

## **Book review of Jen Gilbert's (2014) *Sexuality in School: The Limits of Education*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.**

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### **Introduction**

The idea of sexuality in schools has always been a highly contested and challenged topic in Canada. Ontario Premier Doug Ford's 2018 decision to rescind the updated sexual education curriculum in schools is one of countless examples that shows the discomfort and unease that many individuals in our society hold about sexuality. This tense political climate calls for reflection; how can we better serve the needs of our youth and educate them to be accepting and knowledgeable individuals in our society? Jen Gilbert's 2014 book, *Sexuality in School: The Limits of Education*, offers a fresh and valuable approach to the idea of sexuality in education by bringing together the fields of psychoanalysis and queer theory. Gilbert suggests how sex education and sexuality can be reconceptualized and better understood within the field of education by approaching the current conflicts and controversies of sexuality as symptoms of society's unresolved fears and insecurities about the self and sexuality. Gilbert is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University and a scholar in the fields of sexuality education and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) issues in education. In *Sexuality in School*, Gilbert argues that sexuality is misunderstood in education, especially in relation to LGBTQ communities. In response to this assessment, Gilbert offers readers the argument that sexuality is ordinary; it is everywhere and part of the human condition, and, thus, we must not be afraid to acknowledge its existence nor to discuss its influence on education. Gilbert asserts that education is charged with sexuality, which cannot be denied in the classroom since our search for knowledge is inevitably fuelled by the emotions of love, curiosity, and aggression. For these reasons, education is also an emotional terrain, filled with unspoken tensions and unresolved questions regarding sexuality. Using this assertion as a key grounding for her book, Gilbert (2014) creates a thought-provoking theoretical framework for her study. She seeks to "hold open a space between the proliferating surfaces of queer theory and the depths of psychoanalysis" (p. xvii).

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In her introduction, Gilbert (2014) shares the threefold purpose of her book, referring to her goal of unpacking the terms "education" and "sexuality":

My tasks are to notice the range of ways each concept is used, especially in debates about LGBTQ issues; to note places of conflict and convergence between different theoretical orientations; and to place my own project amid those debates while also seeing conflict over the meaning as itself an effect of studying sexuality and education. (p. xv)

Gilbert states her own challenges with sexuality and identity formation; she begins the introduction of her book with an anecdote sharing the discomforts and questions she has encountered along her own journey as a queer educator. In so doing, she engages in "analytic bracketing" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 97) by creatively referencing her own story as an opportunity to draw the reader into her narrative. Gilbert revisits her own becoming through her study of schooling and sexuality, and her voice helps the reader situate her perspective and motivations in studying the topic of sexuality in education. Gilbert claims that rather than dismissing or shying away from sexuality, we must become curious about its origins and attempt to understand "its unruly effects" (Gilbert, 2014, p. xv).

It is important to recognize that Gilbert approaches the topic of sexuality in schools with a reflective and welcoming voice. The reader is invited on an intellectual journey through the challenges of sexuality in education today, which include the inclusion of queer storybooks in primary schools, the use of media in LGBTQ youth narratives, and the difficulties of sex education in schools today. Gilbert challenges readers on commonly held

assumptions without the use of an accusatory or threatening tone; this helps to create a hospitable learning space for the reader and foreshadows and models her suggestion that educators approach education as a hospitable act, which she recommends in her closing chapter.

In her first chapter, Gilbert begins by drawing on queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's (1993) parody, "How to bring your kids up gay" (2014, p.1) and offers a discussion of Sedgwick's critique of parenting manuals and the heteronormative assumption that parents can determine who their children will become. Although homosexuality is no longer considered a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM), Gilbert cites Jay Prosser's 1998 book titled *Second Skins* to unsettle the ways that trans-identity narratives are still medicalized. Gilbert draws together the positions of Prosser (1998) and Sedgwick (2004) to alert the reader that their work asks us to "notice how we deploy childhoods in the name of LGBTQ equality" (p. 3). She builds on this historical research by introducing psychoanalytic theory to better understand a) why many adults want to "fix" the child and control sexuality in our society; and b) why the child is made into a repository for the adult's wishes, hopes, and disappointments.

Gilbert's voice seeks to acknowledge previous work in sexuality studies (Prosser, 1998; Sedgwick, 2004), but also takes the conversation to a deeper level when she weaves her narrative together with psychoanalytic theory and interrogates current discourse in queer circles on education. Her work fills a gap in both sexuality studies and educational theory through her careful unpacking of commonly held assumptions of adolescence and growing up. This is seen in her intervention on the fragility of adolescence (Chapter 2) as well as the *It Gets Better* project (Chapter 3).

