

Breathing Life into Sexuality Education: Becoming Sexual Subjects

Louisa Allen

Volume 27, Number 1, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070274ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070274ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian Philosophy of Education Society

ISSN

2369-8659 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Allen, L. (2020). Breathing Life into Sexuality Education: Becoming Sexual Subjects. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 27(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070274ar>

Article abstract

This paper thinks with Todd's (2017) ideas around 'breathing life into education' in relation to the curriculum area of sexuality education. It explores how this metaphor might be employed as a method for re-animating thought about the nature and purpose of sexuality education. The paper argues that sexuality education suffers from the stifling effects of instrumentalism and a neoliberal normativity that seeks to micro-manage the lives of students. Within sexuality education, this finds expression in a repetitive emphasis on reducing unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections. Confined by these foci, sexuality education's pedagogical possibilities and transformative potential are limited. Breathing life into sexuality education offers opportunities for shaping this curriculum area as sensuous event. It also provides a life-enhancing pedagogical orientation that shifts focus from determining student's imagined sexual futures, to attending to uncertainty in the present. Thinking with Todd's ideas within the realm of sexuality education is an attempt to exercise their utility within a specific curriculum context. The paper also endeavours to press the metaphor of breath further, to characterise it as an act that is both mundane and profound. The implications of this conceptualisation for thinking about change in sexuality education are explored.

Copyright © Louisa Allen, 2020

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

Érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Breathing Life into Sexuality Education: Becoming Sexual Subjects

LOUISA ALLEN

University of Auckland

This paper thinks with Todd's (2017) ideas around 'breathing life into education' in relation to the curriculum area of sexuality education. It explores how this metaphor might be employed as a method for re-animating thought about the nature and purpose of sexuality education. The paper argues that sexuality education suffers from the stifling effects of instrumentalism and a neoliberal normativity that seeks to micro-manage the lives of students. Within sexuality education, this finds expression in a repetitive emphasis on reducing unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections. Confined by these foci, sexuality education's pedagogical possibilities and transformative potential are limited. Breathing life into sexuality education offers opportunities for shaping this curriculum area as sensuous event. It also provides a life-enhancing pedagogical orientation that shifts focus from determining student's imagined sexual futures, to attending to uncertainty in the present. Thinking with Todd's ideas within the realm of sexuality education is an attempt to exercise their utility within a specific curriculum context. The paper also endeavours to press the metaphor of breath further, to characterise it as an act that is both mundane and profound. The implications of this conceptualisation for thinking about change in sexuality education are explored.

Breathing Life into Sexuality Education: Becoming Sexual Subjects

This paper seeks a new landscape of thought for sexuality education via the philosophical ideas of Sharon Todd (2017). It contributes to an existing body of philosophical thinking about sexuality education broadly concerned with morals (Spiecker, 1992; Stutel and de Ruyter, 2011), ethics (Corngold, 2013; Carmody, 2009) and values (Halstead & Reiss, 2003). This work traverses issues of the purpose of sexuality education (Lamb, 2013; Morris, 2005; Jones, 2011; McAvoy, 2013; Gilbert, 2014; Bialystok, 2018), how to address sexual diversity (Mayo, 2013; Gereluk, 2013), sexual ethics (Heyes, 2019; Lamb, 2010), consent (Gilbert, 2018), moral pluralism (Corngold, 2013; Lamb, 2010) religious difference (Halstead, 1998) and effective pedagogy (Wilson, 2003). The current discussion adds to thinking around the nature of sexuality education by endeavouring to re-imagine its purpose and pedagogy.

To do this, it draws on Todd's (2017) ideas around 'breathing life into education'¹. Breathing life into education operates as a metaphor to provoke new life-enhancing ways of thinking and practicing education. More literally, it is also a call to recognise our senses and the sensual, via reference to the

¹ *Breathing Life into Education: Re-sensing the educational subject* was the title of a keynote Todd presented at the Philosophy of Education Society of Australasia, conference in Newcastle in 2017. This work has yet to be published and excerpts referenced here are transcribed directly from this presentation.

embodied act of breathing. As a practice, breathing is something so taken for granted we hardly notice it yet is simultaneously a fundamental, life-sustaining act. In this way, it shares a similar mode of presence to education in our lives as a habitual occurrence that prepares us for life. Motivated by this call to thought, this paper asks: what might it mean to take Todd's notion of 'breathing life into education' and *think with it* (Maclure, 2017) in relation to sexuality education?

The first part of this paper explores the question of why breathing life into education might be valuable. Todd (2017) describes this idea as 'a small attempt to intervene into what have become suffocating discourses on education, focused as they are so often on performance, managerialism and standardisation that leave most of us gasping for air and longing for spaces to breathe'. Within sexuality education, this suffocation occurs via a repetitive emphasis on content aimed at reducing unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections (Sears, 1992; Irvine, 2002; Aggleton, 2017). These foci impoverish students' experience of this subject by delimiting it to a disembodied, desexualised educational encounter centred around acquisition of knowledge, skills and competencies for future sexual activity (Allen, 2007). In the second part of the paper, a detailed exploration of how Todd mobilises the idea of breath as *method* is undertaken. The last section explores *what breath can do*, as a metaphor, to animate thought about the purpose and pedagogy of sexuality education. This paper argues that breathing life into sexuality education holds potential for re-invigorating this subject as *sensuous event*. It also offers life-enhancing possibilities by paying pedagogical attention to the present, while facing uncertainty. This form of sexuality education coheres around students *becoming* sexual subjects, the shape of which is not determined in advance.

