

Sexuality and Curriculum: The Kids are Alright (But the Adults are Really, Really Nervous)

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*The desire for intimacy and embodied love is the basic bond, the glue, that builds and
sustains democratic culture as a way of life and an ethic of reciprocity and caring.*
(Carlson, 2012)

In *The Education of Eros* Dennis Carlson examines the “problem” of adolescent sexuality through historical curricular lenses and thereby reframes ways in which we might think about sexuality education. The essential “problem” for US white, middle class, heterosexual society seems to be that adolescents have sex at all. Carlson identifies key issues that have been the focus of sexuality education for the last half of the 20th century and the first decade of the 21st: teen pregnancy in general, teen pregnancy in welfare mothers in the 1960s and 70s, homosexuality from the 1970 to the present, AIDS/HIV in the 1980s, and the abstinence-only movements of the 1990s and 2000s. Taken together, not only do these issues capture the problem writ large—adolescent sexuality itself—they also offer commentary on the particular social movements within which they occur. Along the way, Carlson aligns the cultural attitude shift with a subtle shifting of psycho-philosophical theories from Marcuse’s Marxist reading of Freud’s repression theories within a capitalist society, to Foucault’s ethics of a “care of the self” within postmodern structures of bio-power. The book concludes with the author effectively making a case for

Books Discussed

Carlson, D. (2012). *The Education of Eros: A History of Education and the Problem of Adolescent Sexuality*. New York: Routledge.

approaching adolescent sexuality—and the “education” thereof—from cultural studies perspectives in order to understand both more deeply. If we as a democratic society, he proposes, began to understand adolescents as “active subjects of their own desires” (p. 175) by means of learning from the popular cultures they both produce and consume, their sexuality education would take on a whole new and different nature. But first, adolescent sexuality must be reconstructed as something other than a problem.

For those of us who might assume that there are national curriculum standards for— if not for sex education then certainly for health education, under which it is almost always categorized—there are not. Currently, the U.S. only has Common Core Standards for math and English. However, in the 1990s the Centers for Disease Control, along with several partner organizations, developed National Health Education Standards and Performance Indicators. The individual states were then left to adopt state standards—most of which are taken from the NHES. Individual districts followed suit and developed curricula and material from the state standards. According to the CDC web site, “The NHES are written expectations for what students should know and be able to do by grades 2, 5, 8, and 12 to promote personal, family, and community health. The standards provide a framework for curriculum development and selection, instruction, and student assessment in health education” (<http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/sher/standards/>). These same standards are in effect today (imagine math, science, or language arts standards that have not been revised in almost a quarter century). And what sort of frame do the national standards for health education provide for curriculum development?

The Standards and Indicators are built around six “Adolescent Risk Behaviors” identified by the CDC: alcohol and drugs, injury and violence, tobacco, poor nutrition, inadequate physical activity and risky sexual behavior. Problem is, neither the National Health Education Standards nor the Georgia Performance Standards (since I live in Atlanta I looked at these) discuss human reproduction or puberty—not to mention desire, same sex or otherwise. Pregnancy is not mentioned. At all. An editorial in the Atlanta Journal Constitution called “Health Education Ignores Sexuality,” states, “It appears that these omissions are part of a trend to avoid dealing with teen sexuality, as evidenced by the repeated mentioning of the CDC’s first five adolescent risk behaviors, but not of the sixth — risky sexual behavior...When the state standards finally talk about sex, the kids are already in high school and the only example of risk-reduction mentioned is abstinence.” (Nahmias, 2010). Treating adolescent sexuality as a “risk behavior,” or worse, erasing it altogether from curriculum and education is not a phenomena of the 21st century in the U.S. As Dennis Carlson demonstrates, it is symptomatic of how American society has dealt with the “problem” of adolescent sexuality since the end of World War II.

