

PEDAGOGIES OF POSSIBILITY
FOR NEGOTIATING SEXUALITY
EDUCATION WITH YOUNG
PEOPLE

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD

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There has been great controversy about what sexuality education young people want and what they ‘should be’ getting in Australia, and other countries around the world (USA, UK, Canada and South Africa). If one were to rely only on media portrayals it might seem as though sexuality education was prolific and highly radical, exciting stuff flying in the face of all orthodoxy ... but listening to young people, one learns a very different perspective. One thing is clear – sexuality is the topic young people most commonly report they need improved education on. A call from young people that also holds sexuality education policy and practice to account (Allen & Rasmussen, 2017; Jones, 2020). Young people’s contemporary sexual cultures have different features, considerations, risks and potentials that can be at odds with the current (and past) sexuality education curricula and pedagogical frameworks. It is therefore important to not just recognise young peoples as key stakeholders in curriculum debates surrounding sexuality education, but also to actively reconsider new forms of inquiry and advocacy necessary to ensure that young people are meaningfully engaged in the decision-making processes (Lamb & Randazzo, 2016; Pihkala & Huuki, 2019; Quinlivan, 2018; Renold & McGeeney, 2017; Ringrose, Warfield, & Zarabadi, 2019; Wolfe, 2018). Further, adult allies need to tackle and set out strategies to overcome some of the risks inherent to their inclusion; embracing both risks of harm to young people and the risks of media and community perceptions over-stating or over-playing that harm in ways that prevent better work occurring. While sexuality education research books and sexuality education resources do exist, I am not aware of any other books that focus on young people’s engagement or provide useful models or resources to achieve this to the extent that this book does.

This book, *Pedagogies of Possibility for Negotiating Sexuality Education with Young People*, provides critical reflection, including a feminist queer lens, on the possibilities and challenges of working with, rather than for, young

people in the redesign and delivery of sexuality education. It takes a deeper look at this push to have young people actively engage in sexuality education praxis, inquiry, school policy and ethics deliberations. This book tackles the issues and problems around what young people want to learn more about and how they want to learn it. Every chapter includes young people's experiences (data varies from observation to conversation), and research artefacts are also used.

The book has been composed by an impressive team of authors led by Associate Professor Debbie Ollis of Deakin University – an internationally esteemed teacher educator who is well-known in both Australian academic circles and media for her influence on sexuality education curricula. Dr Leanne Coll, Lecturer at Dublin City University, a researcher–educator with significant national and international expertise in co-productive and action-orientated inquiry with young people and educators aimed towards transforming sexuality education. Honorary Associate Professor Lyn Harrison of Deakin University and Emeritus Professor Bruce Johnson of the University of South Australia have both attracted highly competitive support from the Australian Research Council in related fields and have had excellent track records in sexuality education research during their careers. Something notably novel offered in this work is the way this team provides a new deeper consideration on the *complexities* of working with, rather than for, young people – hardly simple terrain. This is a fabulous work which thoughtfully reflects upon the research and education processes of supporting young people as *active agents in* rather than *passive objects of* sexuality education. So much sexuality education is infantilising, or worse, where it recognises the agency of young people but does not allow for it in a practical sense as this book suggests will be important. This is only possible due to the broad range of experiences across the authorship team representing cumulatively many decades of experience.

The book has a logical, well-considered framework. The chapters are structured around the nature of ongoing, nuanced and emotionally charged engagements in negotiating sexuality education with young people – time (past, present and future) does not and has not automatically or easily been resolved and so beginnings and endings are not dressed up as more solid than they are. However, we do find a very loose time-based logic to the chapters – the earlier chapters looking more to past and current thinking, the latter to current and future opportunities. The book provides chapters which individually include clear introductions, literature reviews or ideological groundings, provocative scenarios and incidents it terms 'encounters', and concluding or transitional reflections. Chapter 1 offers some beginnings for the key theme; Chapter 2 explores its key concepts and literatures and the methodological

details of the larger ARC project *Educating Young People about Sexuality Education* reported in the book including the Victorian-based case study. Chapter 3 details matters of context and constraints and takes on the changes to ethics review processes necessary to work in this area – possibly my favourite part of the book. Chapters 4–6 are more pragmatically orientated moving beyond research institutional matters into pedagogical and methodological processes of negotiating sexuality education with young people in schools; project-based encounters around rethinking safety, inclusion and feminist forms of public pedagogies. Chapter 7 reflects on the key ideas of the text in a more future-oriented way, considering how ideas could be built on or responded to by a variety of stakeholders. The smooth transitions between the chapters made the book a relatively fast read in a world of theory that can be a difficult slog; the signposting and transitions are well-placed and well-paced.