The Need for Air

What is it about education that sees most of us gasping for air? For Todd, one problem is that it ".....is permeated by a neoliberal normativity that seeks to micro-manage the lives of children, teachers and parents to ensure they are engaging in the enterprise of their lives in appropriately productive ways" (Todd, Jones & O'Donnell, 2016, p. 191). This emphasis finds expression in education's focus on the attainment of skills, competencies and the procurement of facts (Todd, 2015b). High stakes testing and the production of leagues tables cements educational investment in these practices, where students must perform well to secure their school's reputation for success. Another consequence of this 'neoliberal normativity' (Todd, Jones & O'Donnell, 2016, p. 191) is the future-focused orientation of schools. These institutions are rendered responsible for preparing students for their adult lives by equipping them with knowledge and skills appropriate to future roles. This function is evidenced in the career advice pupils are given to take subjects that align with their imagined futures. For example, electing to study 'economics' at secondary school, as a pre-requisite for entering a commerce degree at university and eventually securing employment in the commercial sector.

The micro-management of students' lives and emphasis on acquiring skills and knowledge for the future, is vividly apparent in sexuality education. This area of the curriculum is beset with information designed to help students navigate future sexual activity. In Aotearoa-New Zealand for instance, during primary and intermediate school (5-12 years), sexuality education is expected to equip students with knowledge about their changing bodies and how to cope with puberty. As existing literature attests, this information presents a picture of 'normal' gender and sexual development that culminates in an imagined heterosexual future (Brömdal, Rasmussen, Sanjakdar, Allen & Quinlivan, 2017). Sexuality education for

senior students typically involves the procurement of facts about sexually transmissible infections, their symptoms and curability. It can also entail the attainment of skills and competencies around ‘negotiating sexual consent’, ‘how to say ‘no,’ and how to discuss and implement safer sex and contraception with sexual partners. Such information is rarely acknowledged as relevant to students’ current lives, but rather acquired now, for future use. The idea that students are positively and legitimately sexual subjects who may be engaging in sexual activity, is still an uncomfortable proposition for many schools (Allen, 2007).

Another stifling element of education for Todd is its perceived socialising function. The idea that schools are sites in which social problems can and should be solved, limits the possibilities of what education can be. Of this predicament she writes,

Too often...education is seen to be the obvious bearer of social messages aimed at the improvement of society and political life, not unlike a homing pigeon in this regard. If we want to improve the quality of citizenship, we turn to schools to carry the message: if we want to increase our society’s scientific contribution, we turn to schools; if we want to live better across cultural differences, again we turn to schools (Todd, 2015a p.54).

Underpinning this view is a perception of education as operating with, and reproducing an ideal of, humanity and the common good. There is a sense that, by teaching students ‘the right information and skills’ and encouraging them to behave in a manner consistent with responsible citizenship, schools can contribute to a nation’s social, political, and economic prosperity. One of the problems with such a vision, is that schools are destined to fail, because social ‘problems’ are rarely attributable to education alone. As Todd writes: “If education is supposed to be able to fix problems, why hasn’t it done so already?” (Todd, 2016, p. 622).

The perception of schools’ power to create an ideal society and social citizenship is apparent in sexuality education. This curriculum area has long been recognised as a state instrument for reducing so called ‘negative consequences’ of sexual activity (Irvine, 2002). Acknowledging the politics surrounding this subject, Sears (1992) writes: “...the dispensing of sexual knowledge as a prophylactic for the unwelcomed consequences of freewheeling sexual behaviour is the cornerstone of modern sexuality education” (p. 17). By this he means that sexuality education serves as a social mechanism for disease prevention and the control and regulation of citizen’s sexual behaviour. This agenda is evident in curriculum emphasis given to preventing unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible diseases. It is presumed that, in providing students with knowledge about safer sex and teaching condom and contraceptive competency, incidences of unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections will reduce. In countries with the lowest rates of these phenomena such as Norway, Sweden and Denmark, it is clear an entire social infrastructure engenders these outcomes (UNESCO, 2017). Laws pertaining to sexuality, societal perceptions of young people’s sexuality, affordable and easy access to condoms and contraception, as well as national governmental health policy *in conjunction with* comprehensive sexuality education are just some of the factors which contribute to lower rates. While comprehensive sexuality education has been successful in *reducing* unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections (Kirby and Rolleri, 2007), it is an impossible mandate to expect schools to *eliminate* them on their own (Kopp Kallner, Thunell, Brynhildsen, Lindeberg & Gemzell Danielsson, 2015).

