Sexual Health Education: Silenced by Diplomacy and Political Correctness

Melody E. Morton Ninomiya
Memorial University

Abstract

My exploratory Master's thesis research examines how teachers of 'sex ed.' in Newfoundland and Labrador perpetuate problematic assumptions as they relate to sexual health. Sexual health education remains rooted in the simplistic idea that it exists primarily to regulate teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Educators' diplomatic thinking and pedagogies expose how fear and discomfort have served to silence topics such as pleasure, desire, homophobia and gender identity. This article challenges educators (and those who support them) to cross over the border of political correctness and diplomatic relations by first examining their own notions of gender, sexuality, curricular/pedagogical objectivity and privilege.

Transforming the conversation of sexual health in the classroom offers possibilities for challenging dominant culture and assumptions. For example, educators can re-define safe sex as the practice of fostering a culture of safety for all sexual and gender identities. Considerations related to the complexity of single-sex versus co-ed classrooms, abstinence, sexual pleasure, media representation and pornography, merit attention if we want to cross the borders instilled by fear and ignorance.

A society that is unwilling and struggles to engage in dialogue with children about love, desire and commitment has seemingly turned to schools to teach sex education. It is often argued that educational institutions are overburdened by the demands to "solve the problems of a society unwilling to bear its burdens where they should be properly be shouldered" (Noddings, 2004, p. 167). This instrumentalist approach attempts to use curriculum as a tool, responding to the real or imagined crises of teenage pregnancy and STIs (Case & Tudiver, 1983; Diorio, 1985; Moran, 2000; Prentice, 1994). Sex education today, though more cautious in its claim for effectiveness, is still viewed as an agent working against STIs and teenage pregnancy (Moran, 2000).

This essay, drawing on my qualitative Master's thesis research, highlights how sexual health education (SHE) is largely shaped by teachers' conscious and unconscious fears, discomforts and values. All too often teachers choose silence on issues that are perceived as controversial while also touting progressive inclusion (i.e., acknowledging that there is nothing wrong with "homosexuality"). Based on a survey of the pertinent literature and my own critical-qualitative study using open ended questionnaires, I argue that teachers must examine how SHE may serve to oppress more than it equips youth to better understand their identities, values and choices. It is time for teachers (and those who support them) to re-invent SHE through critical thinking, further education and counter-hegemonic pedagogies.

Defined by Dominant Cultures

For a sex-obsessed culture it seems reasonable to ask *why such a silence about sex*? Prentice (1994) writes that "we regularly talk about sex in order to argue we should not discuss it: we display it as proof we should not see it" (Prentice, 1994, p. 3). A conservative agenda of protecting and limiting sexualities in public settings is arguably untenable (Patton, 1996). Prentice (1994) writes about the insidious nature of sexual regulation:

> Sexual regulation in all its forms produces a number of effects: it builds the 'right' character in citizens; it shapes the 'right' sorts of families; it harnesses libidinal energy and restricts its expression; it affirms those who are 'normal' and it punishes those who are deviant…without imagining conspiracies or reducing sexual discipline to a mere 'effect' of capitalism, racism or sexism, one can point out how useful it is to a consumer society to have a well-disciplined, relatively predictable citizenry who self-regulate…like other forms of social organizing, sexual regulation works in the service of ruling. It is accomplished through a nexus of formal and informal procedures and sanction, managed by a network of professionals inside and outside of the state: social workers, teachers, early childhood educators, psychologists, psychiatrists, public health nurses, licensing officials, corrections officers, social service administrators, religious leaders and the like. (Prentice, 1994, p. 7)

Canada is no exception in re-asserting a commitment to heteronormativity, gender binaries and hegemonic models of gender roles (Frank, 1994; Prentice, 1994). We do not need to look far to see how much sex is relational, shaped by social interaction, understood by historical context and assigned cultural meanings (Weeks, Holland, & Waites, 2003). Many people know that the words *sex* and *gender* are no longer synonymous and yet many struggle to understand why anyone would ever want to change their sex or gender. And while social codes of clothing and behaviour can no longer always be clearly defined by gender, how do we understand that people tolerate boyish girls and pity girly boys?