Just for fun, and under the pretense of collecting data, I looked at the Georgia Performance Standards for Health Education (adopted in 2009) and counted the number of times the document mentions sex or a derivative of the word for students in Kindergarten through 12th grade. Sex/uality is mentioned in the indicator regarding the physical and emotional consequences of unprotected sex. There is also a performance indicator for accessing resources that provide accurate information regarding sexual assault and sexual violence; another indicator references sexual violence as abuse. There are

two mentions of sexually transmitted infections (STI). “Sex/uality” is used twice in reference to risky sexual behavior, once in relation to AIDS prevention and once in discussing the consequences of early sexual behavior, my favorite mention of which is, “Explain the importance for making a personal commitment to remain sexually abstinent.” This one is similar to an indicator under the Standard on decision making: “Justify the reasons for remaining sexually abstinent.” The examples for this indicator are, 1) Discuss the reason(s) abstinence is the most effective and healthy means for preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and 2) analyze risks and consequences of early sexual involvement (https://www.georgiastandards.org/Standards/Georgia%20Performance%20Standards/9-12_Health_Education.pdf). The patterns are clear: sexuality is risky, and it should be presented to students almost exclusively in terms of disease and pregnancy prevention.

The *Education of Eros* traces the historical and social pathologization of adolescent sexuality, a discourse that runs throughout current National Health Education Standards and state performance standards—as well as the disengaging, watered-down curricula that promise “mastery” of these standards. Thus, the turn toward cultural studies to which Carlson points sexuality education is both relevant and urgent. Youth culture and popular culture are interrelated and irreducible—and they are the sites where sexuality curriculum is located and learned. In *Eros* it becomes painfully obvious how little sexuality education has ever considered adolescent identities and cultures and how little curriculum standards have adapted to adolescents in a poststructuralist, postmodern society. Carlson does not abandon us there, though. He suggests not only do young people already construct their sexual selves, but they also already shape sexuality curriculum from their varied cultural contexts.

Do you remember your sex education class? The first official “sex ed” class at my school was a health unit in 7th grade physical education class, and it was the stuff of legend. Sixth graders looked forward with nervous glee to the day when we, too, would be separated into boys and girls and led in a straight line to different rooms to have “the talk,” with big diagrams and a teacher (a male coach for the boys and a female coach for the girls) to explain s-e-x to us and answer questions after! By the time I reached 10th grade, when the Human Reproduction unit was presented as part of our required health class (the only one required in 12 years of public schooling at that time), I was sexually active, had experienced a pregnancy “scare,” and been presented with an ultimatum of marriage by my fundamentalist parents.

In 1980, a year after the Human Reproduction unit, I saw the movie *Little Darlings*, with Tatum O’Neal and Kristy McNichol. A synopsis. O’Neal’s privileged character and McNichol’s “streetwise” character learn that there are consequences—different ones for each character—when young people—in this case young women—are not educated to be “active subjects of their own desires” (p. 175). They had made a bet over which one would lose her virginity first. While the film could be “read” contextualized by Carlson’s study as reinscribing heterosexual “principles” around love and sex, it is memorable here because I remember it—called it to memory as I read *The Education of Eros*—as a student for whom formal sex(uality) education was, by meaningful accounts, an abysmal failure. The movie ends with a lie by both girls: the rich girl, Tatum, lies and says that she had sex with the middle-aged camp counselor, played by Armand Assante (a rumor that threatened to

ruin his career); and the tough girl, Kristie, lies and says she did not have sex with the tough guy also-with-a-heart-of-gold, played by Matt Dillon. What I remember most is that the “tough girl” who had expected to be in control of her first sexual encounter, which meant she would keep her emotional responses in check, had felt disappointment and regret—let down and sorry she had done it. Like me. But, as Dennis Carlson narrates in *The Education of Eros*, the early 1980s was not a time when young women were encouraged to think of themselves as sexual beings.

Carlson’s history reminds me of Foucault’s “genealogies,” a term, Carlson explains, borrowed from Nietzsche to “refer to a history of the production of ‘truth’” (p. xv). In fact, although he does not claim it, *The Education of Eros* is reminiscent of Foucault’s genealogies as it moves beyond histories that are not histories. Carlson narrates nothing less than an epic historical, social, cultural, and political struggle for truth, and he does so succinctly and masterfully: while chronicling his narrative as kind of a historical policy blow-by-blow, he does not let the reader become complacent in historical narrative, a progress narrative of social conservatives vs. progressive liberals. He expects us to move with him beyond old binary paradigms and engages frequently with Herbert Marcuse’s repressive desublimation to help us re-orient.