Now is exactly the right time for a book like this; one which builds on the potential to empower young people and seeks to become attuned to, advocate for and negotiate with young people on matters that matter most to them:

- matters of sexual consent;
- new technologies shaping sexual cultures; and
- issues of sexual diversity in education around the world.

Ollis, Coll, Harrison and Johnson offer a well-researched academic contribution into possibilities for negotiating sexuality education with young people drawing on their different strengths and experiences. They deftly cite and source all the main recent contextual stimulants, smoothly traverse the key theoretical positions and thinkers in this area and take readers through the most important research-based angles relevant to their Australian sexuality education field and larger conceptual inquiry. They do so without being too heavy-handed or pedantic in their coverage as academic texts can be, leaving what was, frankly, an academically satisfying but none-the-less, most enjoyable read on potentials for negotiated sexuality education accessible to a range of audiences.

The wide audience for this book could be:

- education and sociology researchers;
- education policy-makers, leaders and administrators;
- those working in non-government organisations;
- teacher educators and teachers; and

- higher education students including pre-service teachers or psychology students looking to one day become teachers themselves or indeed school counsellors.

The focus on a very current and somewhat divisive topic is a strength of *Pedagogies of Possibility for Negotiating Sexuality Education with Young People*, as this will draw in a range of readers with different preconceptions. This book will also map out an area that is only very basically referred to in debates but never really given any detail. It could serve as quite a practical guide to teachers and sexuality education researchers and could also be useful for sociologists such as myself. Teachers and teacher educators, sexuality educators and people involved with non-government organisations who work directly with young people will especially get much from this book for its pragmatic offerings on young people engagement models for direct sexuality education. However, sexuality education researchers and research students may similarly find the unpacking of the messy, nuanced and charged processes of working with young people of interest to their studies, which could potentially feed into future projects with the potential to break new ground for co-productive, action-orientated and critical work with young people in the field of sexuality education. I hope readers enjoy this book and find it as useful as I did, in finding more collaborative and consultative ways to extend and update the content and value of their own sexuality education contributions.

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We would like to extend our appreciation to the Australian Research Council and the Linkage research funds that made the Engaging Young People in Sexuality Education (EYPSE LP130100350) project possible.

We would also like to acknowledge the very important contributions of Jane Flentje, from SHINE SA, who was a project partner in the larger EYPSE project. Jane's extensive professional expertise and knowledge in the area of sexuality education were invaluable assets to the project. She has been both a generous critical friend and trusted colleague.

There are many other colleagues who have supported us throughout this project. Claire Stonehouse who provided much needed observational data and sexuality education to the students when the need was identified. A special thanks must also go to Dr Emily Gray, who helped us on several occasions in ways that go beyond academic support.

We would also like to acknowledge our gender and sexuality education colleagues across the globe whose scholarly work has inspired us and pushed us out of our comfort zone theoretically. We would like to highlight the work of the late Professor Kathleen Quinlivan from Auckland University in New Zealand. Kathleen's work has long since challenged us to embrace the unruliness of pedagogical and methodological encounters which place young people at the heart of reforms.

A special acknowledgement must go to Fitzroy High School teachers and school leaders. To Linda Mitchell the principal, who allowed us to work with the school on transforming sexuality education. To Briony O'Keeffe whose commitment to the democratic classroom, feminism and the students she teaches is an inspiration. Her work with young people engenders a sense of hope that change is possible. Our time spent together has taught us much about the emotional labour of teaching and the feminist potentials of classroom spaces. Thank you for inviting us in and the opportunity to work in collaboration with the FemCo to respond to enduring injustices that matter most to them.