There is irony in the lack of service and protection offered to queer[1] youth in a society that offers many social service programs based on an uncontested child-saving concept. Is it easier for society to see the seventh grader as asexual rather than lesbian, gay or transgendered? If society views children as a product of their parents, how can we talk about a young person's right to forge their gender identity (Talburt, 2004)? Prentice (1994) states that gender socialization is sex education. Recognizing that linguistics and gestured signs don't just *mean*, but they *do*, informal sex education is ongoing throughout a child's life (Haims, 1973; Patton, 1996). This informal sex education can be held accountable for the fear and violence directed towards anyone considered "deviant." Imagine the term "safe sex" used to describe the absence of threat to those who deviate from any sexual norm – someone who represents a tension between a longing to be a citizen and a struggle to survive (Patton, 1996).

Divorcing the Trinity of Biology = Gender = (Hetero) Sexuality

Prentice (1994) described the problematic multiple meanings for the word "sex", a frequently unchallenged package of what *is* and what *ought*. In general, people have come to believe that sex both is and should be exactly what it seems to be (Diorio, 1985). This ambiguous sense of sex poses a particular problem when token inclusion of non-heterosexual-identified people is

used to symbolize support and tolerance - also something for which the non-heterosexual-identified are expected to be thankful (Kumashiro, 2002). Despite increased visibility of stereotypical "gay characters" on television shows and films, we are caught in a time when youth are reluctant to "out" themselves while media is busy constructing new cultural blueprints for the sexual identity that they are coming "into" (Fine, Anand, Jordan, & Sherman, 2003).

Fraser (1993) argues that there is advantage in creating *counterpublics*, a term signifying explicit alternatives to publics that exclude the interests of potential participants, to oppose stereotypes that cause shifting in one's own identities, interests and needs. Ironically, the space to form counterpublics comes out of our exclusionary practices of the public sphere with hopes of reconstituting new identities (Fine et al., 2003). For example, Michael Warner as a queer theorist who writes about the possibilities for counterpublics, would argue that marriage is an extension of politics that "confers status on people rendering sex invisibly private and presumptively normative….giv[ing] people that status at the expense of others, while pretending merely to honor their private love and commitment" (Jagose, 2000).

It is necessary to critique and deconstruct terms such as sex, marriage or parenting that "marry" assumptions of gender performances, biological sex and heterosexuality. Until people are able to "divorce" themselves from such assumptions, they will not be able to think inclusively about the meaning of terms as it relates to all genders and sexualities.

Troubling Sex Education and Curriculum

In a societal pedagogy that presumes language can transparently communicate and ignores how it excludes, polices and incites SHE and its chosen curriculum, a good antidote is to think of sex as multiple vernaculars (Patton, 1996). Getting in the way of multiple vernaculars is the issue of power and identity in schools, a concentrated source of contestation. SHE is a relatively narrow intervention that is expected to address an entire range of cultural responses to a complex social dynamic (Talburt, 2004).

The challenge lies in the question "how might curriculum begin to assert itself into the tangled web of ignorance that currently exists in and around discourses about sexuality" (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 200)? In theory, SHE would be incorporated and explored in all subject areas, fostering a deeper understanding and freeing adolescent sexuality from its inherited boundaries (Moran, 2000). These boundaries are profoundly influenced by notions of morality that preclude any neutral zone to "discuss the 'facts' of sexual reproduction, sexual attitudes or sexual behaviors" (Adams, 1994, pp. 60-61). Our moral views unquestionably alter our understanding of even the most scientific information (Adams, 1994).

The language of sexualities is complicated. Gilbert (2004) writes that "prohibiting and controlling what can or cannot be said about sex also determines what can be said about the self and its desires, dreams, and fantasies" (Gilbert, 2004, p. 111). The contradiction between knowledge as power and sexual knowledge as private and dangerous is the source of much debate around SHE.   How can one teach about the dangers while also exploring the pleasures of sex? What language does sexuality speak? How do we, as a society, learn to pose sexuality as a question? Gilbert (2004) suggests that these questions become the grounds of SHE conversations with adolescents. Most school curriculum assumes a transparent language that translates perceptions of sexualities into thought and fact. This assumption may indeed mark the limit of education in its current forms and practices (Gilbert, 2004).

Objective Curriculum?

