affects are never separated for Quinlivan and it is clear in so many ways that the students in her class are aroused! But aroused in what way? Through the possibility of dreaming new worlds (Munoz 2009), queer worlds? She writes of the “embodied expressions of pleasure and exhilaration” that speak to the “joyful possibility of a utopic queerly carnivalesque future” ever mindful that these arousals to dream big come with big risks of disappointment. Of course, the promise of a full gaze into the sex education classroom is the promise of all affect – even those harder to touch affects like jealousy and hate.

Everyday Lives

And now a personal riff. As a teacher for 16 years now steeped in current theories, Quinlivan does the invaluable polyphonic work of bringing together theories and practice and does so not only to illuminate theory but at times to destroy it, mindful always of Gilbert’s (2014) urgings to make use of failure. Isn’t that just like jazz? Where there’s a theory that is treasured and destroyed in the making? A melody made unrecognizable?

The focus on everyday lives is a reminder to scholars to put their theories to work and to make them work. In honoring youths as having everyday lives, seeing their strengths, destabilizing their positions as learners, Quinlivan recognizes the power they possess in activism, the way students can lead us, rather us them. This is not a new idea. It’s been around since at least the revolution of the 60s, represented by the book *Summerhill*, when educators insisted on discussion circles, open classrooms, student choice, and student presentations, democratizing the classroom and unwittingly opening its arms to the current neoliberal reclaiming of such. Today this honoring of youth and their “choices” is hard to theorise from only a democratic education perspective. Students’ everyday lives are full of their need to act, be, and engage and there comes Quinlivan’s honoring and following their lead. Thankfully, in this volume, we are spared the

neoliberal chatter of students emphasizing their individual choices. And we can lose ourselves in example after example of students finding their freedom in community.

As I write young people in the U.S. are marching on Washington for better gun laws, the purported entitlement of adolescents being put to good use in activism. Teens from the Florida school in Parkland where 17 people were shot to death by a former student the education system had failed, called for this march and hundreds of thousands of teens followed. They are doing activism differently and surprisingly. For example, they come out and say that politicians are trying to give them money in exchange for publicity. They name the attempts to profit from their voices. And they refuse it, exposing the structure of a corrupt system whereby people make money from youths' idealism. This march, along with Quinlivan's narrative and photos of her students' activism, lead me to ask, to what extent do we underestimate our own influences and entanglements with youth? How do we allow them to find that small plot of land to develop on their own?

And while I see the "group as a beautiful, aesthetic, affective and relational site of learning within the school" and, this group of teens protesting, or Quinlivan's group of adolescents, I have a reminder. While holding precious, and treasuring youth, a lovely affect for both groups to share (adults and teens). We should remember they can also be a pain! When I behold their activism, I hope they are a pain in their legislators' sides. Tomorrow I may wish they are not such a pain in my classroom.

The events staged by Quinlivan's group are characterised by affective and relational expressions of humour, pleasure and quirkiness. Initiatives such as the planting of a blossoming 'Diversity tree' within the grounds of Tui High School humorously challenges and re-signifies deficit constructions of its label as a 'lesbian' tree at another school where such a tree was originally planted.

The book's look at the everyday lives of students promises to cut through the positions of honoring affect as well as the chaos. One student, Ruby, suggests that students value each other for 'who' rather than 'what' you they are in the RDG and that this can cultivate the emergence of more holistic 'beautiful' subjects. Looking at people holistically is at the heart of humanism. And in these moments, any posthumanism

theorizing is sidelined by the everyday thinking and desires of the students in all their particularity. Such statements from her students challenge the new materialism perspectives of the later chapters. There is nothing post-humanist about this. It is a reclaiming of humanism in the face of neoliberalism and financialization of being.

Porn

And finally a riff on pornography. How does a sex educator compete with pornography? How does the sex educator who ironically may have seen far less of it than her students address the questions and issues porn raises? Quinlivan has an answer and that is that looking at pornography from unexpected angles enables more expansive possibilities to be considered than the positions of bad for us vs good for us, harmful/not harmful. Coming in ‘slantwise’ as Ahmed (2006) suggests, or ‘coming in sideways’ as Ivinson and Renold (2013) write allows for something new to emerge.

Quinlivan asks students to look at art. Eschewing Courbet’s “Origin of the World,” perhaps the porn of its day, she brings in paintings by Linda James that students can engage with, paintings that capture something about the eyes of the women posing in typical pornography. The art produces, what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) call deterritorialising affective flows which can create possibilities for new and different responses to the commodification of sexualities.

Through these paintings student engage with the commodification of sex, undistracted by the commodification of sex in pornography. They give students pause to uncover the implications of pornography in their lives.

