"In Some Ways They're the People Who Need it the Most": Mobilizing Queer Joy with Sex Ed Teachers in New Brunswick, Canada

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"In Some Ways, They’re the People Who Need it the Most”: Mobilizing Queer Joy with Sex Ed Teachers in New Brunswick, Canada

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Abstract: Teaching about sexuality can be messy. What does it mean to incite queer joy as an educational language in sex education? In this article, we explore how queer joy can be used by teachers as a language to confront this messy work of sex education and teach in more pleasurable, joyful, and inclusive ways. In our analysis, we draw upon the conversations and visual data we created alongside 43 teacher-participants from New Brunswick, Canada, in a series of participatory media-making workshops and describe how queer joy informs the artful praxis that transpired in these spaces. In these workshops, we observed teachers grappling with conservative community norms, vague curricular standards, and the absenting of pleasure and queerness in their practice. Our sense is that a shift in approach—where educators employ queer joy as a language to talk and think about sexuality education amid rising political violence against 2SLGBTQI+ communities—creates new possibilities and problematics for encountering youth sexualities in North American schools.

Keywords: New Brunswick, Participatory Visual Research, Queer Joy, Sexuality Education, Teachers

Introduction

Teaching about sexuality can be thorny. At this moment, alarming conservative incursions on sexuality education are unfolding across North America. In Canada, the conservative Saskatchewan and New Brunswick provincial governments are anxiously trying to censor sex education curricula, and far-right groups are organizing anti-queer and anti-sex ed protests across the country (Brown, 2023; Latimer & Scarpetella, 2023; Poitras, 2023). This is particularly concerning given that Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex + (2SLGBTQI+) inclusion is already downplayed in school-based sex ed programming (Gilbert, 2014). These protests mirror the conservative policy shifts and sex education controversies happening across North America and broader global contexts—including Florida’s ‘Don’t Say Gay’ Bill, moral panic around Drag Queen Storytime, a rise in anti-trans legislation, and anti-sex education protests (Barbee et al., 2022; Ellis, 2022; Goldberg & Abreu, 2023; Kottasová, 2023; Vida, 2019). We are writing this piece shortly after the New Brunswick Conservative Premier, Blaine Higgs, amended the province’s 2SLGBTQI+ school inclusion policy (Policy 713)—a move which now makes educational spaces even more violent for queer and trans students and workers (Burkholder et al., 2023; Ibrahim, 2023). The changes to Policy 713 now makes it mandatory for youth under the age of 16 to obtain parental permission for schools to use their names and pronouns. In a media scrum in May 2023, the New Brunswick Premier questioned the “promotion” of queer “lifestyles” in schools and asked if “kids in elementary school and kindergarten” should be “exposed to drag queen reading time” (CBC News, 2023, 0:20). The amended Policy 713 has become a lightning rod for public debates around inclusion in the New Brunswick school system, including in the sexuality education classroom (Burkholder & Keehn, 2023). In August 2023, the New Brunswick Premier disclosed his plans to review the sex ed curriculum and make parental consent a mandatory component of its programming—the only K-12 curricular space that would require parental input (Raiche-Nogue, 2023).

We write together as two white queer femmes—one bisexual professor (Casey) and one lesbian graduate student (Melissa). Having worked with over 40 sex ed teacher-participants across New Brunswick (2022-2023) in a series of art-based participatory workshops, we have learned that many want to teach a pleasure-based, inclusionary sexuality education, but they are nervous about potential ramifications. Sweet and
Glenn (2023) observe, “There is something uncomfortable, perhaps scary, about facing head-on the complexity, ambiguity, pleasures and risks inherent in teenagers’ relationships” and sexual lives (p. 294). This feeling is amplified within New Brunswick’s current queophobic educational and political scene. In this context, we think together about how queer and trans people continue to flourish in the face of this oppression. We believe it’s because queer joy sustains our communities: it always has. And we have experienced its urgency ourselves as two queer female educators doing this kind of sexuality research within our specific educational context.