The desublimation of eros was to be the driving force behind the revolution that would herald a new, liberated age, when people were finally free, individually and collectively, to realize their fuller potentials as creative, sensuous subjects of their own making.... (p. 174-175)

“We now live,” Carlson declares, “in a postutopian age, for both good and bad” (p. 175). By the time he proposes cultural studies and media literacy as viable thinking by which to approach educating Eros, particularly Foucault’s ethics of care of the self, the reader sees it coming. Carlson reminds us as we go along with him that we—21st century readers—have the advantage of seeing postwar education and curriculum development through post-modern, if not postmodern, lenses. This book is unique because it is a history—and more than a history.

This is not Dennis Carlson’s first foray into adolescent sexuality and curriculum. In 2005 he wrote, “Curriculum is the coming together of teacher, student, and text within a situated moment in space and time, in which we are called upon to produce (or co-produce) both themselves and culture” (*The question concerning curriculum theory. JAAACS, Vol 1, February 2005*). It is from this notion of curriculum as the locus of synthesis wherein cultural production takes place that Carlson seeks the sexuality curriculum co-constitutive with that culture. In *The Sexuality Curriculum and Youth Culture* (2011) he and co-editor Donyell L. Roseboro collected essays that opened conversations about sexuality education to include the possibilities that sexuality curriculum is produced in popular youth culture and is therefore embedded deeply within it. His collection with Elizabeth Meyer out this year, *Gender and Sexualities in Education: A Reader*, further examines the possibilities youth culture and popular culture hold for democratic practices in education—this time delving deeply into their interrelationships with gender and sexualities. Adolescents, argues Carlson in both collections, are always already engaged in sexuality curricula; what is left is for curriculum makers and educators to catch up. *The Education of Eros*, published chronologically between the two, theorizes and historicizes adolescent sexuality as a producer of cultures and

curriculum, and as such is an untapped component of democratic schooling. It serves as a fitting bridge.

In *The Education of Eros* Carlson seeks not just to change but to “re-frame” the conversation about adolescent sexuality and sexuality education. He traces historical shifts and re-alignments of sexuality education in the U.S. as he examines social movements in and out of the academy. Built around the normatizing of adolescent sexuality in public schools that would construct “normal,” non-sexual, heterosexual adolescents, he weaves court cases, statutes, and policies and draws from a variety of theoretical lenses—curriculum, cultural, critical—to explore his topic. The book is not only very readable in terms of language and explanations of concepts that are sometimes complicated and always political, it is also just plain interesting. A history of adolescent sexuality education, organized around the “problem” therein, is a commentary of a most intimate aspect of the US psyche.

Carlson captures cultural climate shifts by organizing the book into essentially a decade-by-decade snapshot of movements that have established policy—and thereby the curriculum—for educating adolescents about sex. As social and cultural constructions changed throughout the last half of the 20th century and into the 21st, ways in which the public—whose demographic, economic, and political makeup also shift to allow it to maintain structures of surveillance, regulation, and control—continues to re-form the way it attends to the problem. The historical drama unfolds after WWII, when the concept of American homeland was being re-constructed as a raced, classed, gendered, religious, and sexualized place. Postwar American sexuality was first significantly marked by the Kinsey Report in 1948. If, as Kinsey proposed, “normal” Americans were located somewhere along a sexual behavior continuum, mainstream, *really* normal Americans would have to define and regulate sexuality—via gender conformance—toward “life-adjustment” and later “family-life” development. Carlson depicts complex, epic struggles between conservative and liberal-progressive—morals and values vs. neutral facts, if you will—forces vying for ideological prominence in sexuality education, culminating at the turn of the 21st century in a watered-down “abstinence plus” curriculum that may have placated radicals on both sides, but was no more effective than any canned sexuality ed program that had gone before.

...everyone conveniently overlooked one “fact” that emerged out of all these studies: it really did not matter much what kind of sexuality education young people had in school, or even whether they had sex-education classes. If sex education was about preventing or delaying sexual activity among adolescents, there was no indication that it was making a difference. (p. 119)

With this important point, Carlson confirms what political conspiracy theorists have suspected all along: the objective is less about putting forward an effective curriculum—in this case, of course, sex ed—than about whether the curriculum validated by the dominating vocal side is adopted. This may be stating the obvious, but “effective curriculum” is not determined by political legislatures.

