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Reframing sex education

The second international one-day sex education conference held at the Institute of Education, University of London on 25 May 2005 invited delegates to address 'Cultural Aspects of Sex/Sexuality Education.' This biennial event, which attracted many high-calibre research papers by young and established academics from each continent, provided a forum for vibrant multidisciplinary debate and the exchange of exciting research findings. A selection of the conference papers comprise this special issue of *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning*, the general aim of which is to present contemporary scholarship in the diverse field of sex and relationship education.

More specifically, though, the chosen conference theme of 'culture' required delegates to explore sex education through one of society's 'keywords' (Williams, 1988). In describing culture as 'one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language', the cultural materialist Raymond Williams (1988, p.87) not only registered the linguistic complexities of culture but also repositioned it as one of the most important concepts in the social sciences. Stemming from the work of Williams and other pioneers, culture, particularly in its popular forms, may be regarded as an active element of social reproduction and a principal means through which people signify their experiences both to themselves and others. Through sustained thinking, culture has come to be recognized as a medium which enables sense to be made of the world and the ensuing 'cultural turn' in academia has opened an immense array of objects of study and topics of inquiry to scrutiny. This widening of interests and intellectual landscapes is

especially well demonstrated with regard to the generationally young whose visceral lifeworlds, an integral part of which is sexuality, are now established subjects of investigation.

The key organizing principles of culture, namely its production, circulation, and consumption, are variously expressed through formal and informal channels among which are the media forms of sound, film, print, television, and web-based communication; formal structures of management such as education and law; and elite and popular art. This scope is reflected in the manuscripts which follow, each paper illuminating how culture works in society. By directly connecting culture to a range of systems and circuits of value, the authors contribute to understandings of how cultural environments have the potential to shape sexual learning. The first paper by Sara Bragg provides an account of a school-based research project with 12-15 year olds in the UK which militates against the reactionary prejudices and pessimism often attached to the popular media. At an age when many young people turn towards their peers as the main source of information about sex (Balding, 2005, pp.100–101), the *Media Relate* initiative shows how the imaginative use of the media as a resource for critical reflection and analysis can engage young people in having a 'real debate' about sex, love and relationships.

In contrast, the second paper by Renée DePalma and Elizabeth Atkinson reports on the culture of silence among students and staff in higher education when invited to join an online discussion about sexual orientation and schooling, a topic which, Ofsted reports, many teachers are nervous about and deal with superficially, if at all, in schools (Office for Standards in Education, 2005). The authors' analysis foregrounds the ways in which silence functions to butress the construction and maintenance of heteronormativity and

considers the democratising potential of raising the visibility and representation of minoritized groups so as to break that silence. Nicholas Addison's contribution also addresses the hiatus between sex/sexuality education and the lived experiences of young people and makes a strong case for using works of art as a locus of discussion. This he demonstrates through a deconstruction of Paula Rego's triptych *The Pillowman.*

In their respective papers about the influence of popular films on learning about sex, Sharyn Pearce and Shakuntala Banaji draw on Hollywood and Bollywood cultural productions to argue that cinematic experiences not only provide useful resources for acquiring sexual knowledge but also articulate powerful messages regarding gender roles. Lynda Measor's paper on 'condom choreography' also focuses on gender issues and discusses the policy implications of young men's cultural resistance to the use of prophylactics. The paper by Rebecca Dittman and Pam Meecham elucidates transgender issues in relation to the Gender Recognition Act (2004) in the UK and suggests how the visual arts offer a 'safe space' for discussion about this little understood area of human experience. The final manuscripts are concerned with the cultural specificity of place in the context of sex education. While the paper by Joy Walker and Jan Milton compares the sexuality education of primary school children in Sydney, Australia, and Leeds, UK, and raises questions about universal dimensions of learning about sex, Judy Hemingway's paper concentrates on the geographical constitution of sexual cultures by interrogating the habitus of seaside resorts.

Set against the entrenched stance of an esteemed medical authority that 'sex education in schools is uneven, and is sometimes useless' (Collier *et al*., 2003, p.328) is that propounded by an eminent philosopher of education who reasoned as follows, 'suppose

[…] kissing were to be described as a movement of the lips that has the function of stimulating the organism. The generality of this description would omit some essential features of kissing; furthermore by describing it as a mere bodily movement it would be assimilated to salivation or to a knee-jerk which is, I would think, dangerously misleading' (Peters, 1964, p.10). Clearly, a meaningful and strategic way forward is needed. Situating the papers in this special issue within the framework of culture offers one means of avoiding the narrow pathologizing discourses which continue to underpin sex/sexuality education on the one hand and the excesses of disembodied abstraction on the other. Collectively, the pedagogic implications of this selection of papers suggest that as educators we might benefit from being less precious about disciplinary boundaries. Sex education as a field of learning, rather than a discrete curriculum area, invites multi- and interdisciplinary debate along with pragmatic partnerships. These, I would argue, have the capacity to make significant inroads into the improvement of sex education and ensure that we are able to move on to new possibilities and places.

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