Consequences of Airlessness

Todd does not wish to deny the inevitable orientation of education's future focus or extinguish the hope and vision it inspires. However, she wonders, "when education is defined *primarily* against the background of an illusory future..." what space does it leave "...for attending to the complexities of the present?" (Todd, 2015a p. 55). Her concern is that "...in living our dreams of the future, we are not living fully in the present" and this can create a state of alienation from embeddedness in the world (Todd, 2015a p. 54). Todd's ideas about education as ethically responsive and politically just are partly formed by the importance of facing what is happening in the present. She suggests that our tendency to create unrealisable futures is a mechanism that avoids "...facing our own implication – in living our life with others" (Todd, 2015a p.55). This thinking not only has implications for the nature of education and its pedagogies, but for our view of the roles of students and teachers.

To extend Todd's ideas here in relation to sexuality education, I turn to the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold (2018) to think through the limitations of an exclusively future-focused education. Ingold (2018) employs the concepts of *strong* and *weak* to characterise particular forms of educational pedagogy and how these constitute student subjects. He proposes that,

A strong education arms us with knowledge, allows us to shore up our defences against the vagaries of the external world, gives us immunity, and provides security and the comfort of reason. If anything troubles us, we can account for it and make it go away – or at least put it in its context. Shut up in our armour, however, and walled in by our intellectual defences, we fail to take in or respond to the reality the world presents to us (Ingold, 2018 p. 34).

Strong education characterises the current state of sexuality education in many western global contexts (Padmini & Aggleton, 2015). Strong education arms students with knowledge about safer sex and condom use to protect them from so called negative consequences of sexual activity like unplanned pregnancy. It gives educational policy makers and teachers 'comfort' and provides them with a sense of 'security' that schools are fulfilling their responsibility to equip young people with sexual knowledge and skills to navigate the world.

The problem with this form of education, according to Ingold, is that, encased in this armour, we fail to discern and thus respond to, the reality the world presents to us. A sexuality education related example here is the way schools teach about alcohol and sexual activity by enforcing the message: 'don't drink.' Health programmes convey this dictum by highlighting the dangers of drinking before engaging in sexual activity such as unwanted sexual acts and/or sexual regret. The reality of many young people's (and indeed adults') lives is, however, that *they do drink* before engaging in sexual activity. Having a drink is a socially assigned way to relax and loosen inhibitions before a sexual encounter to make it more pleasurable. However, this reality, and fact that some young people *will* drink, is not acknowledged when students are taught 'not to drink' and to 'say no to sexual activity'. This kind of strong education, as Ingold calls it, fails to attend to the complexities of young people's present realities in which some drink before having sex. As Todd (2015a) proposes, such education is not ethically responsive in facing our own implication in living our life with others. When adult educators deny the enduring place of alcohol and sex in young people's lives, they produce a state of alienation from students' embeddedness in the world, which ultimately renders sexuality education's messages impotent.

Ingold (2018) explains that a *weak* education by contrast,

.....entreats us to break out of the security of our defensive positioning, take off our armour, and meet the world with open arms. It is a practice of disarmament..... It is about exposure rather than immunity; it renders us vulnerable rather than powerful, but by the same token, it values truth and wisdom over knowledge. Whereas strong education seeks to instil what is desired, weak education is a search for what is desirable (pp. 34-35).

The implications of a weak pedagogy for sexuality education are radical within the historical entrenchment of this curriculum as the defence-mechanism against everything ‘unwanted’ about sexual activity (Sears, 1992; Irvine, 2002). If the essence of sexuality education is armouring students against disease and unplanned pregnancy, then the practice of disarmament promises to undo the current nature of this subject. To surrender the pretence that arming young people with knowledge and skills to prevent unplanned pregnancy will be successful is to render vulnerable the place of sexuality education at school. Historically, advocates of sexuality education have legitimised the inclusion of this subject at school on its capacity to solve social problems (Zimmerman, 2015). To admit the improbability of this aim via education alone, undermines the existing nature and purpose of sexuality education (Allen, 2007).

Ingold’s proposition of weak education suggests that, rather than instilling a future directed desire such as young people don’t drink before engaging in sexual activity, students search for ‘what is desirable.’ This might entail that sexuality education navigate an already established culture of drinking in social situations in ways that are desirable for all. As such, any pedagogical practice would start from the premise that some young people *do* drink, and that what is desirable in the context of sexual activity is a point for students to explore within sexuality education.

A search for what is desirable seems an especially apt suggestion for sexuality education given the embodied nature of desire and sexuality. It necessitates a very different orientation to the work of sexuality education and the way it has conventionally addressed young people as sexual subjects (Johnson, 2013; Allen, 2005). Such an approach harbours the possibility that sexuality education no longer centres prevention of unwanted sexual consequences. This shift does not mean removing this aim from the curriculum but instead lifting emphasis from it. For many policy makers, teachers, and parents this would risk irresponsibly exposing students to sexual danger by failing to provide them with necessary skills and information to keep them safe. The search for what is desirable in Ingold’s sense then, offers a new landscape of thought for sexuality education and its constitution of young people as sexual subjects.