Most importantly, we would like to thank the young people without whom this project wouldn't exist. Working with them has been an immense privilege

and career highlight. Not only did they welcomed us into their classrooms but enabled us to learn from their lived experience of sexuality education at school and more broadly. Their perspectives, experiences, questions, debates and approaches to sexuality education not only challenged us to think differently but will continue to drive our practice as researchers and educators.

It is to the 4,000 young people who contributed to the EYPSE project that we dedicate this book to.

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

BEGINNINGS

An interest in what sexuality education should, could or ought to be about has long since captured the imagination of the public, parents, young people, researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. As a collective of experienced educators–researchers, with differing trajectories, theoretical understandings and lived experiences, we are passionate about sexuality education futures that are inclusive, empowering and meaningful to young people. As a research team, we are connected by our dedication to working with rather than for young people in transforming sexuality education. This book draws on our collective involvements in a larger Australian Research Council funded co-productive and action-oriented research project: Engaging Young People in Sexuality Education (EYPSE). This project and the experience of co-authoring this book has been a welcomed opening in our academic journeys. Our experience of working with young people in this project – with their school communities, in their classroom spaces and with their teacher allies – has opened up a window that not only challenged our way of viewing what more sexuality education might be but has propelled our thinking in ways we could not have anticipated as experienced researchers–educators in this field. It is not our intention to provide conclusive statements about future directions for sexuality education in this book, but rather to provide a platform for readers to explore the productive tensions and affective intensities of actively engaging with young people in co-producing sexuality education. An emphasis is placed on experimenting with encounters that moved us and challenged long-held ideas about sexuality education inquiry and praxis. Although we know much is left unsaid, we hope the approach we have taken will be of use to others who have the privilege of being invited in.

PAST–PRESENT–FUTURE ENTANGLEMENTS

Don't shield anything from us. Don't try to hide what's the truth, we'll find out one day. If we're going to find it out, we may as well find it out from a safe environment. (Sammy Year 9, 2017)

Concerns about young people having access to meaningful, inclusive and empowering sexuality education has been a global issue for decades (Renold & McGeeney, 2017). The reality of matters such as sexually transmissible infections, unwanted and teenage pregnancy, infertility, violence against women, sexual assault, revenge porn, image-based abuse, sexism, homophobia and transphobia focus attention on the need for rights-based and inclusive sexuality education. The dominant risk discourses that permeate pedagogical approaches and underpin sexuality education curriculum design have come under criticism primarily because of the way they position young people as incapable of making informed sexual decisions (Allen, 2013; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Jones, 2011; Koepsel, 2016). Yet translating this focus into an approach that 'doesn't shield' or 'hide the truth' from young people remains perhaps one of the biggest challenges for policy-makers, schools, educators and community stakeholders.

Sexuality education at a global level has also been problematised for its lack of intersectionality, presenting a curriculum that often ignores and marginalises diversity of sexuality, gender, race, colour, ability, religion, etc. (Allen & Carmody, 2012; Jones, 2011; Sears, 2005; Talburt, 2009). Moreover, it has been argued that approaches premised on a risk framework or orientation also result in the marginalisation of pedagogical approaches focussing on sexual desire, pleasure and intimacy. Rather, such approaches feed into negative risk discourses and reinforce the idea that young people need to be protected from sex, prioritising knowledge and skills to promote sexual safety and sexual health promotion (Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2016; Hirst, 2014; Koepsel, 2016; Lamb, Lustig, & Graling, 2013). This relates to the shifts over the past 40 years from a focus on the 'facts' about physiology, disease and hygiene to acknowledging young people as sexual beings, and the need to minimise harm and support gender and sexual diversity (St Leger, 2006).