Looking at Newfoundland and Labrador's provincially mandated curriculum objectives for Human Sexuality units, the key messages have central themes of understanding puberty changes, reproductive anatomy and physiology, pregnancy and consequences of STDs and HIV/AIDS, awareness of sexual expression, responsible decision-making, and outcomes of sexual intercourse (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 1993). It should not be shocking then, that teachers in a questionnaire distributed as part of my Master's thesis research, answered in ways that assume teaching SHE is about disseminating factual information that will discourage teenagers from having sex (i.e. practice abstinence). The majority of teachers in my study indicated a religious affiliation and in several cases made reference to the fact that their school was formerly Catholic and, consequently, exists in a predominantly Catholic/Anglican community. It would be remiss to not consider how church attendance may correlate with values taught in SHE. Marsman and Harold (1986) found in their Ontario-based study that frequent church attenders did not approve or disapprove of SHE but rather were more likely to favor conservative values *in* SHE.

Looking at the objectives of SHE, as mandated by the Newfoundland and Labrador Department of Education (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2007a, 2007b), it is clear that the 21st century curriculum is "organically connected to the sex education of the previous century" (Moran, 2000, p. 217). The objectives of the current SHE are organically connected to the previously denominationally Christian-based schools.

Teachers Assume Objectivity

"Teachers are more likely to teach topics they consider important" (Johnson Moore & Rienzo, 2000, p. 59)

Looking at teachers' responses to topics covered, most important topics, measures of success and definitions of abstinence, there is an assumption that factual information needs to be covered while topics of controversy which risk offence (and, therefore, defense) are considered optional. Teachers emphasized and expressed concern for students' lack of understanding around *real world* consequences. To give an example, comments like those from teachers below were common throughout many of the open-ended answers.

> *"[my main concern is that I] correct misinformation."*

> *"[my main concern for students is] technical information, risks, consequences."*

> *"Main concern is that information doesn't get through to students."*

> *"The feedback I get from students allows me to evaluate their comprehension of topics we have covered."*

> *"[I emphasize abstinence] a great deal, but I feel students think this is preaching and do not believe that there is so much risk."*

The combination of my teachers' perception that health education at large is not an academic subject and that SHE is built on a medical framework intended to prevent and alert students to

the dangers and difficulties of sex - facilitates *questioning* youth to work against each other (Allen, 2005; Bragg, 2006; Measor, Tiffin, & Miller, 2000). By neglecting critique and complicating relationships, identity, pleasure, power and desire, SHE loses integrity as an academically challenging and engaging subject area.

Responses from teachers in this study suggest that they unknowingly perpetuate neutral, natural and status quo forms of sexuality while simultaneously believing that curriculum content is relevant to diverse sexual identities. For example, several respondents who prioritized and defined abstinence in heteronormative[2] terms also felt that students of all sexual identities would (in theory) be respected and that curriculum content was appropriate but needed an updated appearance. Such inattentiveness to the silences and unspoken values in curriculum would be indicative of how SHE fails rather than protects its students by not attending to the development of the sexual self (Fine, 1988). Gate-keeping by teachers is inescapable and is frequently misunderstood as the mere selection and simplification of some prescribed curriculum content (Thornton, 2001). In this way, the same material resources will be construed differently depending on individual teachers and their understanding of any given topic.

Bragg (2006) argues that teachers fear too much that SHE be "inappropriate" or "too explicit" and consequently do not offer young people experience or skills in critical media consumption. Explicit and inappropriate information is undoubtedly accessible and pervasive in television, internet, advertising and magazines. Youth are then left to negotiate sexual media culture and become participants in this "private" sphere that is less objective and more objectifying. Interestingly, teachers in this research study did not identify or comment on the importance of critiquing media representation of sexualities and sexual behaviors.

Teachers responded with comments that identified themselves as generally comfortable, mostly competent with a desire to get training, if it were available, honest, open to diversity and in tune with what students "need" from SHE. Schultz and Boyd (1984) writes about how teachers' self-perceptions as liberal, tolerant, politically correct and doing the "right thing" tows a middle line so as not to upset anything can hardly be called *liberal*. There is much work to be done for teachers to see that what they consider "liberal" is often disguised oppression to those students who don't fit into the metaphorical heterotrophic space in the classroom.