Another consequence of future-focused education is the way it leaves little room for *uncertainty*. When schools are preoccupied with the procurement of facts and acquirement of skills and competencies there is scant appreciation of the “...existential vagaries and doubts that accompany living a life” (Todd, 2015b, p. 241). The kind of knowledge valued at school is founded on fact and reason and offers a sense of certainty in being ‘true’ or ‘correct’. The attainment of such knowledge to secure a specific future, provides a comforting order to a world where futures are unknowable and unpredictable. This sense that schools can stabilise future uncertainty for students is, however, a fallacy. Preparing students for a future that is not predictable with tools of certainty (facts, skills and competencies) fails to prepare them for an uncertain future at all. Instead, it falsely suggests a certainty about their lives that cannot be guaranteed.

Todd suggests what is required is a “...shift to seeing education itself as a process fundamentally engaged with uncertainty” and that this will “...actually make it more – not less – valuable than seeing it as a vehicle for skills management and training” (Todd, 2016, p. 622). This would require education to

acknowledge what cannot be captured by fact and reason and an opening up to what one cannot know. It would value *sensible* experiences beyond skills and competencies and create possibilities for students' wonderment and curiosity about their lived experiences (Todd, 2015b p.241). Such an education moves away from an instrumental approach fixated on results and measuring performance and turns towards how students might contribute to an ethical engagement with life. One where they can sustain a mode of being that is open and responsive to uncertainty, including difference experienced in relation with others.

This thinking might be mobilised in sexuality education by reconfiguring how this subject supports young people in their expression of sexuality. Instead of predominately arming them with skills to prevent unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmissible infections, its pedagogy might imagine the study of sexuality differently. Rather than pre-empting a predictable future of (hetero)sexual activity, it might cultivate wonderment and curiosity about their lived experiences of sexuality now. This pedagogy could ask: how does sexuality enter your life at this moment (leaving room for the possibility that it might not)? Such discussions are much broader than identifying who is sexually active (or wants to be) and who is not. In its valuing of *sensible* experiences, this is an educational exploration of how the sexual enters our everyday lives via objects, movement, images, people, sound and even smell. Students themselves would identify these manifestations of sexuality in accordance with their specific lived experiences. This discussion covets an openness that does not presume to know in advance what sexuality is for any young person, or how it might play out in their lives. Such a pedagogy embraces uncertainty, and the way currently unknowable and unpredictable phenomena provoke ethical engagement from students.

What Breathing Life into Sexuality Education Might do

'Breathing life into sexuality education' is an especially fitting metaphor for a curriculum area which is often critiqued by students for literally sucking the life out of a subject which has at its core the body and the sensual (Allen, Rasmussen & Quinlivan, 2014). Numerous international studies document how young people often complain that sexuality education does not address embodied dimensions of sexuality, especially that of physical pleasure and desire (Hirst, 2012; McGeeney & Kehily, 2016). This is clearly seen in the way human anatomy is conventionally characterised in these lessons as 'reproductive' rather than 'sexual' or 'sensual' organs. These diagrams are also typically line-drawn, offering a dissection view of internal organs with the effect of medicalising and sanitizing their functions. The aim is to distance students from the sexual and sensual possibilities of human corporeality, while simultaneously dampening their desire and any curiosity around it.

Young people find these and other disembodied and de-erotised depictions problematic because they fail to take into account their lived experiences of sexuality and how sexuality is portrayed in media and other digital mediums. Instead, sexuality education is saturated with messages about risk and danger and the harms which can eventuate from engaging in sexual activity. This situation has instituted a gap between the knowledge included and valued in the sexuality education curriculum, and that which circulates about sexuality within young people's own lives (Allen, 2005). It also offers a reason why students may not implement the information they learn from sexuality education, such as safer sex, in their relationships. Failing to connect messages about sexual risk and danger to young people's lived realities as sexually embodied subjects, has implications for students' ability to find value in such information. When sexuality education only ever casts sexual activity as risky and problematic, and young people know otherwise, they are likely to 'shut off' and/or deem such information irrelevant to their own

experience. In this form of what Ingold calls ‘strong’ pedagogy, sexuality education fails to respond to the reality the world presents to young people. How then might we re-animate and re-signify sexuality education drawing on Todd’s ideas about breath?