Scholars in the field are clear about the need to move away from the negative discourses of risk and harm associated with sexual activity, to embrace co-productive, strength-based, empowering, inclusive and creative approaches to sexuality education (Quinlivan, 2018; Renold, 2019). This means engaging with young people around the positive aspects of sex such as pleasure, intimacy and desire using an inclusive and non-discriminatory approach (Allen, Rasmussen, & Quinlivan, 2013; Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Ingham, 2005; Jolly, 2016;

Sundaram & Sauntson, 2016). Jolly (2016, p. 305) argues that new norms will be created in this changing landscape of strength-based sexuality education, and these will need to be examined to ascertain whether they do achieve the desired outcomes and what ‘regulatory effects’ are created. Similarly, McGeeney and Kehily (2016, p. 238) call for more dialogue between researchers and practitioners to ‘critically examine how, why and to what effect is pleasure included, ignored and celebrated’ within sexuality education. Although pleasure has started to find its way onto the sexuality education agenda, evidenced internationally by the latest UNESCO guidelines (2018), little has changed in practice. As Lamb et al. (2013, p. 316) argue: ‘the discourse of desire is no longer missing but is often situated as part of a discourse on safe practice and thus equates pleasure with danger’. Young people themselves have highlighted how they rarely have access to education experiences that are pleasure-based or appreciative in terms of an approach to their sexual becoming (Allen & Carmody, 2012; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Hirst, 2014; Jones, 2011a).

The latest international guidelines (UNESCO, 2018) emphasise how sexuality education is a basic human right; nevertheless, the provision in schools is ad hoc, inconsistent or non-existent in many countries around the world (Hague, Miedema, & Le Mat, 2017). Louisa Allen (2019, p. 1) reminds us of the low status of sexuality education in schools, maintaining that ‘as a subject which invokes the body, sexuality education sits low in the academic hierarchy of important educational knowledge’. The recent student-led campaign for consent education in Australia has seen 37,000 young people sign a petition for ‘Teach us Consent’ (AAP-SBS, 2021), in response to sexual assault in schools, or related to school-based activities. Chanel Contos, a former student who is a survivor of rape, initiated the petition and elicited nearly 3,700 stories of sexual assault from young women across Australia (March 2021). Chanel is asking for sex education to start early:

It’s not too late if we can prevent children from growing up and going through what I have. Not teaching children and teenagers about consent is an absolute robbery of their innocence. (Dexter, 2021).

Consistently, research specific to young people and sexuality education emphasises that young people are willing and enthusiastic about participating in research and education on their own and others’ views surrounding sex, gender, sexualities, respectful relationships and sexual cultures (Allen, 2011; Allen & Rasmussen, 2017; Johnson et al., 2016; Ollis, Coll, & Harrison, 2019; Quinlivan, 2018). This body of work has made significant contributions to understandings surrounding what constitutes meaningful sexuality

education for young people (Johnson et al., 2016; Quinlivan, 2018). There is an increased recognition of how (re)positioning young people as architects of their own learning can productively reframe key debates surrounding the appropriateness, nature and relevance of sexuality education (Coll, O'Sullivan, & Enright, 2018; Johnson et al., 2016).

ESTABLISHING THE CONTEXT

The landscape of sexuality education in the Australian educational context contains many contradictory features. On the one hand, it is an example of great progress and potential (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020), yet on the other, it demonstrates enduring institutional and public discourses of risk, harm and childhood innocence related to sex, sexuality and gender. This is what Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) call a 'culture of limitation' that includes discourses that threaten to challenge future transformations of sexuality education. Although Australia has a nationally agreed curriculum in Health and Physical Education, which includes a focus on 'Relationships and Sexuality' (ACARA, 2015), its implementation is at the discretion of seven state/territory-based education departments. This means that in one state or territory, sexuality education (or parts thereof) may be mandated, while in another, no guidance is afforded at all. Situated as a component of health education, sexuality education competes with other areas of health education such as drug education, mental health, nutrition, etc., which means that government funding and priorities also impact on many schools' ability and willingness to provide sexuality education.

In Victoria, which has a long and vibrant history of sexuality education provision (see Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020; Johnson et al., 2016; McLeod, 1999; St Ledger, 2006), the education department has mandated a Respectful Relationships Education (RRE) initiative (DET 2021) driven by a Royal Commission into Family Violence and funded to the tune of \$44 million. This has resulted in primary and secondary schools delivering core components of sexuality education, which has promoted similar responses from some other states (Our Watch, 2021). Saying this, the 'moral panic' from a small section of the Australian community over the implementation of the Safe Schools initiative nationally (a whole school and curriculum program designed to tackle discrimination and violence experienced by gender and sexually diverse students) is an example of some of the backlash that can occur regardless of policy and curriculum shifts (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). The subsequent backlash from Safe Schools resulted in schools and education departments in

all states and territories, except Victoria, withdrawing from the programme and more broadly in some jurisdictions avoiding making explicit reference to sexuality education (Thompson, 2020). It is interesting that the current call to include consent education in Australian schools is not an explicit call for the improvement of sexuality education (the curriculum policy context in which it is taught in relation to sex and relationships, with teachers trained to teach it) but rather cherry picking an aspect to appease the public and take the focus away from the word sexuality.