Crossing over the Border of Political Correctness and Diplomatic Relations

A critical analysis of teachers, their pedagogies and perceptions in this research is framed mostly by what teachers were not saying. In other words, the critique primarily lies in the silences and the lack of awareness around the oppression that this silence serves. Teachers in formal educational institutions are in a position to directly address the discomfort and fear associated with the nature of sexualities and related practices. Problematic and silent topics such as pleasure, desire, homophobia, gender identity and media critique are undeniably real and have the potential to be liberating or devastating. If there is desire to empower and foster a sense of moral autonomy, then issues of power must be woven throughout SHE (Measor et al., 2000). Careful examination suggests teacher education is key to making SHE necessarily reflective, critical and transformative but not without experiencing discomfort and grappling with the complexity of sexualities.

At the foundational level, gender and sexuality norms uncover a host of issues like regulation, discipline, fear and control. I believe that schools are yet another site for systemic oppression to

exist; however, there is hope in exploring ways to foster critical thinking. Questioning sexual and gender identity is not only complex but can also challenge the very core of what it means to align oneself with a certain category. Similarly, gender and sexual identities are complicated by politics, religion and stereotypes. Mediating theoretical and conceptual ideals with daily realities of violence (of any kind) is indeed a huge challenge. In this way, educators are in a unique and influential role that can offer a chance for transformative, reflective and critical thinking – all of which are much needed in the conversations around sexual health.

So what then counts as successful health education? There appears to be a contradiction between how educators currently measure success and how these measurements serve to meet disguised hegemonic, political and often times oppressive criteria. Frequently, success is defined by tested knowledge, performance and completion as suggested by teachers who participated in this research study. Theorists and researchers offer that successful SHE troubles the concept of gender identity, questions the root of fear when one talks about multiple sexualities and provides youth with skills and language to negotiate sexual participation through pleasure and desire.

Teachers and youth in small communities across Newfoundland and Labrador face the challenge of feeling discouraged from going to outside help for fear of having their identities, questions or concerns exposed to other community members (Johns, Lush, Tweedie, & Watkins, 2004; Shortall, 1998). This research further highlights the ways in which SHE still operates in a heteronormative, gender oppressive and fear-inducing metaphorical space that is silent on topics like pleasure and desire; that in fact, do not offer alternative ways of thinking, being or educating.

Possibilities for Transformative Border Crossing

Teachers, as the curricular-instructional gatekeepers, can construe the "same" content quite differently (Thornton, 2001). Educators struggle with a range of student maturity, experience, shyness, and knowledge in a context where there is also an attempt to avoid controversy for fear of becoming vulnerable, dealing with parental complaints and attracting any media interest. It is important that teachers understand the pedagogy of SHE as a critical and transformative practice. Teachers have choices. We can hear and observe what is being covered but what about the things that are not being covered?

Theorists and researchers offer that successful SHE not only troubles the concept of gender identity but also questions the root of fear when one talks about multiple sexualities - providing youth with skills and language to negotiate sexual participation through pleasure and desire. Educators are rarely exposed to problematic and oppressive qualities of curriculum documents and materials, particularly as they relate to SHE where there is a need for radical changes and critical thinking.

It is important that teachers consider how SHE is not entirely objective, how single and mixed-gender classes serve different purposes, what heteronormativity means and excludes, how gender is performed, how abstinence relies on defining "sex" and why female pleasure is completely overshadowed by the messages of victimization, fear, possible pregnancy and vulnerability. If there is a desire to promote positive sexual health attitudes and practices that provide youth with the knowledge, resources and skills to make informed choices then, it is possible. In this context, it is key that teachers be educated. Perhaps we now need to

acknowledge that the *process* by which people try to find answers to difficult questions is more paramount than the answers themselves. We need to invest in a process for educators to help transform the oppressive nature of SHE into one that offers understanding and informed choices to our young people.

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ENDNOTES

1. Queer is a term that is considered by some to be offensive and reclaimed by others to describe a sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression that does not conform to heteronormativity. Queer is often used as a catch-all category that is often bracketed as including lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans-identified, questioning and straight allies (LGBTQS).

2. Heteronormative describes situations where heterosexuality is assumed as *the* norm (overt, covert, or implied) and variation from heterosexuality is marginalized, ignored or persecuted through beliefs, policies or social practices (Lovaas & Jenkins, 2006); assumes heterosexuality as "natural, universal and monolithic" and binary constructs of woman/man, straight/gay, feminine/masculine (Hennessy & Ingraham, 1997, p. 279).