To breathe life into sexuality education implies a re-vitalisation of this subject in a way that is life-enhancing. This suggests breaking with a tradition of understanding sexuality education as predominately a state tool for equipping students with information, competencies and skills to prevent unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections. With reference to the work of Ingold (2018), life-enhancing education “...would not be about instilling knowledge *into* the minds of novices but about leading them *out* into the world” (p. 30). This, Ingold (2018) proposes, is the fundamental question of education: What does it mean to lead a life? (p. 20). As such,

Education...is not a ‘stifling in’ but ‘a leading out’ which opens paths of intellectual growth and discovery without predetermined outcomes or fixed end-points. It is about attending to things, rather than acquiring the knowledge that absolves us of the need to do so; about exposure rather than immunisation (Ingold, 2018, p. ix)

What might *leading a life* mean for sexuality education? It would necessitate a move away from judging this subject’s effectiveness on measurable outcomes, such as, reduced incidences of teenage pregnancy and increased rates of condom use. It would no longer be concerned with instituting students’ life trajectories in terms of heterosexually imagined futures, in which they first gain qualifications, secure employment, and then have children. Instead, a life-enhancing sexuality education would have no predetermined outcomes, but emerge from pedagogical attention to sexuality in the present. A sexuality education that is about ‘leading out’ is not limited by what it pre-empts as desirable for young people’s sexual futures. Instead, it is committed to a life-enhancing exploration of what is desirable in any given moment. It is also an education that gives *attention* to the reality of young people’s lives.

Breathing as a Metaphor for Change in Sexuality Education

What Todd’s ideas about the nature of breath also offer is a way of thinking about change in sexuality education. One of the frustrations for some of those who teach and research in this area is the apparent slow rate of change in terms of, for example, transforming the marginal status of sexuality education in the general curriculum (Tasker, 2004). The notion of how change occurs, is also pertinent within the current discussion about applying Todd’s ideas to sexuality education. To suggest Todd’s thinking might engender changes to this curriculum in some radical and momentous way, is naïvely dismissive of the conservative and entrenched history of this subject. So, how might we think about how such changes to the purpose and pedagogies of sexuality education occur?

What Todd’s metaphor of breathing evokes is the ever-present possibility of change, but not in the way we might expect. To return to her description of breathing; “To breathe is to undergo a unique encounter with the world each and every time, after all no breath is ever repeated twice. Each breath is different from the next and occurs only in the here and now of living experience” (Todd, 2017). Because a breath is never repeated twice, the potential for change is always present in the newness of the next breath. ‘Present’ refers here, not only to the now of experience. It also references ‘presence’ within breath’s ontology, as an act that is never repeated twice. Within the newness of each breath lies the

potential for change, despite often being an indiscernible act and each breath appearing to mimic its predecessor.

And this is where I endeavour to contribute to Todd's thinking about breath. Stretching this metaphor of breath further, it is possible to see how this fundamental embodied act is both *mundane* and *profound*. To breathe is to live. Breath is a life-giving quality which humans cannot function without and, in this way, *it is profound*. As a basic element of life, it is also an act often not visible and, as such, *mundane*. The unseen nature of breath is delineated by Davina Quinlivan (2012) while explaining the challenges of capturing this process on screen. In her study of the place of breath in Cinema, Quinlivan (2012) characterises the visual aspect as "...the subtle flow of breath itself where the only visible trace of difference must be observed in close-up, as it were; close enough to see the quietly alternating image of the respiring torso as it conveys movement from inside to outside, through the surfaces of the skin" (p. 15). This almost undetectable, yet vital, process sutures it within the material fabric of life as an indispensable and vibrant metaphor.

Change is like breath. It is mundane and profound at the same time. Because a massive overhaul of what sexuality is, and how it is taught would be impossible within the existing institutional confines of this subject, change that has profound effects might occur via seemingly minor variations of thought and practice. Changes to the purpose and pedagogy of sexuality education do not need to entail, for example, the removal of the goal of reducing unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmissible infections. Change might simply begin with a question like: how might we understand the nature of sexuality as it manifests in this moment for you? Very small increments of thought like this question, can have profound effects. Not in the sense that one person could be instrumental in creating a question that changes the way we think about sexuality education. But, rather, because of the collective nature of change, in which all individuals are implicated.

I return again to Todd's (2017) conceptualisation of breath as "...at once singular and relational. It is a single body that breathes in and yet the act of breathing is relational through the air that we share." Change might be envisaged similarly, as the act(s) of a singular person, at the same time that it is an inextricably relational undertaking. Humans are interconnected by the air they share which is breathed by others, and thus their reliance on that air and investment in its presence, is a non-voluntary collective life-sustaining responsibility. Change might look like it is affected by the acts of individuals, but it is always a collective undertaking because of the way our relationality with others is inescapable. What is also promising for educational transformation as provoked by the metaphor of breath, is that change is always a possibility. That is, change is a perpetual becoming. If each breath is unique, the next breath (which is ontologically a relational undertaking) and how it is occurs, is an opportunity for change. This possibility is realised when Todd (2017) asks us to metaphorically and literally "...inhal[e]....deeply to create expansive sensuous spaces for new lives, new subjects and new futures to be singularly experienced in relation with others."

