

Understanding Sex and Relationship Education, Youth and Class: A Youth Work-Led Approach

Sharon Elley. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

Reviewed by Paul Reynolds

Sexual education and the articulation and regulation of bodies of sexual knowledge offered to youth is a controversial area of contested positions, particularly in the UK. The conventional nature of approaches to enabling youth to learn their understandings about sex and make choices are encapsulated in the paradigm of sex and relationships education (SRE) that dominates policy and practice. Within that paradigm different voices pursue positions that range from indoctrination in the idea of sex within monogamous, genito-centric and heteronormative if not explicitly heterosexist values to offering youth a broader sense of exploring diversity and difference in both their sexual desires and the relational forms it takes.

Elley's contribution to these debates is an empirical study of the experiences and attitudes of youth aged 15–21 in a distinctively youth-work led SRE programme delivered with comprehensive schools in the UK, which evaluates the congruencies and dissonances of the experience of the SRE programme with broader contextual factors that shape sexual understandings. The contextual variables include socio-economic circumstances, peer and family relations and values and youth experiences and aspirations. The novelty of the study is to focus on a youth work-led approach rather than more established schools-based SRE, and a focus on class variables in understanding how SRE is responded to, and risky or dangerous behaviours with public policy consequences avoided. In the former, the youth work approach is less formalised within educational authority structures and adopts an approach that is considered more inclusive and enabling of youth participation in their own decisions and learning.

The study is framed within a broader understanding of the relationship between different SRE approaches and the underlying moral and political approaches to SRE policy, and an awareness of international and well as national dimensions to SRE. The study is mainly, however, an empirical case study that seeks to examine one particular approach to SRE, take seriously class contexts in a way much public policy literature on sex and sexuality does not, and make proposals for improving SRE. It reflects its sourcing in a PhD thesis.

Yet recognising that narrow framing of the focus of the text should not detract from a fluent, careful and insightful study. Elley summarises the relevant policy and class contexts effectively, and draws from recent theoretical notions of class to un-

derline the importance of class as a variable in educational response. The discussion of class recognises intersections between class, gender and heterosexuality and provides a useful framing for this study in recent studies of class in the UK. There could be an argument for having taken these arguments further, and looked at how the dissonances of working class youth, for example, could be articulated into a more political conception of alienation, and thus seen less as not reaching youth, and more of by-product of a more intentional approach to working class youth that produces a depoliticised and disengaged youth. In such a study, however, theory supports and not directs the analysis, so the relatively contextual underpinning to subsequent discussion is understandable, particularly in a study that understands class as socio-economic context.

The fieldwork itself, drawing from youth workers, youth and parent and peer relationships, charts dissonances in how youth see and respond to SRE, its messages and its framing. It details the argument that youth work approaches might offer more effective engagement with youth than traditional schooling, but nevertheless have problems in dealing with youth whose class position and its influences on relationships lead to a lack of engagement and lack of positive responses to possible sexual risks in a broader pessimistic social climate.

The findings are not in themselves unexpected, but the evidenced and nuanced reading enriches understandings. Even in less institutionally framed SRE, the problem for professionals is avoiding the classical Foucauldian critique of education as pedagogisation (Elley does not theorise it through Foucault), and articulating progressive sexual messages within disciplinary contexts of biological, medical and health framings. A second problem is not being able to articulate meaningfully the diversity of relationships and practices that constitute youth sexuality. Elley demonstrates that youth have a sense of these weaknesses and it fuels their sense of a dissonance between SRE messages and their lives, particularly in the context of the rationalist approach to desire and pleasure in SRE and the actually cultural and class based realities of youth sex. Parents and youth are concluded as having complex relationships in which sharing sexual knowledge is avoided, represented in a mutual ignorance or non-communication or acknowledged in ritualistic ways that obscure moral and personal discourse, whilst peer relationships combine forms of pressure with forms of nascent experience sharing and support. Again, socio-economic variables such as inharmonious family contexts are picked up in the research findings as a particular variable in the failure to provide adequate support for youth developing their sexual selves.

Elley's discussion of the impact of class and location on youth accounts of their sexual values and practices is intelligent, focusing on the different meanings of risk and danger in sex and its relationship to different notions of personal and social values that are very much connected to class positions and social aspirations (though she recognises patterns of difference within as well as between class stratas). Similarly, she recognises the intersection of class and gender and the persistence of gendered presumptions and their variance between and across class strata as an important variable in how youth compose their heterosexual relationships.

Elley's conclusions combine recognition of the need for SRE concerns to be located in broader understandings of socio-economic conditions and class and gender

influences on the different engagements of youth to social and public processes. Her recommendations for an SRE reconceived as *Social and Sexual Relationship Education* are sensible, and her exhortation for SRE practitioners to reflect this broader awareness in their approach to youth sex education, and to avoid the pathological representations of risks and dangers and provide more nuanced understandings that elide with youth experience is well taken. Her closing concern, that SRE and its professionals (and politicians and policy-makers) see themselves as opening doors of knowledge opportunity with the danger they pathologise youth for failing to walk through rather than reflect on the nature of the door and the welcome is important.

This is a strong example of how a disciplined, well-conceived project can add to knowledge and make a cogent case for policy change and professional reflection. It sets an agenda that needs both urgent attention and expansion to consider question of non-heterosexual sexuality and its SRE articulation. A moral radical approach might begin to deconstruct the discourse of SRE as a philosophy, and make a cogent argument that Elley's *Social and Sexual Relationship Education* approach is correct to bring the social in, but might meditate on the relationship between sex play and sex practices and the construction of representations in relationship which can exclude and devalue less conventionally framed relationships – such as 'fuckbuddies' and careful casual engagements. Equally, radical voices might want to make more strident claims about the impact of class and gender and how youth experience – sexual and otherwise is shaped – whilst critical voices such as Foucault and Illich might question how far a youth work-led approach defers or reframes but does not escape the tendencies of pedagogisation.

Those concerns widen the necessary scope of critical engagement with SRE, and Elley's study is a very positive contribution to it, and is convincing and articulate plea for further research and critical thinking about SRE. As such, it is a text that contributes to the field and should be read by everybody who has an interest in how we seek to inculcate sexual knowledge in youth.