

Chapter 62

Flying Faster than the Birds and the Bees: Toward a Sex-Positive Theory and Practice in Multicultural Education

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ABSTRACT

The need for multicultural education to analyze human sexuality education is an area of critical need in research and practice. Many current human sexuality learning experiences contain practices that are shaming to learners, producing values that problematize sexuality. The author of this chapter introduces a sex-positive approach to human sexuality education, honoring multicultural education by intentionally understanding sex-positivity outside of a White, western context. Implications of this approach for education research, practice, training, and advocacy are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Gwen has been teaching U.S. History for two years at a large high school in which 82% of learners identify as people of color. Gwen is asked by the principal to help “give input about the school’s sex education class, given that Gwen is one of the younger teachers and probably has more up-to-date knowledge than some of the more senior teachers about what kids are facing with regard to sex.” Gwen knows that many of her students come from cultural communities where sex is not talked about, and sex is thought of as shameful. Further, Gwen, who identifies as a 28-year-old, White, cisgender, heterosexual woman, has not had any experience teaching human sexuality. She begins to become anxious about her new assignment. She would like to empower students to understand their sexuality and not be afraid of it; however, she does not know how to do so.

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The vignette of Gwen's experiences above is increasingly common for early career teachers in diverse learning environments. Increasingly, scholars have noted the complexities of applying educational research and theory, especially in the investigative areas of cross-cultural / intercultural and multicultural education (Barr, Moore, Johnson, Forrest, & Jordan, 2014; Burnes & Stanley, 2017; Haberland & Rogow, 2015). Specifically, within education literature, there are also documented, increasing difficulties with teaching processes and outcomes surrounding the teaching of human sexuality in increasing multicultural and diverse learning environments (Donaghue, 2015; Nogaski, 2015). Human sexuality is broadly defined as the as the entire realm of human experience that is more or less closely connected to sex (Levay, Baldwin, & Baldwin, 2015, p. 4).

Although humans' sexuality is often equated with *sex* (or engaging in sexual behaviors), human sexuality also encompasses things such as (but not limited to) gender-focused traits, the biological sex that one is assigned at birth, romantic and sexual attractions, sexual orientation, arousal and desire, sex as a commodity (e.g., sex work), and biological wellness related to sex (including reproductive health, infections and diseases). With this multi-faceted view of human sexuality, it becomes apparent how the need for human sexuality education must be comprehensive in order for learners to understand the numerous aspects of their own sexual experiences and sexual well-being. For example, comprehensive human sexuality education must not only include information on sexually transmitted infections, but also on arousal and intercourse that can happen between people of multiple genders for purposes other than procreation.

When understanding how human sexuality is taught, it also becomes necessary to define multicultural education, or any form of education or teaching that incorporates the histories, texts, values, beliefs, and perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds (Dolby, 2012) as elucidated in the vignette of Gwen stated above. Although some have used the term culture to solely talk about race and ethnicity, scholars in various academic and advocacy-focused disciplines and organizations have broadened the term "culture" to address many sociocultural identities, including sexual orientation and gender identity (Sue & Sue, 2015). In understanding multicultural education, all members of the learning process – learners, teachers, administrators of learning environments – begin to engage with core values of wellness, resilience, and social justice that provide a rationale for educators to explicitly celebrate diversity and multiculturalism. Such diversity includes the understanding that learning and teaching happens across the human lifespan, and that education must not be restricted to a specific age or cognitive ability. The values of wellness and resilience are also a part of multicultural education, as instructors incorporate teaching approaches that reflect the education discipline's commitments to working with learners holistically over their respective lifespans from a perspective of health and strengths-based frameworks and incorporating global perspectives to ensure that learners understand how concepts being taught may be influenced by a variety of social and cultural factors.

Teaching in high stakes school systems has been empirically associated with direct instruction, student apathy, a narrowed curriculum, stress experienced by teachers and students, and a lack of emphasis on social, emotional and physical goals. Further, the detrimental effects of such a narrowed curriculum necessitate the need for innovative theory to be used in educational settings. Such detrimental effects are unfortunately apparent in multicultural education, as human sexuality is often taught in traditional educational systems from a White, western context that focuses on STI/STD prevention and does not focus on sex as a pleasurable, healthy series of acts for young people (Fine & McClelland, 2008). The unfortunate impact of narrowed curricula is especially true in the area of human sexuality education (Donaghue, 2014), resulting in school administrators (such as Gwen's principal in the vignette) to make

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