Breathing out

The call to sensibility that the metaphor of breathing evokes as an embodied act has particular implications for sexuality education. To breathe life into sexuality education is to re-invigorate what is often critiqued as a disembodied and de-eroticised subject, as *sensuous event*. A life-enhancing education is not one "...we live in containment, cut off from the senses, but about being exposed to the 'teeming,

sweaty heat’ by which we know we are alive” (Todd, 2014, p. 232). Although this description references education generally, it reverberates particularly evocatively with sexuality education. However, by sensibility, Todd does not mean simply the perception of the world through our five (or more) senses. What she hints at here are “...general impressions and ways of feeling and an orientation to the world that are an extension of our haptic sense or sense of touch” (Todd, 2017). This is a sensuous orientation to the world, which Todd suggests might be accessed via aesthetic practices which invite creativity and an opening up to materiality and uncertainty. This opening up of sexuality education to be about more than its traditional foci, like disease and pregnancy prevention, is one of the possibilities of envisaging sexuality education as sensuous event. The embodied nature of a sensuous pedagogy also invites acknowledgement and experience of the sensuous, with transferrable value to other settings (e.g. sexual relationships); for example, not only being aware of how one’s own body feels but also how someone else might affectively/corporeally experience an event. This awareness is critical for negotiating sexual activity and consent.

Todd (2017) explains this sensuous orientation to education as it is mobilised in the work of Danish feminist collective, Sisters Academy (see Sister’s Academy, n.d.). This group is premised on a mode of being “...based on ... imagination, desire and not at least the sensuous experience of and engagement in the world” (Worre Hallberg, 2016 p. 40). Sisters Academy operates a nomadic school, which travels to different Nordic upper secondary schools to experiment with how a school might operate in a society governed by aesthetic principles (e.g. sensuous and poetic ways of knowing) rather than ‘rational’ thought (Darsø, 2016). The collective engages in various ‘performance experiments’ at these schools that involve transforming space through light and set and sound design to create a parallel universe in which performance art and activism merges with pedagogy and research (Darsø, 2016). The aim is to defamiliarize the familiar educational setting and mode of learning in order to rethink how teaching occurs and how learning is understood when aesthetic dimensions are centred. The nomadic school explores creative courses such as drama, music and art, as both subjects in themselves are integral to other subjects like maths, physics, language and biology (Darsø, 2016). One example of sensuous teaching from this project involved the teacher setting students the task of ‘exploring emotional moments’ by whispering a heartfelt poem or lyric in another person’s ear and noting what kind of sensuous experience this engendered (Darsø, 2016). This form of education offers an intervention into dominating principals of rational thought in western societies, premised on efficiency, duty, and discipline (Worre Hallberg, 2017).

What the Sister’s academy approach offers sexuality education is a valuing of sensible experiences beyond the skills and competencies-based focus of conventional sexuality education. The Sister’s Academy’s orientation to education does not attempt to equip students with information they can use in the future e.g. knowledge about how to put on a condom. Rather, the aim of its pedagogy is to create possibilities for students’ embodied wonderment and curiosity about their lived experiences in the now. To apply this thinking to sexuality education: it is not a pedagogy interested in defining what, for example, ‘puberty’ is in terms of describing bodily changes. This is an education concerned with learning through immersion in sensuous experiences, to engage student’s embodied senses and open-up new ways of encountering educational content. It might entail, for instance, students sourcing music or creating their own, that expresses what they understand sexuality to be and then reflecting on the sensuous event that listening/playing this music produces for them.

The notion of sensuous experience and engagement with the world in the context of sexuality education would undoubtedly raise alarm bells for many schools. However, sensuous here does not necessarily imply sexual. In the example above, for instance, it is not a case of simply concluding that this music *is sexual* or *makes me feel sexual*. Rather, it is about paying attention to what music evokes corporeally and affectively from us that may be sexual but is not limited to what we conventionally understand as sexuality. Music could, for instance, incite movement such as the tapping of a foot or the desire to dance, feelings of happiness, love, eroticism or, evoke memories of significant people and events. This form of sensuousness requires an awareness of our aesthetic presence in the world, which draws on tacit and embodied knowledge. For Todd (2017), this type of pedagogy constitutes "...a life enhancing education. One attuned to creating possibilities for novelty to come into being both at the individual and collective levels." Creating possibilities for novelty in sexuality education might involve its extraction from the material containment of school and the repositioning of lessons in other spaces where young people have lived experience (e.g. the cinema, a rock concert, a dance class, the art gallery). This pedagogy might ask if/how their experience in these sites can be understood as 'sensual' and what elements of this context make it such? Such questions offer the possibility of opening-out discussions of sexuality in ways that students themselves direct towards potential topics that matter within the specificities and immediacy of their lives.

Another immersive sensuous pedagogical possibility is sexuality education's transportation to the museum to create novel opportunities for students' engagement with museum objects. Students might be asked to scour the museum and collect, via photographs or hand drawings, objects *that speak to them* in some way about sexuality. These objects do not need to be conventionally associated with sexuality (e.g. chastity belts which are often displayed in museums as historical sexual artefacts) but ordinary objects that have sexual significance for them. What is vital in such pedagogical encounters is changing the educational space of sexuality education and inclusion of immersive pedagogies which evoke sensuous knowledge in relation to the material. Students might be asked, for instance, how viewing/holding an object might make them feel, and to note what this might illuminate for them about sexuality. Given the currently limited relationship between museums and school-based sexuality education (see Fisher, Grove & Langlands, 2017 for an exception), this potentially lends a new landscape of thought and material and spatial potentiality to this curriculum area. As an unfamiliar space of sexuality education, the museum has, as the Sisters' Academy conceptualise it, a transformative potential to evoke deeper modes of learning and being, as well as being together.