Our work together is often an exercise in queer joy: how we build community, how we support each other, and how we queer the norms imposed on us. In this political moment, we view queer joy as “a centerpiece to our resistance” (Luong, 2023, para. 2), to the extent that we have begun exploring it in the context of sexuality education (see Burkholder & Keehn, 2023; Keehn et al., In Press). J.J. Wright (2023a) tells us that queer joy is about “connectedness, humanity, pleasure, and reciprocity” (para. 10). In a later publication, Wright (2023b) explains further that “queer joy is the elation in the freedom to be queer” (p. 8). Extending on Wright’s thinking, we wonder: what can queer joy as an educational language offer the sexuality education classroom, even when it is unwelcome? In taking up the work of sexuality education, teachers often face additional scrutiny and are viewed with suspicion (Gilbert, 2021). Even in researching sexuality education ourselves, we have encountered hostility and ambivalence, including amongst teacher-participants. Still, Fields and Gilbert (2023) ask us to consider that:

[Sex education researchers] inhabit the same impossibility that teachers and students struggle against: we cannot want to know about sexuality without becoming suspect; we yearn to know something, anything; and we cannot yet know what it will mean to satisfy our yearning to know. Allowing ourselves to remain in that difficulty is fundamental to understanding the difficulty in which students and teachers reside every day (p. 240).

We want to propose that queer joy can be put into practice in deep and interesting ways, offering teachers a way to confront this difficulty. To do so, we work through notions of joy and pleasure.

Drawing upon our own recollections and research working alongside 43 New Brunswick teacher-participants this past year, we describe the possibilities and complications that queer joy might offer the sexuality education classroom. For us, queer joy as an orientation suggests new modes to think and talk about sexuality in sex education classrooms in ways that center queerness and pleasure. Queer joy can materialize through the themes and topics being discussed, how teachers choose to uplift sexual and bodily diversity, and in what gets noticed, enacted, or felt in the classroom. Our sense is that a shift in approach—where educators employ queer joy as a language to talk and think about sexuality education amidst political violence—creates new possibilities and problematics for encountering youth sexualities in North American schools.

At the same time, we acknowledge the concerns of a reviewer of this article who asked us to consider educators who have “more sex negative views or generally just worry about [conservative] backlash.” We see queer joy as a framework that is useful for all sex educators—especially those who have internalized shame and sex negativity. A risky proposition given the current state of homophobia and transphobic discourses and policies being enacted in schools across North America (Barbee et al., 2022; Ellis, 2022; Goldberg & Abreu, 2023; Kottasová, 2023; Vida, 2019). Before explaining our study further, we turn to a deeper theorizing of queer joy.

**Queer Joy: The Stuff of Queerness**

Our understanding of queer joy stems from Turesky and Crisman (2023), who suggest that it is “a complimentary practice to the feminist killjoy: By taking joy in one’s own identity, an identity constituted from all that is antithetical to cisheteropatriarchal culture, one also disrupts the comfort of that culture” (p. 270). In imagining how queer joy could exist in sex ed classrooms, we have been inspired by Emmons (2020), who writes that “in true joy, our souls are opened, giving our existence a certain fluidity, a sense of easiness” (p. 1). Our sense is that queer joy reimagines this easiness into something more radical. It says that this joy is a sensation of pleasure—a kind of satisfaction that comes from being queer and from being embraced by queer community—but it also suggests that this joy upsets cis-heteronormative cultures. It does so because queerness is upsetting: muddling normative understandings of how bodies love, lust, move, self-express, and fuck. Acts like touching and kissing, when done by queer people in public places, are construed as outrageously disruptive—or as the New Brunswick Premier declared: “promotion” (Mundie, 2023). Our joy lets us embrace these pleasures.

Manalansan (2014) says that “mess, clutter, and muddled entanglements are the “stuff” of queerness” (p. 94). Queer joy moves in tandem with this messy business, centering pleasure and disruption. Our understanding is that this duality—(first) finding pleasure in queerness and (second) relishing in its ability to cause a rupture—propels queer joy forward. Similar to Duran and Sintos Coloma’s (2023) suggestion that queer joy is a central emotion, you will know (or feel) that you are teaching queer joy when it nudges classroom conversations toward the non-normative (and toward the edges of the curriculum), when it causes a lurch or a jolt (or a smile) among learners, when it flouts norms and poses fun at them, or when it makes unlivable spaces (like New Brunswick public schools) slightly more liveable. Tristano (2022) articulates that “our [queer] joy holds immense power. We produce joy in spite of the material realities and structures of power placed upon us” (p. 279). We argue that queer joy also builds power: it enables people to build more caring and pleasurable communities, and to live richer lives within these communities. Queer joy shrugs off the status quo and says that...
people can joyously exist as queer in a world that positions queerness as impalpable.

We also gesture towards the idea that queer joy flows from a kind of resistive queer labour. Turesky and Crisman (2023) note that queer joy owes much to the early organizing practices and work of Pride protests and celebrations, which offered space for queer folks to gather, socialize, and make connections during moments of deep social and political violence. Queer communities across Canada have worked for decades to propel queer visibility into the public consciousness (Warner, 2002). And queer folks continue to work together to foster radical public expressions of mutual aid, shared experiences, intergenerational organizing, and kinship, including in New Brunswick. In this sense, queer joy is akin to the work that queer people often do in cis-heteronormative spaces—telling the stories that rarely get told and easing queerness into places where it was never allowed before.

