

## *Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education* by Lauren Bialystok and Lisa M. F. Andersen, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2022

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Review of

## *Touchy Subject: The History and Philosophy of Sex Education*

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The aptly named *Touchy Subject* marks the latest installment in the History and Philosophy of Education Series (University of Chicago Press). Each book in this series is co-authored by a historian and a philosopher, who bring their distinctive disciplinary approaches to a challenging topic in education. In this case, co-authors Lauren Bialystok and Lisa M. F. Andersen tackle the always delicate subject of sex education with admirable clarity and scholarly insight.

The first half of *Touchy Subject* dissects the history of sex education in the United States from the late 19th century to the dawn of the new millennium. The broad contours of this roughly 120-year timeline will be familiar to readers of other historical studies of sex education in the US (see Freeman, 2008; Irvine, 2004; Luker, 2007; Moran, 2002; Zimmerman, 2002). Key periods and developments covered include the Victorian era conspiracy of silence that early sex education advocates sought to overcome; the progressive era push among so-called social hygienists and social purity reformers to integrate sex education into a rapidly expanding system of public schooling; the mid-century emergence of family life education (FLE), with its emphasis on preparing students to occupy traditional gender roles as well as find happiness and fulfillment in marriage and the nuclear family; the late-1960s backlash against sex education, spearheaded by anti-communist and Christian conservative organizations; and the channelling of billions of dollars of federal funds, beginning in the 1980s and continuing to the present day, for abstinence-only-until-marriage education (AOUME).

A common theme emerging from the history recounted here is that the interests and concerns of some groups – poor, working class, non-White women; the LGBTQ+ community; youth in general – have been consistently sidelined, if not completely ignored or forgotten, as advocates with different social and political agendas have left their imprint on school-based sex education. The Protestant social purity reformers of the late 19th century, as *Touchy Subject* points out, championed premarital chastity without considering whether all women wanted to live up to this middle-class social expectation. The family life educators of the mid-20th century promoted heterosexual dating beginning in junior high school as a way for youth to develop a “marriageable personality.” In so doing, they overlooked that some young women – middle-class women of colour in particular – were particularly vulnerable to stigmatization and abuse in a context in which frequent dating was encouraged and normalized. They also projected the era’s heteronormative domestic ideals onto all youth without considering individuals’ unique desires and life goals. To cite another example closer to the present day, since early in the Reagan presidency, the US government has aggressively funded AOUME both domestically and in developing countries despite clear and mounting evidence that it is woefully ineffective at achieving its primary goals, and harmful

insofar as it withholds vital health information from its recipients. Indeed, recent studies indicate that almost all Americans have sex before marrying, and teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates in the US are among the highest in the industrialized world (CDC, 2019; Finer, 2007; Guttmacher Institute, 2015, 2019).

Some intriguing research of primary source material animates the first half of *Touchy Subject*, including an examination of mid-20th-century sex education textbooks. These textbooks are notable for the scant attention they pay to venereal disease and teenage pregnancy prevention – a major preoccupation of the earlier social hygiene movement, as well as contemporary sex education. Evidently, the omissions were intentional, as the Freud-influenced sex education proponents of the time rejected the earlier fixation on syphilis, gonorrhea, and out-of-wedlock births, which they equated with “a myopic and distorted variety of education” (Cuber and Ray, 1946, as cited in Bialystok and Andersen, 2022, p. 34) that inevitably leads to hang-ups around intimacy and sex. For these family life educators, the purpose of sex education was less about highlighting the dangerous consequences of sexual activity and more about achieving happy and fulfilling marriages and positive family relationships. The curriculum they championed, which was grounded in interview data from married couples, included discussions of the emotional dimensions of sexuality, values and goals in sexual decision making, and the pursuit of pleasure. As the authors point out elsewhere in the book, these topics are conspicuously absent from many of today’s so-called comprehensive sex education programs – all of which are defined in opposition to AOUME, but otherwise differ widely in terms of depth and breadth of content.

*Touchy Subject* also provides a fresh look at an underexplored time in the history of sex education in the US – the decade or so prior to the HIV/AIDS crisis. Using grant files from the Ford Foundation records as primary source material, the book examines an experimental student-led sex education program in New York City. This program was established at a time (the early 1970s) when fewer than a third of the city’s public schools offered any sex education and when a municipal budget crisis made the funding of new programs a longshot. Herein lies an interesting tale of a radical proposal for peer-to-peer sex education and counselling, submitted by the Student Committee for Rational Sex Education (SCRSE) to the Ford Foundation in 1973. The proposal was funded and initially implemented with great promise – with peer educators running workshops, moderating discussions, and disseminating information to hundreds of their fellow students in a dozen schools – only to lose momentum in the face of skeptical school officials who asserted their own control over the program. Though its foray into sex education was fraught with obstacles and ultimately short-lived, the SCRSE had established a precedent that was later revived at the height of the AIDS epidemic. During that period, groups such as Teens Teaching AIDS Prevention (Teens TAP) in Kansas City and Youth Education Life Line (YELL) in New York City took up the mantle of peer education and activism, and in the process shone a spotlight on the inadequacy of school-based sex education at a time when the stakes had never been higher. The book’s examination of these various peer-directed initiatives serves as an interesting historical backdrop to an extended discussion, taken up later in the book, of how authority over sex education should be allocated among different stakeholders.

The second half of *Touchy Subject* takes up a set of thorny philosophical questions underlying ongoing debates over sex education in North America and around the world:

- How can any particular policy or practice be defended in the face of deep and persistent disagreement?
- Who gets to decide what shape and form sex education should take?
- Where should sex education be undertaken, and what should its primary aims be?