According to Todd, Jones and O'Donnell, (2016) it is in "...the unpredictable contact with non-human materialities within a shared environment," in spaces like the museum, that the life-enhancing potential of sexuality education partially lies (p. 191). Through such encounters, a distinction can be made between "...education as an institutionalised practice of schooling and pedagogy as a practice of transformation" (Todd, 2015a, p. 55). Via such pedagogical practices, students come into being as (sexual) subjects and learn to know, share, and experience the world. What is key here for Todd is education's openness to this unpredictability and uncertainty. Invoking the value of uncertainty in the context of rethinking young people's educational transition from school to work, Todd (2016) writes,

To me, if we are going to take youth disaffection seriously, we need to confront the uncertainties youth are facing not by skilling them up and telling them 'now you're ready to face the world we have imagined for you', but by engaging that uncertainty honestly, directly and with humility – that is, by rethinking uncertainty from an educational vantage point (p. 622).

What might sexuality education *do* when its future-led focus is loosened? Could it shift closer to an art form where ambiguities and uncertainties are integral to its purpose of provoking thought and stimulating interest and action rather than instilling the ‘right’ knowledge and attitudes deemed necessary for change (Todd, 2016a)? Within such an imaginary, *sexuality education would face uncertainty in the present, and cohere around students becoming sexual subjects the shape of which is not determined in advance*. This would invite a redirection away from trying to determine or control the sexual futures of young people, towards facing uncertainty meaningfully. The content of sexuality education lends itself to exploring, for instance, questions like the uncertainty of our sexuality and our gender. Attending to these kinds of uncertainties promises to open a new landscape of thought, not only for this curriculum area, but the ontology of being human.

References

- Aggleton, P. (2017). *Education and Sexualities: Major Themes in Education*. Routledge.
- Allen, L. (2007). Doing 'it' differently: Relinquishing the disease and pregnancy prevention focus of sexuality education. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(5), 575-588.
- Allen, L. (2005). *Sexual Subjects: Young People, Sexuality and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Allen, L., & Rasmussen, M. (2017). *The Palgrave Handbook of Education*. Springer Nature.
- Bialystok, L. (2018). “My Child, My Choice”? Mandatory Curriculum, Sex, and the Conscience of Parents. *Educational Theory*, 68(1), 11–29.
- Brömdal, N., Rasmussen, M., Sanjakdar, F., Allen, L., & Quinlivan, K. (2017). Intersex Bodies in Sexuality Education: On the Edge of Cultural Difference. In L. Allen & M. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education* (pp. 369-390). Springer Nature.
- Carmody, M. (2009). *Sex and Ethics: Young people and ethical sex*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Corngold, J. (2013). Introduction: The Ethics of Sex Education. *Educational Theory*, 63(5), 439-442.
- Fisher, K., Grove, J., & Langlands, R. (2017). 'Sex and History': Talking Sex with Objects from the Past. In L. Allen & M. Rasmussen (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Sexuality Education* (pp. 29-52). Springer.
- Darsø, L. (2016). Arts-in-business from 2004-2014. In U. Johansson Sköldberg, J. Woodilla, & Berthoin Antal, A. (Eds.), *Artistic Interventions in Organisations: Research, theory and practice* (pp. 18-34). Routledge.
- Gereluk, D. (2013). The democratic imperative to address sexual equality rights in schools. *Educational Theory*, 63(5), 511-523.
- Jen Gilbert (2018) Contesting consent in sex education, *Sex Education*, 18 (5), 268-279.
- Gilbert, J. (2014). *Sexuality at School: The Limits of Education*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Kopp Kallner, H., Thunell, L., Brynhildsen, J., Lindeberg, M., & Gemzell Danielsson, K. (2015). Use of Contraception and Attitudes towards Contraceptive Use in Swedish Women - A Nationwide Survey. *PLOS - One*, 10(5).
- Halstead, J. M., & Reiss, M. J. (2003). *Values in sex education: From principles to practice*. Routledge Falmer.
- Halstead, J. M. (1998). Values and sex education in a multi-cultural society. In M. J. Reiss & S. A. Mabud (Eds.), *Sex Education and Religion* (pp. 232–259). Islamic Academy.