Why Does Queer Joy Matter?

Queerness is routinely cast as private and unspeakable in schools. Studies have consistently revealed a long history of queer erasure, harassment, and marginalization in the Canadian education system (Bochenek, 2001; Davies et al., 2017; Peter et al., 2021; Schrader & Wells, 2004; Slovin, 2021; Taylor & Peter, 2011), including in New Brunswick (Burkholder et al., 2021). In an earlier project, Casey describes the gender-based violence found within the province’s entire schooling scene: “The whole school should be queer and trans affirming. [Yet] inclusion practices themselves are conceptually flawed and work to re-center cisnormativity and heteronormativity within [NB] school environments” (Burkholder et al., 2021, p. 3). Unsurprisingly, sexuality education across Canada also overlooks the educational and social needs of queer and trans youth (Davies et al., 2023; Robinson et al., 2019; Wright & Greenberg, 2023). Canadian sexuality researcher Jen Gilbert (2021) writes:

The [sex ed] curriculum is freighted with contradictory demands: the curriculum ought to be comprehensive but still “age-appropriate”; it must prepare students for healthy sexual lives but not push them there “too early”; and it should allow for many possible sexual and gender futures without being seen as endorsing, advocating, or recruiting students into queer and trans futures. (p. 457).

In turn, 2SLGBTQI+ youth have reported discriminatory and pathologizing experiences in their sex ed classrooms (Bradford et al., 2019)—and this discrimination is amplified for Black and Indigenous and disabled students (Roberts et al., 2020). Queer joy makes space for all in the sexuality education classroom and mobilizes the (extra)ordinariness of queer bodies and romance, affection, intimacies, relationships, while also relishing in them.

Sexuality education is often approached through discourses of risk and health and concentrates on topics which can be easily measured and evaluated, like disease prevention, pregnancy prevention, abstinence, and clinical anatomy (Maitland, 2023). Jen Gilbert (2021) writes that “sex education, wrapped in [this] language of health, becomes a defense against the dirtiness of sexuality” (p. 465). In appealing to this language of risk and health, teachers and schools avoid the messiness of sexuality while appeasing the conservative parental groups and politicians who are deeply invested in the sex lives of Canadian youth (Hogan, 2023). In the process, sex ed becomes textured by an array of oppressive norms about sex and bodies (Balter et al., 2021; Kolenz & Branfman, 2019). This is something that we have continuously noticed in our conversations with New Brunswick teachers. They are quick to point out that teaching about pregnancy prevention is safer than teaching about oral sex, and teaching about ‘straight’ sex is safer than teaching about ‘queer’ sex. A comprehensive approach to sex ed emphasizes notions of individual autonomy and agency (SIECCAN, 2018), using “an evidence-based, secular curriculum that covers sexual and physical development, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, gender and sexual diversity, sexual decision making, and healthy relationships” (Bialystok, 2018, p. 16). Importantly, it advances the idea that young people have a right to learn about their bodies, relationships, and sexualities (IPPF, 2016). While learning about bodily health is an important component of a comprehensive sex ed experience, it should operate in conjunction with the other topics like pleasure and sexual diversity that Canadian youth are already demanding should be incorporated in the curriculum (Cormier & O’Sullivan 2018; Narushima et al., 2020). It is well known that centering sexual pleasure in sex ed contributes positively to youth sexual wellbeing, helps dispel messages of shame and guilt around sex, and supports inclusive sexual rights (Fine, 1988; Mark et al., 2021). While discourses of health nervously skirt around any mention of sexual satisfaction, queer joy faces pleasure head-on in the sex ed classroom, and we explore some of the ways pleasure materializes in these spaces below.

How Might Queer Joy Exist in Practice?

We teach and study sex education, and this paper draws on a range of art pieces and conversations we have assembled from our research, as well as recollections from our teaching experiences, and our own queer orientations. In 2020, Casey started a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada-funded project called Supports and Barriers to Teaching Comprehensive Sexuality Education with New Brunswick Teachers. As part of this project, she and her colleagues surveyed 412 New Brunswick teachers and found

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4 In our own New Brunswick context, this happened much later than in the US and in other Canadian cities, with Moncton hosting its first Pride in 2000, and Fredericton, where we live, hosting its first Pride in 2010 (Thorpe, 2022).