The first six chapters of *Educating Eros* trace the development of sex education as simultaneously

evolving out of and contributing to the discourse of adolescent sexuality as a problem. Those in power—from the voting public to policy makers to curriculum writers to teachers (everybody but adolescents)— attempting to define what knowledge was most supportive of their particular ideologies—would assume positions of confrontation, of having to “fix” or “stop” behavior in which young people would prefer to engage. *Because it is pleasureable*. In Chapters 1 and 2, Carlson takes us from the 50s pursuit of the “normal” adolescent to the rise of SIECUS, the Sexual Information and Education Council of the US, in the 60s. The 1960s essentially a reflect societal trends that sought to move from a curriculum that is value laden to one that is “fact based”—as if “facts” are not inherently value laden. He links this rising influence of the Christian Right on sex education with a hidden curriculum of conformity, inequity and intolerance—one that ignored both popular culture and youth culture. He further notes the layers of complexity within the struggle for sex ed that made strange bedfellows, as it were, of the conservative religious right and liberal-humanist left. Both camps sought to control and surveil adolescent sexuality—particularly the recurring “problems” of teenage pregnancy, teenage welfare mothers, STDs and HIV/AIDS. Despite holding vastly differing ideologies, these common goals allowed them to compromise to varying degrees and definitions on an abstinence-only curricula. The primary belief the adults seemed to have common was that teenagers should not be having sex.

Contextualized by a well-known local battle over sex education in Anaheim, California, in 1968 that pitted SIECUS educators against the political right, Carlson traces one instance suggestive of the shape of things to come with the later, stronger abstinence only movement driven by the Reagan, Bush, and G.W. Bush right. Prompted by articles in *Rolling Stone* and *Village Voice* that had offered the Anaheim sex ed curriculum as indicative of the spirit of the times (it was 1968 after all), the claim drew the attention of the right—who, despite losing this battle, began a mobilization that still thrives today—and liberals—who claimed a victory in SIECUS’s “scientific” curriculum “that almost completely ignored popular culture and youth culture” (p. 33). Carlson foreshadows his later discussion on today’s pop culture and media literacy by pointing out neither faction paid the least amount of attention to youth culture—or counter culture—during this dispute. Particularly chilling, though, is to see the activism of the Christian Right take root, having the lens of history to look back and see just how it has flourished. Carlson credits the political skirmish at the grassroots level in Anaheim with “reawakening [of] a puritanical, fundamentalist, and evangelical Christian right, seeking a return to a safe and secure sense of what is morally right and wrong, and what it means to be a woman and what it means to be a man” (p. 31). One need look no farther than today’s sexuality education curricula—with few exceptions—to see which camp’s strategizing and eventual influence proved more effective.

In Chapters 3 and 4, Carlson examines the “Problems” of teen pregnancy and the welfare mother, and the homosexual and homophobia, respectively. He continues his incisive historical-cultural studies-theoretical-policy discourse, this time on two chapters that are unique to the others in that they put distinct—classed, raced, sexed—faces on the problem of adolescent sexuality: poor, mostly black, sexually active women and white, mostly gay male sexually active men. While he deftly moves the book from post-WWII developments of sexuality education to postmodern discourses, these two chapters differ from the others in that they particularly focus on populations, above, than

on time frames (Chapters 1, 2, and 6) or theory and social constructions (Chapters 7 and 8). In each of these two chapters, Carlson traces the shifts in discourses on teen pregnancy and homosexuals and makes interesting summations. The “problem” of teenage pregnancy and the welfare mother has been appropriated politically to different ends by both the left and right and has become part of the “technologies of control” (p. 57) of the adolescent body by the state that include population control. The problem of homophobia as a dominant curriculum discourse has, on the other hand, evolved out of the problem of the homosexual as evil (my word; the author uses “bad”) and contagious. He reminds us, “It need hardly be said that the historic linkage between sex as sin and sex as sickness had not been fully broken” (p. 75). Carlson argues that homophobia in schools is a powerful message of hidden curriculum, and continued evidence of schools, curriculum, and pedagogy as heteronormative spaces. Schools, he concludes, have historically been constructed as safe spaces for *homophobia*. The collections *Queer Theory in Education* (1998), edited by William Pinar, and *Queering Straight Teachers* (2007), edited by William Pinar and Nelson Rodriguez both theorize schools and curriculum as heterosexually constructed spaces are undertaken. What *Educating Eros* accomplishes is situating the problem of homosexuality within the problem of adolescent sexuality—and the problem of what to do with both in the formal curriculum.