The inclusion in the Australian Curriculum of the dedicated focus area ‘Relationships and Sexuality’ promised a positive shift from the arbitrary provision of sexuality education to an explicit focus on sexuality education. Yet, as the broader research project on which this book is based found, the introduction of curriculum policy has been no guarantee that schools have changed their approach to sexuality education. Jones (2011) argues that this isn’t a surprise as up to 28 sexuality education discourses have shaped the development of sexuality education in schools in Australia since the 1800s. She describes these discourses as changing in response to the changing perceptions of the ‘sexuality problem’, which she portrays as threats to an ideal concept of sexuality (Jones, 2011, p. 59) determined by figures of authority, such as policy-makers, politicians and ‘moral crusaders’ (Ben-Yehuda, 1986, p. 496). A key finding in her detailed exploration of curriculum policy and curricula in Australia, is the complex nature of sexuality education. Jones (2011, p. 166) maintains that ‘there is certainly no flawless, universal sexuality education that would suit every student and context’. Rather, she argues that there is value in using different approaches and practices in schools, and like other scholars in Australia and elsewhere, Jones (2016) points to the need to amplify the voices of students to illuminate what they believe is appropriate and relevant sexuality education. Students’ calls for more discussion of the emotional dimensions of sexuality education; issues related to gender and sexually diverse students; and more information regarding pleasurable, safe and consenting sexual activity have been consistently reported (Helmer et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2016; Mitchell, Patrick, Heywood, Blackman, & Pitts, 2014; Pound et al., 2016).

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION

This book is the culmination of the final two stages of a large three-year participatory research project, funded by the Australian Research Council and SHINE SA, undertaken in four secondary schools across Victoria and

South Australia. The EYPSE project engaged over 100 students (aged 15–17 years) as co-researchers in understanding, critiquing and transforming sexuality education. The larger study aimed to examine young people's views and experiences of their school-based sexuality education and explore how young people can be engaged in the development of new ways to teach and learn about sexuality education.

Stage 1 of the project consisted of a survey of over 2,400 students about their previous experiences of sexuality education and their perspectives as to how sexuality education might be improved to better suit their needs (Johnson et al., 2016). Stage 1 of the project established that school-based sexuality education was a significantly used and trusted source of information for many students. They also offered several visions for sexuality education which was more meaningful to them. In terms of content, they suggested that less repetition of the biological aspects of sexuality, and more explicit and accurate information about gender diversity, violence in relationships, intimacy, sexual pleasure and love would be beneficial. While some students felt uncomfortable or embarrassed during sexuality education lessons, many still viewed sexuality education as an important curriculum area of relevance to their current everyday realities and future lives. Like Sammy, in the opening quote, the young people in the study did not want the content 'sugar coated'; they felt they had 'a right to know', to be told it 'as it is' and rather than focussing 'on the names of sexual organs', they wanted a bigger focus on 'relationships and love'.

Building on survey responses, Stage 2 of the larger project also included a one-day workshop that engaged students who had completed the survey in unpacking the survey data through a variety of arts-based and participatory activities. Stage 3 of the project focussed on the potential of co-producing and negotiating sexuality education (including pedagogical approaches and the design of curriculum resources) with young people and adult allies (teachers, researchers and community educators) in a variety of school contexts across Victoria and South Australia. The co-productive and action-orientated approach taken in Stages 2 and 3 of the project was complex, messy, dynamic and determined by the needs of individual schools and other institutional and contextual factors. Focussing on Stages 2 and 3, in one Victorian school, this book offers a sustained and critical consideration of the possibilities and politics of negotiating sexuality education with young people. This book examines the affordances, tensions and challenges of participatory and action-orientated methodologies that authorise young people's perspectives and visions for sexuality education. In doing so, it also focusses on important ethical considerations for participatory school-based educational inquiry on

aspects of sex, gender and sexualities across various educational contexts (e.g. in the classroom, in the school, in policy and ethics committees).