5 A beautiful example of this mutual aid and organizing is QueerTransFatties New Brunswick: a “grassroots collective by and for 2SLGBTQ+ fat folks in New Brunswick.” See more at https://www.instagram.com/qtfattiesnb/
that they generally lack training on how to confidently teach sexuality education—including themes related to sexual pleasure, desire, and bodily diversity—despite taking up a significant portion of New Brunswick’s sexual health curriculum (Burkholder et al., 2022). As a response, Casey began SexualityNB—a project which directly addresses these identified shortfalls by creating a network of supports, lesson plans, and resources for teachers across the province (see more of this work at: https://sexualitynb.org). Over the past year, we have been co-facilitating participatory visual workshops across New Brunswick for teacher-participants to learn more completely about their trepidations, desires, and experiences teaching sexuality education. Together, we have observed that discussions around queer pleasure, desire, and sexuality often mirror the deficit language of our current political climate, and the deficit language used more generally to describe 2SLGBTQI+ communities (Duran & Coloma, 2023). In an earlier article (Burkholder & Keehn, 2023), we highlight and theorize this language:

We noticed that when teachers talked about queer sexuality, it was frequently done using deficit language. We view this absence of queer joy – as a sensuous embodiment that is playful and fun – as a product of our cisheteronormative schooling system (Burkholder et al., 2023), but also, a product of the overall absence of teacher education on sex, gender and sexuality" (p. 15).

Moreover, teachers tell us that they are grappling with an overall lack of administrative support, conservative community norms, transphobic political violence, and general discomfort when it comes to teaching sexuality education (Burkholder & Keehn, 2023; Keehn & Burkholder, Submitted). But many teachers also resist these conditions and actively scrutinize their schools, districts, and the New Brunswick government. In turn, we see this resistance as an entry point for queer joy.

**Artmaking with Sex Education Teachers**

We engage in participatory visual methodology (Mitchell et al., 2017) with teacher-participants, where we co-create artwork alongside participants as a way to artfully interrogate and shake up hegemonic schooling spaces to produce alternative modes of representing and understanding (Mitchell & De Lange, 2013). Through the creative praxis of sculpting, textile work, zine creation, and collage-making, we prompt teachers to consider how sex education emerges in their classrooms. We engage participants in thinking about the possibilities of queer and joyful sex education through semi-structured conversations and artmaking. Collages and zines (DIY print productions) are an “inherently queer literacy practice” (Burkholder et al., 2021, p. 98) and we use them in our workshops to remix texts and upset heteronormative thinking. Engaging in participatory visual research is a practice in radical queer work and joy, where we engage in the crafty, messy, and slow pedagogy of queering spaces that are normally very unqueer. As Thorpe (2021) describes, “queering refers to an ongoing process of disruption and recreation that seeks to identify and address normative and oppressive discourses” (p. 30): a process of remaking the day-to-day practice of sex education in inventive and defiant ways.

The collages, sculptures, textiles, and conversations we analyze in this paper materialized from three specific workshops we facilitated across New Brunswick in the city of Fredericton, the city of Saint John, and a small rural community in the Southern part of the province. We recruited teachers to the Fredericton workshop (15 teachers) by using a digital poster created by Casey [see Figure 1] to post on social media, and by reaching out to Melissa’s local teaching contacts. Our workshop in Saint John (15 teachers) was part of a province-wide professional development series for teachers, and participants signed up for the workshop through the New Brunswick Teachers Association. We were directly invited to host our third workshop in a rural community school (13 teachers) by a teacher who worked with Melissa previously.

© There is only one school in this community, and for this reason, we have decided to keep its identity anonymous.
We are deeply grateful to the teachers we have worked with. Findings loop through teacher artwork and through our conversations to explore queer joy through the three themes that continuously emerge from the teacher-participants’ collective conversations and artwork in our workshops: pleasure, deviant bodies, and unruly sexualities. For this paper, we have analyzed the transcribed audio data, generated from the teachers’ presentations of their artwork and their own experiences teaching sex education, as well as some photographs we took of their artful creations. Through the feminist practice of diffractive analysis (Taguchi, 2021), we look for ways where teachers use their artwork and subsequent reflections to push boundaries, seek out queerness, and question the scripted projects of sex education. We also consider how these conversations and materials produce new kinds of knowledge about sexuality in schooling spaces. Diffractive analysis “relies on the researcher’s ability to make matter intelligible in new ways and to imagine other possible realities presented in the data” (Taguchi, 2021, p. 267). Our analysis enables us to critically piece together, notice, and make sense of participant nervousness around sex education, and then find moments of joy and possibility within this discomfort.