Gilbert locates points of mediation and dialogue between psychoanalytic theory and sexuality. One of her particularly insightful arguments is her assertion that "there is no such thing as an adolescent" (p. 34), claiming that adolescents are not independently influenced human beings; they are impacted by all those around them and cannot exist without outside influences, which include their parents, peer groups, and the media, to name a few. All of these influences contribute to the adolescent's thinking and development. Gilbert makes this claim with the help of D. W. Winnicott (1956/1992), a key contributor to psychoanalytic theory. In order to develop her argument on the interaction and influence of the role of authority in the life of the adolescent, she closely examines revolt, sexual exploration, and the adolescent's emotional parental relationship (Oedipal complex) on the adolescent's behaviour. As a result, Gilbert is able to harness psychoanalytic theory in a way that allows for "a different language of development" (p. 32).

Gilbert urges educators to turn inward and reflect upon what sexuality means for education. She addresses questions such as What do adults want from the child? What tools and support are educators currently providing to the child? Are we setting the child up to repeat the adult's difficulties and traumas? Through her analysis of the *It Gets Better* project—an international online campaign in which LGBTQ individuals share video testimonials describing how their life has improved—in Chapter 3, Gilbert cautions the reader that sometimes our interventions are not necessarily what is best for the child, rather, they are an adult's opinion of what *would have been* best for the adult's own childhood. Her argument seems to mirror Hannah Arendt's (1977) argument for natality; that is, as adults, we must be careful not to impose the world that we wish to have upon the child, but, at the same time, we have a responsibility to inform the child of the world that is the reality we experience today. Perhaps in our efforts to comfort the queer child we run the risk of imposing our hopes rather than acknowledging the child's difficult reality. This allusion to Arendt's work, however, is not explored in Gilbert's chapter. Although Gilbert refers to Arendt briefly in her introduction when situating the structure of her book, additional links to Arendt's concept of natality would have helped to strengthen Gilbert's claim and develop her argument further. Conversely, Gilbert supports Arendt's argument that, as educators, we must always continue to query: What are the child's needs? How can we better respond to the adolescent's life narrative?

To help situate her argument, Gilbert shares historical examples of controversies and debates within the education system regarding sexuality and schooling. For example, she describes the 1997 banning of picture books that depicted same-sex families in British Columbia schools that underwent multiple appeals and reversals, finally reaching the Supreme Court of Canada in 2002. Although this ban was ultimately reversed by the Supreme Court, Gilbert points out that no specific policy, program, legislation, or intervention will resolve homophobia or anti-LGBTQ sentiments in schools. Schools often reinforce the larger cultural climate and expectations of society, and, as such, sexuality should be addressed as a part of schooling because it is naturally a part of adolescence and the

human condition. Currently, sexuality is hidden away and ignored in school, but Gilbert suggests that sexuality can be addressed with the help of fiction, film, legal case studies, and personal experiences. These mediums can help demystify the topic of sexuality for students, provide a healthy and safer space for an understanding of sexuality, and help to address anti-LGBTQ attitudes in our schools and communities.

Gilbert brings theory into practice in her effort to critically analyze perspectives of sex education and the idea of risk. Additionally, Gilbert challenges mainstream understandings of what is progressive and beneficial for the LGBTQ community in education. Her argument in Chapter 4 asserts that adult sexuality cannot be successfully predicted from a child's sexual curiosities. Childhood curiosity about sexuality is to be expected since sexuality is all around us. It is flawed to assume that curiosity equals "troubled" sexuality in adulthood. Gilbert also challenges the reader to re-consider the way we understand risk (expressed in Chapter 2); she asserts that risk must be viewed as an inescapable quality of living rather than a hazard to be avoided in adolescence.

A unique feature central to *Sexuality in School* is Gilbert's closing chapter, titled "Education as hospitality." In this chapter, she seeks to outline the role that Jacques Derrida's law of hospitality can play in inviting queerness in the classroom—that the truly hospitable host must allow for the strangeness of the visitor and not impose any judgments and requests upon the guest. Gilbert argues that Derrida's understanding of hospitality can benefit education, especially when educators encounter uncertainty and difference in the classroom. In her own act of hospitality, she does not leave the reader to navigate through the challenges of sexuality in education alone. Gilbert provides "a reluctant manifesto for welcoming LGBTQ students, teachers, and families" (p. 93) in order to encourage educators and society at large to become more comfortable with saying words like "transgender" and "lesbian" out loud in various contexts so the words don't feel like slurs. In so doing, her suggestions seek to encourage societal dialogue on the issues that are faced by the LGBTQ community. Not coincidentally, these suggestions link back to her "queer provocations" (p. xiv) or theoretical commitments, that are outlined in her introduction, providing an organized structure to her writing and serving as an appropriate closing to her text.

This book is highly relevant to the field of education, particularly educators and general readers who share an interest in youth studies, queer theory, theories of identity, or ethics in education. Gilbert's coherent and timely text concerning the struggles and aspirations of LGBTQ youth calls attention to the exploration of larger issues, including how sexuality is (mis)understood in education today. Gilbert's text carefully analyzes the ways in which sexuality is approached in schools, and her interventions are meticulous, thoughtful, and steeped in research.

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