On the whole, the book offers carefully reasoned, nuanced, and richly informed responses to these questions. While frankly acknowledging the reality of irresolvable dissensus about values and objectives, chapter 4 argues that school-based sex education must unwaveringly promote equality and liberty;

support LGBTQ+ youth; and provide accurate, inclusive, and comprehensive sexual health information. Chapter 5 makes the case for distributing authority over sex education among the state, parents, children, and experts (e.g., teachers, health care providers, and researchers). It also cautions against automatically deferring to parents in cases in which they oppose sex education curricula – the default approach in the US – asserting instead that children’s “own interest in sexual self-determination provides the litmus test for justified paternalism” (p. 114). Chapter 6 affirms that, despite ongoing doubts about their suitability for the task, schools are an indispensable provider of comprehensive sex education. Furthermore, among the principle aims of school-based sex education should be enabling and encouraging young people to critically assess information as well as seriously consider the ethical dimensions of sexuality in a media-saturated age.

One quibble I have with *Touchy Subject* is its invocation of Amy Gutmann’s (1999) principles of “non-repression” and “non-discrimination” in chapter 5. *Touchy Subject* relies upon these principles in asserting that parents and democratic majorities should not be permitted to make decisions about sex education that contravene children’s interests in sexual self-determination – an assertion for which I otherwise have great sympathy. As Bialystok and Andersen write, “there is a good argument for the state to have broad authority over sex education that promotes, as Gutmann says, ‘non-repression and non-discrimination,’ even over the objections of other authority holders” (p. 119). The problem with invoking these principles in this context is that Gutmann herself argues that local communities can legitimately decide to prohibit school-based sex education entirely on grounds that “classroom discussions desanctify sex” and that such value-laden subject matter should be confined to the family (1999, p. 109). As I have argued elsewhere, this claim demonstrates that Gutmann’s principles of non-repression and non-discrimination do not have much teeth (Corngold, 2011).

Towards the end of *Touchy Subject*, after exposing the inadequacies of various prepackaged curricula offered up by advocates of AOUME and comprehensive sex education, Bialystok and Andersen make a compelling case for what they call “democratic humanistic sex education” (DHSE). As the name suggests, democratic and humanistic goals and values – including learning to critically assess information, respect others, and lead a flourishing life – are at the very heart of DHSE. DHSE is not a prepackaged instructional approach or curriculum but rather adaptable to local contexts and to cultural and technological changes. It is also broadly comprehensive, not just in the sense that it covers a range of facts about biology, the risks of pregnancy and disease, and various forms of contraception, but in the sense that it explores (in a contextualized way) values, emotions, ethics, decision-making, gender and sexual diversity, pleasure, consent, harassment and assault, sex in the media, the opportunities and dangers of growing up in a digitized world, and a range of other matters highly relevant to young people in the 21st century. The authors contend that sex education should not be confined to one small unit in health class, but should be appropriately addressed across the curriculum and should involve multiple stakeholders outside of the classroom, as well including parents, counsellors, health care professionals, religious officials, and politicians. The authors also remind us that revamping the formal curriculum is not enough; if the school system is going to do justice to this critically important area, then adequate provisions will need to be made for teacher training and ongoing professional development so that all teachers are well prepared to participate in the teaching of challenging topics related to sexuality as they arise in various subjects. Furthermore, attention will need to be paid to the informal curriculum and to the policies, practices, and expectations in schools that too often undermine the aims of DHSE.

One unresolved tension in *Touchy Subject* is whether schools can mandate the “truly comprehensive” sex education that the authors endorse over the objections of parents. There are passages in the book in which Bialystok and Andersen suggest that schools can and should mandate this kind of education. They write, for instance, “We have the resources within our political traditions and legal institutions to demand sex education that serves the needs of *all* young people” (p. 167, emphasis mine). A bit later, they insist, “No child should be denied accurate and inclusive information about sex because of who their parents are” (p. 169). On the other hand, elsewhere in the book, Bialystok and Andersen acknowledge that unlike some European countries (e.g., Sweden) where sex education is mandatory without exception, the United

States has a strong tradition of allowing parents to withdraw their children from school programs that the parents find unconscionable – sex education being the paradigmatic example. The authors also concede that taking a hardline stance and preventing opt-outs would likely push a number of families in the direction of private schools that reinforce parental values, if not homeschooling. Moreover, in a section on religious freedom in chapter 5, Bialystok and Andersen submit, “Parents who seek to opt their children out of sex education, or endorse illiberal values about sexuality, may partially constrain their children’s autonomy, but not to the extent that state interference is warranted” (p. 124). So, there is a tension in these seemingly divergent claims that raises this unsettled question: ultimately, to what lengths do Bialystok and Andersen believe the state should go in trying to ensure that all children have access to the DHSE they so powerfully defend in their book?

Though this is a serious book on a serious topic, there are some refreshing bits of levity and humour scattered throughout *Touchy Subject*, beginning straight away with the double entendre of the title. In the early pages, we are presented with survey data which confirms that despite the unrelenting controversy surrounding it, “school-based sex education is more popular than Morgan Freeman, Tom Hanks, or Yoda” (p. 2). In the first of three history chapters, we are introduced to the “unfortunately named” (p. 14) early-20th-century advice writer Orrin Giddings Cocks. And in the book’s conclusion, we learn of the institution in 2009 of high school masturbation workshops in the autonomous Extremadura region of Spain – a development which prompted Peruvian novelist Mario Vargas Llosa to deadpan, “Now that is progress” (Llosa, 2015, as cited in Bialystok and Andersen, 2022, p. 160). Apparently, Llosa’s own Catholic upbringing featured warnings that “improper touching” causes blindness, tuberculosis, and insanity. Touchy subject indeed.

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### About the author

**Josh Corngold** is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Education at the University of Tulsa. His current scholarship examines the discourse around parents' rights in contemporary American education.