Collectively, we have noticed that teachers use their artwork to generate thinking about sexuality in ways that are taboo in their school communities, namely sexual desire, queerness, and body diversity. Teachers-participants in each of the three contexts explained that these topics are minimalized in their practice (because of conservative community norms and a lack of resources) and that they are worried about how to approach these types of conversations with students because of New Brunswick’s conservative political climate. For this reason, we have organized our findings under three themes that have emerged from the teacher-participants’ collective conversations and artwork in our workshops: pleasure, deviant bodies, and unruly sexualities. For us, a sexuality education centered around desire, bodies, and queer sexualities is queer joy in practice: humming with possibility of creating safer, loving, and more inclusive school communities and guiding heteronormative classroom practices towards something more livable, something queerer. Below, we describe the findings we have drawn from our semi-structured conversations and artworks.

Findings

We are deeply grateful to the teachers we have worked with through the SexualityNB project. In what follows (and in conversation with their thinking and art productions), we explore queer joy through the three themes that continuously loop through teacher artwork and through our conversations with them—pleasure, deviant bodies, and unruly sexualities. We have identified these themes as critical components of a comprehensive sex education classroom (Robert & Labunski, 2023) and because teacher-participants are telling us they desire to have these topics as part of their sex education practice. These themes also build upon the concept of queer joy. They uplift sensations of pleasure (and pleasure derived from being queer) and cause a jolt to the straightening devices of sex education. After defining each theme, we describe how queer joy appears in our practice. We also draw up complications and think about how this approach to teaching sex ed bumps up against New Brunswick’s increasingly queerphobic climate.

Pleasure

Many teacher-participants that we have worked alongside point to a clinical framing of sexuality education in their own practice—they worry that teaching themes like desire, pornography, masturbation, and sexual diversity could result in professional repercussions, even though these themes are part of the New Brunswick curriculum (Government of NB, 2023). In an arts-based workshop with teachers in an urban setting, one participant revealed, “I think um, as a teacher and as a newer teacher especially, it can be difficult to break the mold and go outside of the box without fear of repercussions.” Their struggles reflect the much broader systematic landscape of how sex ed is approached in schools. Education tries to limit youth sexuality (Gilbert, 2014)—often engaging with heteronormative reproduction practices, moral panics around masturbation, clitoral shame, and deep-rooted fears about queer sexuality (Barcelos, 2023; Hirst, 2013; Kantor & Lindberg, 2020; Koepsel, 2016; Oliver & Flicker, 2023). As Jen Gilbert (2021) observes, “so many of the policies, practices, and curricula that are at the centre of even progressive sex education programs rely on the language of science and health in order to contain the excessive—dirty?—aspects of sexuality” (p. 463). Although the absence of desire from sex ed programming has been scrutinized for decades (Fine, 1988), schools continue to miss the mark on talking about sex and the richness and fullness that can accompany it—a sexual health education that all students can enjoy and learn from. As Kolenz and Branfman (2019) argue, knowledge about sexual autonomy and pleasure—and understanding what our bodies enjoy or don’t enjoy in sexual situations—is required to consent to safe, healthy sexual activity.

Why does it feel impossible for interested teachers to talk about sexual pleasure? It is, after all, part of the New Brunswick curriculum. For instance, in Personal Wellness (Grade 9), students are expected to “describe factors that contribute to the development of healthy sexuality (e.g., self-pleasure)” (Government of NB, 2023). We propose that the move toward queer joy invites us to think more adventurously about how we can engage with the discourse of pleasure in the classroom. Drawing on Muñoz (2009, p. 1), queer joy brims with the possibility of “new and better pleasures.” Queer joy offers teachers non-normative ways to engage students in conversations about different forms of sex beyond human

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reproduction. Anal sex, oral sex, kink, muffing, strap-on sex, and scissoring disrupt cis-heteronormative understandings of how bodies can engage in sexual activity beyond penile-vaginal penetration. While this language might pack a strong punch for some teachers—for many folks, this is (great) sex. Barcelos (2023) argues that fisting, for instance, can be mobilized in sex ed classrooms to advance a more queer and unruly understanding of sexuality: It “funks up normative understandings of sex and embodiment. It queers the temporal and corporeal aspects of sex by disrupting ideas about what sex ‘is’ or what bodies are ‘supposed’ to be able to do” (p. 284). In this sense, queer joy validates all forms of sexual pleasure and agency, even those which are unintelligible to the heteronormative eye. But how might this language work in unwelcoming spaces, like New Brunswick public schools?