Chronologically, Carlson tracks the change, not unlike Foucault has done in a different conversation, from homosexual to queer in schools—and the shifts of this changing social trend in the curriculum of sexuality. Whereas Chapters 3 and 4 focus on young pregnant women and lesbian and gay adolescents, respectively, Chapter 5, “The Plague: AIDS/HIV Education and Activism in the 1980s,” has its own distinct figure, which Carlson rightly suggests, defined sexuality education from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. It is also in Chapter 5 that Carlson begins his more deliberate shift to a poststructuralist examination of ways language functions within sexuality discourse as he identifies AIDS as a cultural text and goes on to situate it as a curriculum issue (p. 99). He writes,

Language has a hidden curriculum to it, teaching us both more and less than what it appears to....It might have once been possible to see language as just a neutral lens for revealing a “truth” already out there. The AIDS crisis and the national response to it demonstrated the power of language to produce what people see and feel when they look into the face of AIDS. (p. 79 & 80)

The Christian Right used language strategically as it steadily rose to power during the Reagan years. With the President not willing to speak its name, the Right deployed a politics of fear through an AIDS discourse it had shaped as a silent, creeping grim reaper coming from those having illicit sexual sin, which were of course, urban, poor, Black, and Latino/a Americans—regardless of their sexuality—just by virtue of their being urban, poor, Black, Latino/a, and sexual. The Right created and managed the language of AIDS/HIV as contagion, plague, unclean, and sinful—the “language of God’s retribution” (p. 81)—to gain a political and social foothold that is still evident today in the racially nearly one-dimensional makeup of the Republican Party and in the fringe Tea Party groups.

Chapter 6: The Abstinence-only Era and the Welfare Reform Act of 1996, discusses the growing governmental mandating of abstinence-only curricula in sexuality education. Carlson contextualizes the political maneuverings and nuances involved in welfare reform, properly known

as the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act. “Personal responsibility” aptly describes white, conservative Christian slogan of justification toward poor unwed mothers, particularly those who were Black and Latina. Finally, with Newt Gingrich and Trent Lott negotiating with President Clinton, cultures of poverty became personal choice, a mindset that encompassed the “problem” of teen pregnancy and sexually related diseases.

An effective strategy for promoting the personal responsibility of abstinence in curricula was the “slight of hand” of scientifically based research, which, as teachers and teacher educators know, became the sole standard for federal funding of educational initiatives beginning with No Child Left Behind under President George W. Bush and continuing in a morphed form as Race To the Top under President Obama. Culturally, socially, and educationally, Carlson notes, scientific evidence related to adolescent sexuality and sex education has been funded and touted by the Right, particularly by Conservative groups such as the Heritage Foundation, Christian Coalition, and the Family Research Council, to promote white, middle-class, heterosexual, Christian values. He points out,

Scientific evidence, even when it is compelling, does not shape local perceptions and attitudes on the “problem” of adolescent sexuality as much as values, community and family norms, and commonsense beliefs....A moral crusade for abstinence and sexual “purity” had to be translated into a secular campaign of reducing teen pregnancy rates. And the way to do this has been through sponsored research studies, and the selective interpretation and reporting of research data. (p. 116 & 117)

The conservative organizations promoting family values openly bridged and gave credence to the cultural and social gaps between morality and policy. And yet, on the question of abstinence itself, Carlson makes an astute, bottom-line observation, bringing us back to the poststructuralist perspective of language and care of the self, “The question [of abstinence] comes down to who chooses abstinence, for what purposes, and within which context” (p. xv). This obviously negates the pseudo scientific, conservative-religious, regulatory non-choices imposed through sex education curricula.