- Heyes, J. (2019). Towards a virtue ethical approach to relationships and sex education. *Journal of Moral Education*, 48(2), 165-178.
- Hirst, J. (2012). 'It's got to be about enjoying yourself': young people, sexual pleasure, and sex and relationships education. *Sex Education*. (i First article), 1-14.
- Ingold, T. (2018). *Anthropology and/as Education*. Routledge.
- Irvine, J. (2002). *Talk about Sex: The Battles over Sex Education in the United States*. University of California Press.
- Johnson, R. (2013). Are We Nearly There Yet? Struggling to Understand Young People as Sexual Subjects. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, 10(1), 104-123.
- Jones, T. (2011). Saving rhetorical children: sexuality education discourses from conservative to post-modern. *Sex Education*, 11(4), 369-387.
- Kirby, D., & Roller, L. (2007). Sex and HIV Education Programs: Their Impact on Sexual Behaviours of Young People Throughout the World. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 40, 206-217.
- Lamb, S. (2013). Just the facts? The separation of sex education from moral education. *Educational Theory*, 63(5), 443-460.
- Lamb, S. (2010). Toward a Sexual Ethics Curriculum: Bringing Philosophy and Society to Bear on Individual Development. *Harvard Educational Review*, 80(1), 81-141.
- Maclure, M. (2017). Qualitative Methodology and The New Materialisms. In N. Denzin & M. Giardina (Eds.), *Qualitative Inquiry in Neoliberal Times* (pp. 48-58). Routledge.
- Mayo, C. (2013). Unsettled Relations: Schools, Gay Marriage, and Education for Sexuality. *Educational Theory*, 63(5), 543-558.
- McAvoy, P. (2013). The aims of Sex Education: Demoting Autonomy and Promoting Mutuality. *Educational Theory*, 63(5), 483-496.
- McGeeney, E., & Kehily, M. (2016). Editorial Introduction: Young people and sexual pleasure - where are we now? *Sex Education*, 16(3), 235-239.
- Morris, R. (2005). Research and evaluation in sexuality education: an allegorical exploration of complexities and possibilities. *Sex Education*, 5(4), 405-422.
- Padmini, I., & Aggleton, P. (2015). Seventy years of sex education in Health Education Journal: a critical review. *Health Education Journal*, 74(1).
- Quinlivan, D. (2012). *The Place of Breath in Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Sears, J. (Ed.) (1992). *Sexuality and the Curriculum: The Politics and Practices of Sexuality Education*. Teachers College Press.
- Sister's Academy. (n.d.). Education for the future – Sensuous learning. *Sister's Academy*. Retrieved from: <http://sistersacademy.dk/>
- Spiecker, B. (1992). Sexual education and morality. *Journal of Moral Education*, 2(1), 67-76.
- Steutel, J., & de Ruyter, D. (2011). What should be the moral aims of compulsory sex education? *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 59(1), 75-86.
- Tasker, G. (2004). Health Education: Contributing to a Just Society through Curriculum Change. In A. O'Neill, J. Clark, & R. Openshaw (Eds.), *Reshaping Culture, knowledge and learning? Policy and Content in the New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (pp. 203-224). Dunmore.
- Todd, S. (2017) *Breathing Life into Education: Re-sensing the educational subject*. Keynote presented at the PESA Conference 2017: Birth, Death and Rebirth: Does philosophy of education need a new Subject? 1-5 December. Crowne Plaza, Newcastle Australia.

- Todd, S. (2016). Facing uncertainty in education: Beyond the harmonies of Eurovision education. *European Educational Research Journal*, 15(6), 619-627.
- Todd, S. (2016a). Response to Symposium: New ethical challenges within environmental and sustainability education: a response. *Environmental Education Research*, 22(6), 842-844.
- Todd, S. (2015b) Experiencing change, Encountering the unknown: An education in 'Negative Capability' in light of Buddhism and Levinas. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49(2), 240-254.
- Todd, S. (2015a). Creating transformative spaces in education: Facing humanity, facing violence. *Philosophical Inquiry in Education*, 23(1), 53-61.
- Todd, S. (2014). Between body and spirit: The liminality of pedagogical relationships. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 48(2), 231-245.
- Todd, S., Jones, R., & O'Donnell, A. (2016). Shifting education's philosophical imaginaries: relations, affects, bodies, materialities. *Gender and Education*, 28(2), 187-194.
- UNESCO. (2017) Early and Unintended Pregnancy & the Education Sector: Evidence Review and Recommendations. Paris: UNESCO.
- Villines, Z. (2017) 'How do babies breathe in the womb?' *Medical News Today*. Accessed online 4 September 2018. Available at <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/318993.php>
- Wilson, J. (2003). Can sex education be practical? *Sex Education*, 3(1), 23-32.
- Worre Hallberg, G. (2016). Keynote: Sisters Academy: Sensuous society - Beyond economic rationality. *Trousers - Journal for Children and Youth Culture* 61(33) pp.35-66.
- Zimmerman, J. (2015). *Too Hot to Handle: A Global History of Sex Education*. Princeton University Press.

About the Author

Louisa Allen is a Professor, in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Auckland. She specialises in research in the areas of sexualities, young people and schooling and innovative research methodologies which seek to engage hard to reach populations. She examines these areas through the lenses of educational philosophy, queer, feminist post-structural and feminist new materialist frameworks. She has written seven books in these fields.