Many of the teachers we work with feel caught between inclusionary teaching practices and New Brunswick’s current political situation—but in our workshops, they often discuss sexual diversity and pleasure in tandem with the ‘safer’ discourses already circulating the sex ed room (consent, disease prevention, and contraceptives), even as it disrupts the comfort of their dominant, heteronormative schooling cultures. As one participant in an urban workshop shared:

I would have liked to have been taught ‘where are the lines?’ Like are we allowed to say what we want to say? Or like where are the lines we can’t cross, like within those boundaries what can you teach? Yeah and … to be comfortable teaching, like can we talk about pleasure? Can we talk about desire? Can we talk about fantasy? Can we talk about exploring your own bodies? Like I come from… well, a strict Christian background so it was very very fear based and the school kind of reflected that as well. So, now that it’s like teaching it, what are we even allowed to talk about? Or what, at that time, is sinful or shameful? Like are we allowed to talk about that as well? So yeah, I’d like to have those lines cleared up on what people can teach.

As Fields and Gilbert (2023) ask: “Isn’t that our burden as sexuality education researchers” and teachers (p. 240)? Isn’t it our burden to inquire about sexuality alongside our students and lean into its messiness, while attending to the very outcomes that curriculum-makers ask us to cover in the first place? Within these conversations, some teacher-participants point to their own strategies in integrating the pleasures of queerness with the formal sex ed curriculum. They reveal that these integrations often happen informally in the homeroom class, the hallway, and the guidance office because of potential community backlash and the assumption that students are more or less ready to have these conversations. In a workshop with rural teachers, one participant shared,

I think the other thing that we're up against is like, I think that the community also is worried about the age that we presented [sex education] at. And I think the problem is, is that there are some kids that are exposed to [sexuality] any younger age because they are able to do more than other kids in the classroom. They have more access to information. So it's really like it's hard because you've got a percentage of the class who are being exposed to things that they should know about, and they let the other percentage of that young class that are still not being allowed to use technology like younger kids. So we handle this in homeroom small conversations [rather than with the full group].

As Allen and Carmody (2012) argue, if a discourse of pleasure “has a presence in sexuality education, the potential for young people to mobilise and negotiate it in ways that make sense for them remains” (p. 464). Queer joy centers this discourse of pleasure in the classroom, and also queers it—validating the conservations about sexuality that, of course, already exist in schools.

**Deviant Bodies**

How can we welcome the unruliness of bodies as an aim of sexuality education? What if bodies were recognized as sites of wonderment and abundance? Valentine (2023), in conversation with Zurn (2021), notes “queer bodies, bodies that simply do not fit normative narratives, are often talked about and are shaped by knowledge—yet our bodies do not have a place within the [sex ed] discourse” (p. 166). The queer body—with its messy desires, parts, and edges—is often turned into a deviant body. Andry (2018) writes:

My deviations strip me of my humanity and are read as consent to make my body a public discourse. Public and private policing of bodies is a reaffirmation that everyone is allowed an opinion on a deviant body except, of course, the body itself. This is because a deviant body showing autonomy is one of the most frightening things of all (p. 230).

In sex ed spaces, queer, trans, non-binary, neurodivergent, fat, disabled, Indigenous, Black, and brown bodies are positioned as antithetical (frightening) to the normalizing projects of sex ed: They are also policed. As Roberts & Labunski (2023) argue, “racism, ableism, xenophobia and cisheteropatriarchy alienate many people from their bodies, while protecting and even entitling others” (p. 158). And particularly in New Brunswick, settler colonialism has sanitized the existing gender and sexual bodily diversity in the territory (Reid, 2019). Many of the teachers we work with describe how sexuality education takes a monolithic, one-size-fits-all approach to bodily diversity. We have tried to push back on uniformity in sex ed spaces by engaging with moulding clay and the prompt for teachers to sculpt genitalia [See Figure 2] inspired by the research and practice of Antunes and Butler (2023). Their...
creations queer the bounds of the normative body and offer a mode of thinking through how bodies can be shaped.

Figure 2. Shaping Clay Genitals with Teacher Participants

Teacher-participants in our workshops describe working with diagrams featuring white and cis body parts, they talk about their nervousness in using anatomy-based language within early childhood education settings, and they reveal an overall absenting of trans and intersex people’s bodies and their sexual needs—paralleling research which highlights the prevalence of trans-exclusionary language in schooling settings (Tordoff et al., 2021). One teacher participant at our urban workshop noted:

I work in a rural school and I’ve taught sex ed and for the majority of the class it went super well. But there are some people in the class that are vehemently against the gender and sexual orientation unit to a point where it’s almost unmanageable. Like, as a teacher, you’re supposed to be trying to build relationships with these kids and how can you basically try to force them, well you’re not trying to force them. But how can you include this diverse perspective while not shutting down your relationship with this kid or kicking them out of the classroom? Because in some ways they’re the people who need it the most, to be present for these conversations because they need to know that these people exist and there are different perspectives that you can have. So if they’re just kicked out of the classroom because they’re being disruptive, they’re just completely avoiding the thing that they don’t want to learn about. So how do you include the people that don’t want to be included in the class in the room? And I don’t know how to include them.