Truth games are the policy and curricular battles between competing ideologies to control the discourse of adolescent sexuality. The players have shifted over the almost seventy-year struggle for sexuality, but the end game has been the same: to produce and control The Truth about sexuality. In Chapter 7, “Foucault, Disciplinary Power, and Care of the Self,” Carlson presents Foucault’s ubiquitous *The History of Sexuality* as a “general framework for a cultural-studies perspective on sex education and the problem of the adolescent” (p. 125). As he makes his case for a cultural studies-based sexuality education, he does for his topic what Foucault did for sexuality in general. He situates sexuality education as a normalizing discourse of disciplinary biopower. The historical contexts of the struggle to control sex education that Carlson has presented in the first six chapters allow him to draw parallels between the troubled history and the rise of the “bourgeois standards of sexual conduct and morality” (p. 129) of 19th century Europe. Both, he illustrates in his explanation of Foucault’s complex ideas, involve controlling the language, inciting the discourse,

normalizing that discourse, and setting up that normal against what it has spoken as perversions. Those controlling—and controlling for—the problem, are on the dominant side of the gaze—the regulating side of power. The side you want to be on.

Carlson suggests thinking about a new truth game, conceived around Foucault's care of the self, in which binary logic inseparable from morality and political ideologies might be disrupted in curricular ways. He writes, "By reframing sexuality education as care of the self, it becomes possible to engage young people in a dialogue on what is caring for themselves, and what is not" (p. 135). Along with showing the connection between sexuality, discourse, and language—and therefore its connection with power, Foucault's work allows for radical new ways of thinking about sexuality that, since the 1990s, have taken a "poststructuralist turn" (p. 140) and have proliferated within and beyond the field of cultural studies.

By Chapter 8, *Cultural Studies and the Social Construction of the Adolescent Body*, Carlson has meticulously made his case for a "cultural-studies sexual education" (p. 158) that would not only reframe the questions that we might ask in relation to adolescent sexuality, but also overturn perspectives that start with the assumption of a "problem." The turn of the 21st century marks the discursive shift from sex education as a subset of health education to sexuality education as a cultural text. He notes, "Sexuality education as a movement in health education began to reach its discursive limits by the turn of the 21st century, and consequently proved unable to think itself out of its own box of predictable "problems" and responses," giving way to new discourses in social justice that paralleled cultural studies in the academy (p. xv). Chapter 8 is a handy synoptic chapter in which he gives succinct summaries related to his topic of work by Butler, Anzaldúa, Collins, Pinar, Giroux, and others that help us understand the fresh meanings we might make of what he has shown us to be an old topic. In other words, he asks us to consider the new meanings adolescent sexuality education might take on if we look at it from cultural studies perspectives. He begins by situating gender into discussions of sexuality education, then moves beyond conventionally "acceptable" curricular sex ed topics to include masculinity, queer gender/sexuality, and queer masculinity, bringing adolescent sexuality education into the "post utopian age" (p. 175). Carlson also includes transgender in this chapter, appropriately placed in his discussion of disrupting boundaries of sexuality education by disruption how we think about bodies—gendered, raced, classed, sexualized—themselves. He essentially proposes that cultural studies perspectives may help the US as a democratic society reframe and rethink conversations about adolescent sexuality and sexuality education, beginning by examining the problem of problem.

The "problem" is the problem, remaining, until now, unquestioned, untheorized, and unexamined as a constructed category of normal, that is, white, middle class, Christian, heterosexual. Cultural studies perspectives allow us to ask different questions and ask questions differently. How, for example, has sexuality education and the "problem" of adolescent sexuality, been deployed politically by the left and the right, and in whose financial interest (for there is always financial interest)? How have these problems been racially marked and then used by dominant populations? How can these problems, now entering the second half-century of US society, be reframed into generative conversations about "equity, freedom, and social justice" (p. 159)? This is where Carlson boldly

moves to suggest connections among popular culture—specifically media texts—adolescents—specifically their sexuality and gender identifications—and these democratic goals (equity, freedom, social justice). He writes,

