

# Sexuality in school: the limits of education [Book Review]

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**Sexuality in school: the limits of education** by Jen Gilbert, Bristol, Policy Press, 2014, xxviii + 120 pp., £45.00 (hardback) £15.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0816686377 (hardback), ISBN 9780816686391 (paperback)

Drawing on queer theory and principles of psychoanalysis, this slim text by Gilbert discusses the sexuality inherent in children and young people, with specific attention on lesbian, gay bisexual and trans (LGBT) people in schools. It discusses the effect that sexuality, and the effect that both the teaching and the sanctioning of sexuality has on (mostly) teenagers. Largely US/Canada-based, it is nonetheless an interesting blend of queer theory and LGBT studies relevant not only in the USA but worldwide. It covers a range of issues set out in five chapters, moving through the lifespan of the queer individual, from childhood to adolescence, then on to the teaching of sex, and ending with the future, a reluctant manifesto of the ways in which educators and others with an interest in sexuality in education might improve. Each chapter is an iteration of the previous one and displays the tension between the 'innocent child' and the 'knowing adult' by building upon the information within it as the metaphorical child grows to further our knowledge and interest, before ending by pointing us at a future unknown.

Each chapter begins with a real-life application of the chapter subject, and draws not only on the author's own experience as an educator, but on theory of all kinds. She has a clear understanding and intimacy with the subject at hand - it is well-researched and an interesting read. Beginning with the spectre of the queer child as constructed by queer adults, it argues that children are reduced to sets of categories as specified by adults who have a vested interest in doing so. It then moves on to the categorisation of the adolescent and whether such a being exists, before proceeding on to the teaching of LGBT youth through media (via the 'it gets better' project), then on to teaching sexuality in schools before finally giving a 'reluctant manifesto' for future. All through the book, Gilbert draws lightly on queer theory, and LGBT studies. She uses psychoanalytic theory as a mediator between the two to make very clear points about the articulation of children, both younger and older. In doing so, she covers a wide range of topics that are astonishing for a short book, but although each chapter leaves you feeling like you could (or should) know more on the topic, there is a sense that each topic is well-covered and the message is coherent.

One of the clear themes of this book is the construction of children by adults, whether it is the young child constructed as naive and untainted by (homo/bi)sexuality, or whether it is the teenager constructed as a malevolent risk-taker. As well as this construction, the book also adeptly shows how the standard construction of LGBT people is that of a white middle class. She explains how we as (often) white middle class adults ourselves, adopt something of a saviour complex, in that we must 'save' our children from the unknown of sexuality, or from risk-taking or from suicidal thoughts, that may or may not be 'just part of growing up'. At the same time that the author forces you to confront your own ideas about what is the 'right' way forward, she also points out, in line with queer theory, that we cannot legislate a positive future for youth in schools. As a reader of the book, you gain a very clear idea on where the author thinks that schools are currently getting it wrong (answer: pretty much everywhere). Further, the interrelation of queer theory and LGBT studies begin to provide you with new ideas and ways to move forward, even as you start to despair that you could ever effect this because the changes needed within school and society seem too large.

In the past, schools have been cast in a negative light with regards to the teaching of and catering of sexuality in youth, either because they have done 'too much' or because they have done 'not enough', but Gilbert moves past this and looks instead at the impossible position that schools are in. Schools are a microcosm of society in which children are taught by members of society and they are (at least here, potential if not yet current by virtue of being children with no agency) members of society. Gilbert clearly sees that is not right to blame the school for the thin line it is walking between actively bad and not actively good enough, but just as sexuality is everywhere within society. We need to recognise that sexuality is everywhere within schools, and at the present moment schools feel somewhat shackled in what they can achieve whilst staying within the lines that society has drawn from them.

Gilbert's final chapter - her 'reluctant manifesto' lists several ways in which improvements could be made, which surround a common theme - stop boxing sexuality in to 'sex ed' classes and recognise that everyone, whatever their sexuality, has a connection to LGBT people. Teaching LGBT issues in sex education classes, and creating a gay-straight-alliance (GSA) in schools might (and this is a debatable point) ameliorate some of the worst abuses that LGBT students face, but it does not create any structure for change - it is a continual fire-fighting exercise. Gilbert recognises that the way forward is by creating space, by taking LGBT issues out of the closet and bringing them into schools at every level, just as LGBT people are in schools at every level.

This book will provide new and interesting ideas for many people (LGBT or not) working at all levels of primary and secondary school, whether as teachers or otherwise. Its final practice focus gives ways forward in which we can make changes to the environment and stop being so afraid of sex. It is also a useful book for those teaching at higher education levels, bringing in a basic level of queer theory and philosophy that could be understood and applied by academics working wherever they teach. If lessons and ideas from this book were taken on board, I could see a real difference being made to the way sexuality is viewed in school.

Although the book is slim, this doesn't always make it an easy read. This may particularly be the case if one is not familiar with queer theory and as such those with an understanding of queer theory might gain more from this book than those without. It provides a broad overview of the state of sexuality in education, with a more US than UK focus- it does not cover, for example, the spectre of section 28 which British schools are still feeling the legacy of in many instances, or the public sector equality duty that public schools have to follow in ensuring equality in schools. This does not however, remove from the usefulness of the observations made; these stand both in US/Canada and in the UK alike. It may be that some of the specifics discussed within the book (such as the GSAs) do not translate fully to the UK, but the overarching ideas do at every level.