Some teacher participants pointed to the absenting of the clitoris from the discourse, and we also notice the dominance of white able-bodied people, and of phallocentric, patriarchal subtexts of conventional sexuality education (Ringrose et al., 2019) frequent our conversations and art productions [see Figure 3].

Figure 3. Teacher-Created Collage Centering What Sex Ed Looks Like in Practice

Queer joy celebrates the unruliness of bodies made deviant by the formal aims of schooling. Royster (2011) reminds us that “bodies are ways of dreaming utopia, sites for reaching outside of one’s own circumstances, learning and understanding others, serving as a bridge” (p. x). We propose that queer joy offers teachers a language to talk about the bodies sitting in their actual classroom: bodies in transition, intersex bodies, gender fluid bodies, and bodies that require additional assistance for sexual pleasure, fat bodies, menstruating bodies, and neurodivergent bodies. We employ queer joy as a language with teachers to imagine how we might draw youth closer to their bodies—and mold genitals using soft clay, disrupt the practice of gendering genitalia, sew menstrual pads (See Figure 4), explore crip-centered sex, and advocate for youth autonomy in choosing words to describe their own bodies.
We use queer joy to talk about sexual aftercare—an act of self and partnered care that generally unfolds after sex. Acts of aftercare demand bodily knowledge—it might involve drinking water, eating, cuddling, communicating, showering, or resting the body after sexual activity (Afrosexology, 2022). Aftercare can also help soothe an unbalanced power dynamic after kink play (Sloan, 2015). We invite teachers to consider how conversations of aftercare can teach students about boundaries and communication during sexual activity. Together, we ask teachers to rethink their practice:

Bodies exceed the two-dimensional anatomical handouts of penises and vulvas, they upend normative definitions of sex (fingers and fists are great on their own!) and refuse to participate in the rules of education-system sanctioned sexuality. Queer pleasure and joy are profoundly political. (Burkholder & Keehn, 2023, p. 4).

Many teachers are quick to recognize how their own bodies were downplayed as students in sex ed and describe their ongoing struggles with body policing and disciplining within the teaching profession itself. One participant at an urban art-making workshop recalled:

like you never forget that moment, especially if you have big breasts, when a teacher tells you to cover up. Like you never forget that moment, you feel so ashamed, you feel like you’ve done something wrong. And this is kind of what I talked about in my college. I said ‘how do I teach children to be animal in a world that polices’ nature? So like how do we teach kids, no matter their gender identity, that how you express yourself is okay?

In their comments and in their artworks, teacher-participants tell us that bodies and their desires exist in multitudes and sexuality education should, too.

Unruly Sexualities

Queer romances, relationships, and sexual adventures are often detached from the formal aims of conventional sexuality education. Jen Gilbert (2021) describes sex education classrooms as places where “sexual and gender identities are mutable and children are innocent, always already heterosexual, and on their way to normative gender futures” (p. 464). Topics like intimacy, emotion, and love generally do not reflect the range of youth experiences in the classroom and are normally addressed through a binary of healthy and unhealthy [heterosexual] relationships (Sweet & Glenn, 2023). As Jones and Harris (2016) observe:

Sometimes, queer bodies and desires and relationships are performed in a socially acceptable and thus intelligible manner: we are recognized and validated in our roles as wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and teachers. But queers also perform bodies, desires, and relationships that are less than intelligible, less than acceptable, unspeakable: butch, femme, androgynous, polyamorous, trans, and gender creative. (p. 519)

Many teachers in our workshops tell us that they often minimize topics like queer intimacy and romance because they lack the language and resources. As one participant shared in our urban workshop, “It is an uphill battle of human resources, experts, like ‘is this even allowed?’ Am I going to be in trouble? Is there money for that? Is there time for that? Who’s going to teach it?” Another participant in the same workshop noted, “I’m a French immersion teacher and even just for the terminology LGBTQ, I don’t even know what that is in French. I could probably figure it out but the curriculum is in English so none of it is going to tell me that. So it’s just easier, even a glossary of terminology in French would be great.” In our rural workshops in particular, teachers also mention that while sexual diversity is part of the curriculum, conservative community norms have been emboldened by New Brunswick’s queerphobic political climate—creating even more obstacles in their classrooms, like parental backlash against these mandated topics. As one participant reflected, “I think knowing the local context is everything when you teach. You can't come in and pretend like you're teaching in [an urban centre]. It doesn't make sense. You've got to know the space. You've got to know the community. So what supports does this community specifically need?: How to bridge home and school, how to bridge community in school with the support that's required.”