This book also explores the affective tensions and contradictions between what young people want to learn more about and the risky forms of praxis that are necessary to engage differently with various understandings of sexuality education and sexuality education-related content. The important role of adult allies in supporting young people to navigate these contradictions and tensions is foregrounded. Allies are adults who work for and with young people methodologically and pedagogically, they are ‘older adults who people from outside the immediate family who work with and support young people in working for social justice’ (Checkoway, 2017, p. 94), in this case, educators and researchers working to improve sexuality education. Each chapter chronicles and captures both adult allies’ and young people’s experiences of the project by drawing on data produced through experiential, student centred, arts-based methods and various ethnographic techniques (participant observation, focus group interviews and guided conversations).

BRIEF OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

In Chapter 2, we turn our attention to the major concepts and literatures which have influenced the methodological decision-making processes used in this project. How the conceptual frameworks of critical youth studies, feminist post-structuralism, queer and affect theory have shaped the research methodology are delineated. This chapter also engages with the complexities in repositioning young people as active agents in educational research and reform specific to sexuality education. Finally, Chapter 2 provides important methodological details, outlining the stages of the larger ARC project *Educating Young People about Sexuality Education*. Using one of the Victorian-based projects as a case study, we highlight and discuss the politically charged, complex and messy nature of participatory work in schools in which researchers are partners with students and teachers.

In Chapter 3, we explore the broader context and impact of ethical constraints by reflecting on how we navigated institutional ethics processes when conducting research with young people about sexuality education in schools. We argue that political, historical and moral factors in sexuality education have had a major influence on ethical processes, which in turn influence what we can research and how. The young people who participated in our research wanted to talk about the issues confronting them with well-informed and trusted adult allies, yet the institutional ethics approval process was often

at odds with this. In this chapter, we debate the necessary changes to ethics review processes and the need to focus on the ideological and theoretical positions of those reviewing applications, as well as examining the practical value of the research alongside possible risks.

Chapter 4 tentatively maps and acknowledges the messy pedagogical processes of negotiating sexuality education with young people in this project. Focussed on two encounters which trace the unfolding pedagogical praxis central to this project and drawing on theories of affect as tools for thinking, this chapter charts the affective capacities which open up (and limit) possibilities of/for co-producing inclusive, meaningful and creative sexuality education with young people. There is a deliberate shift in this chapter towards a focus on young people as curators of their own rich and complex social worlds, that warrants not only the attention but the response of researchers and educators in the field of sexuality education who are open to being informed and transformed by their perspectives and priorities.

In Chapter 5, the focus shifts towards the ethical–methodological moments of the project and again uses two encounters during the research process to explore long-held assumptions about student safety in sexuality education. It brings into focus the fluidity of boundaries and relationships between researchers, educators, teachers and students, and highlights questions about the positionality and power dynamics in school-based participatory and action-oriented research. Similar to Chapter 4, a turn towards affect inspires a rethinking of these boundaries and relationships and what this might mean for what is possible in researching sexuality education in secondary schools.

Building on previous chapters, Chapter 6 details the dynamic processes in play in the development of the first feminist conference led by students for students in Victoria. It highlights the positive impact that feminist and queer theories-pedagogies can have on sexuality education, while at the same time exploring power relations, privilege and the challenges of co-design in differing educational settings. This chapter also brings into focus the importance of teacher allies in assisting students to make sense of the tensions and contradictions in negotiating sexuality education futures that are creative, empowering, rights-based and inclusive which are too often constrained by school and community structures and ideas about feminism and sexuality.

Finally, Chapter 7 draws together the core arguments raised in previous chapters and foregrounds our concluding thoughts about how these arguments might be built on or responded to by others passionate about working *with* rather than *for* young people in transforming sexuality education. We hope that our reflective attempts to share the unique strengths and productive failures of the EYPSE project might support others undertaking this work in