If popular culture is the new text which adolescents draw upon to construct a sexual self, sexuality education must become about media literacy. We can at least teach adolescents to be more critical consumers of popular culture—to know what they are buying with certain images of masculinity and femininity. Then we can engage them in using the new media technologies to produce their own narratives and images of sexuality and identity that counter and parody those produced by the media industry. (p. 175)

The importance of media literacy to curriculum and pedagogy in the 21st century is steadily becoming a growing body of literature within educational fields of study and practice. What is unique to Carlson's work here is the embedding of poststructural thought that includes parody and counter narratives to disrupt dominant constructions and proliferations of sexuality, which are of course taken as the given—the starting point—of anemic public sexuality education curricula.

In October 2011 New York City schools adopted a new sex ed curriculum that was controversial from the time Chancellor Dennis Walcott announced it. Parents and abstinence-only advocacy groups objected to lessons on birth control and preventing STIs, citing their overly graphic nature. The Department of Education, while stressing that abstinence was the “best way” to avoid pregnancy and STIs, noted that the new curriculum presents “methods of prevention” other than abstinence (Mandatory Sex Ed Details May Be Too Racy for Parents: Report, 24 October 2011, <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/mandatory-sex-ed-curriculum-new-york-city-public-schools-132>). Deputy Mayor Linda Gibbs upheld the new curriculum, stating, “We want to help kids to delay the onset of sexual activity, and if they choose to engage in sexual activity, to do it in a healthy way” (ibid). Healthy ways to engage in sexual activity seemed to be the part of the curriculum causing the most controversy. One New York news station posted a story on its web site that cited examples of activities in the workbook by Health Smart, the company whose sexual health curriculum NYC schools adopted. “Middle school students will be assigned ‘risk cards’ that rate the safety of different activities,” the article reports, “from French kissing to oral sex.” And further, “The workbooks for older students direct them to a website run by Columbia University, which explores topics such as sexual positions, porn stars, and bestiality. The lessons explain risky sexual behavior and suggest students go to stores to jot condom brands and prices” (ibid). The curriculum for high school students is *Reducing the Risk*, which Chancellor Walcott assures parents is a “research-based sex risk reduction curriculum.” Further, he adds that the publisher has made modifications to better fit the curriculum to NYC students. “For example, the national version includes a “risk card” activity you may have read about in the press (above). However, this is one of the lessons we **removed** from the NYC version of the Middle School HealthSmart curriculum because we didn't think it was age-appropriate (emphasis original).” Carlson's readers will quickly recognize this as a reaction to shifting social winds in a climate whose weather patterns do not change much.

That the approach of curriculum stakeholders (excluding, of course, students as sexual practitioners)

is not far removed from SIECUS an 1968, porn stars and bestiality notwithstanding. The *Education of Eros* proposes interrupting those patterns—shifting conversations instead of winds, as it were—by reframing adolescent sexuality as something other than risky behavior. Carlson suggests rethinking adolescent sexuality as a production of popular and youth cultures as a move toward a democratic sexuality education. Not a political football moved back and forth on a field by the Right and Left—but a discourse in which a grown-up public recognizes that young people construct their own sexual selves.

The book is explicitly written for readers interested in adolescent education and sexuality education, including classes in curriculum studies, foundations of education, cultural studies of education, and health education. It is highly accessible, and its appeal will extend beyond education classrooms thanks to the complex, multiple perspectives through which Carlson lays out the book. He has successfully crafted a theoretical historical account of social constructions surrounding the post-WWII adolescent in US society. Or, from another view, he has historicized theory (curriculum, cultural, feminist, critical race, queer, critical) through the contexts of those same social constructions. Or yet again, he has He has deconstructed the “problem” of adolescent sexuality/education along a historical and political timeline and through the lenses of overlapping and intersecting theories. That is a whole lot of appeal. In fact, I think it would be a fine place to start engaging adolescents by asking them to craft their counter narratives. What a deliciously subversive text for young people to read to get the backstory, the insider scoop, of society’s (adults’) definition, implementation, and policing of their sexuality. The *Education of Eros* is a small, readable book that is packed and powerful. It is particularly relevant in a world increasingly interconnected by social media—navigated most deftly it seems by youth. Let the subversions begin.

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