I take flight now to Austin Texas, reminded of the Arterotica show I attended, put together to raise money for “friends and neighbors living with HIV and AIDS, to help them in times of crisis, to pay for food, rent, utilities, eyeglasses, and medicine not covered by health insurance” (<http://octopusclub.org/event/arterotica-2018/>). The event, put on by the Octopus Club, is 100% volunteer. Artists donate art and arrive as art.

The drinks are free and paintings transform themselves from art to porn and back again. Funny, shocking, inspiring, and ridiculous, the event commodifies as it fights commodification and connects sellers and buyers to the neighbors and friends that the government does not take care of. An alternative community where the outrage of a piece that one doesn't care to look at reminds one, in context, of the outrage of health policy in the US.

Quinlivan shows students James' art, women posing as if in ads, as if in porn. She writes that looking at this art gets at the heart of vulnerability around sexuality and even around pornography. The fact that porn-like art can evoke surprising affects, makes it a humanistic project. Like a molecular flight, like a reversal of a theme in jazz, it calls into question the original purpose of the art, or porn. The original purpose of porn, to primarily invoke a physical desire, is undone or made a small part of the discussion of sex, pornography – what is human about looking, about posing, about sex.

No More Riffing

As Quinlivan writes about rhizomes and posthumanism, she continues to turn back into the lived experience of the classroom: “I feel uncomfortably like a ‘stranger in a strange land’, and my ‘ineptitude’ in that space produces students as authoritative guides. Connecting to broader sexuality education assemblages over time, we are entangled together in ways that, in some moments, appear to open us to myriad possibilities.”

The boring same old arguments of sexuality education, good or bad, preventative or harmful, effective or not, can't be where we as sex educators and theorists remain. It makes the fight the center of sexuality education rather than the sex or the pleasure or the relationships. Like Quinlivan we must move sideways and look at things slantwise, to include in sexuality education the myriad of possibilities and connections that may change not only how we conceptualise sex, but human. What Quinlivan has to offer us lies in her statements about the “inseparability of theories in practice” and how everyday lives of adolescents illuminate theory, destroy

our best theories, and suggest new ones. As in this book, we will then open ourselves up to that which is “liberating, and exhilarating, especially perhaps, in these constraining neoliberal times.”

Enjoy this exciting and rich volume.

Boston, MA, USA

Sharon Lamb

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Introduction: Contemporary Issues in Sexuality and Relationships Education with Young People: Theories in Practice

This book suggests approaches to learning and teaching sexuality and relationships education in the high school classroom that can engage more fully with the ways in which contemporary sexuality and gender issues are being played out in diverse young people's everyday lives. It utilises a range of current theoretical and pedagogical perspectives to explore how the sexuality and relationships education classroom can be made more meaningful and relevant for students through foregrounding their lived experiences, and exploring the diverse range of ways in which they are already pursuing and imagining new horizons. While such an approach has been advocated by sexuality education researchers for a long period of time, classroom programmes continue to struggle with such an orientation. As Graeme, a Year 9 high school student reminded me:

Graeme: you don't really talk about relationships and that [in Health]...

Kathleen: ... where do you learn ... get that knowledge from, where does it come from that that's what you want?

Graeme: Oh I guess sort of like past relationships I've had and stuff... [that I] don't sort of want to really rush it and stuff, you always [need to] take time and stuff.

Kathleen: Yeah, it's interesting isn't it? ...you learn how to have relationships having relationships?

Graeme: Yeah...

(Graeme, Year 9, f to f individual interview, November 30th, 2011)

Graeme's approach to learning about how to have intimate relationships makes perfect educational sense, *As I get older, it's certainly one that I would concur with myself*. And yet, for a range of complex and multifaceted reasons sexuality and relationship education programmes find it challenging to follow Graeme's lead. I suggest that these challenges have left school based sexuality and relationship programmes in something of a hiatus, and that it may be timely to reimagine what more sexuality and relationships education could become. To that end, I suggest that teachers and researchers working together can develop an awareness of the inseparability of the extent to which theories in practice shape pedagogical practices in the classroom, and the potential that contemporary theories hold for experimenting with what sexuality and relationships education 'otherwise' could look and feel like. It must be acknowledged that foregrounding students' lived experiences in the classroom requires a significant curricular and pedagogical reconceptualization of teaching and learning about sexualities and relationships, and of 'common sense' binary understandings of theories and practices. However, I suggest such approaches have the potential to make sexuality education more meaningful for young people, and better equip them to engage with, and more thoughtfully negotiate, contemporary sexuality and gender politics in their everyday lives.

In many ways this book documents what I have learnt about teaching and learning with young people in schools through becoming a sexuality education researcher in schools. After sixteen years as a high school English teacher, I returned (nervously) to university in 1996 to learn how to undertake research because I wanted to document the experiences of young lesbian and bisexual students and teachers in high schools, and experiment with what might be possible in terms of affirming sexual diversity within them. Becoming a researcher after having taught in the classroom for sixteen years has enabled me to engage with schooling worlds from the outside in, instead of from the inside out, however my