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Queer joy makes space for everyone. Despite New Brunswick’s current queer panic, we suggest that it could still create a palpable language for teachers to invite in conversations about queer love and connection, diverse sexual communities, and the complexity of human relationships. Queer love, as Ellawala (2023) describes:

renders sexual categories, all cultural categories, provisional and partial, casting their status as cultural truths into doubt... Love is an experience that instills hope in one’s own queer self and self-worth, and insists that we deserve happiness, fulfilment, pleasure, companionship, and a future. It offers the seductive promise of a different, better world (p. 56-58).

Queer love also exists in New Brunswick classrooms. It has always existed here. Queer joy recognizes these histories and reshapes dominant perceptions of what “relationships can look, feel, sound, and smell like” (Tristano, 2022, p. 279). In our work with New Brunswick teachers, we center our own queer sexualities in the discourse and discuss our non-normative relationships, settler-imposed monogamy (Wilbur, et al., 2021), and queer dating experiences. In doing so, teachers will often reveal their own queer stories of relationships, dating, and family. They also talk about how making space for teaching and talking about queer relationships (in all their shapes) can sometimes invite suspicion and scrutiny. Still, we push teachers to think about teaching and talking about polyamory, queer dating, chosen families, and asexual relationalities in their practice, and discover how queering their practice often engenders discussions that meet the curriculum.

For instance, we ask teachers to think about how to queer conversations of consent beyond punitive frameworks. What might it look like to bring a restorative justice framing into consent education (Sikka, 2021)? Dialogue around sexual boundaries—and learning how to talk with our sexual partners when certain things feel good and when they don’t feel good—frequent the discussions we have with educators. In a workshop with rural educators, Author 1 noted:

One thing that we talk about in our practice too, is talking about boundaries, understanding that every single person has different boundaries. So I really like that in my sex ed teaching. Like these are within my boundaries as a sex educator, but there are some things that aren't in my boundaries. So, for example, I would never share a story about my child or I wouldn't share a story with my partner because that's like they can't consent to this like, great story for sex ed. Like, that's beyond my boundaries to talk about my family. Some people would be like, it's beyond my boundaries to talk about my body. Other people, they're like, I don't really have boundaries. And talking about sex ed, you can ask me anything, but I think it's really important to think about for ourselves as educators, which we do already anyway, is being able to model on my boundaries.

In queering these conversations, we offer the importance of talking about fisting, for instance, which requires “exquisite, ongoing, detailed negotiation and enthusiastic consent” (Barcelos, 2023, p. 284). In making space for fisting, we disrupt cis-heteronormative ideas of consent being a power exchange between a sexually-assertive cis man and sexually-passive cis woman (Wright & Greenberg, 2023). In this sense, consent can also exist between three (or more!) mutually respecting bodies trying out new safe words, and also as a caring and sensual exchange between two femmes. Validating these kinds of sexualities and sexual experiences are perceived as needed by many of the teachers we work with. They want to address the messiness of sexuality that already exists in their classrooms, and we want to shout yes, yes, YES!

Complications in Queer Joy

Jen Gilbert (2021) draws on Irvine’s (2014) conceptualization of ‘dirty work’—wherein the social stigma of sex can congeal itself around the bodies and methodological practices of (queer) sexuality researchers and teachers—to explore how sex education controversies can sanitize our collective work and how the sex ed curriculum often works in tandem with this by appealing to Conversative, right-wing rhetoric. Appealing to conservative logics puts researchers and teachers into vulnerable and potentially compromising positions. While we can imagine all sorts of desirable outcomes from using queer joy as an educational language in sex ed spaces—an expanded vocabulary to talk about sexual pleasure, a centering of non normative sexualities, and a celebration of deviant bodies—this language might not find traction in the current conservative-right climate of New Brunswick.

In working with some teachers in the SexualityNB project, our own queer joy has at times been rejected. In these instances, we facilitate through these negativities and talk to teachers about the importance of understanding and honouring their own teaching boundaries—encouraging them to learn to navigate their own boundaries while respecting the boundaries of others. The language of boundaries, of knowing what we like and what we are like, and what feels good and what is okay, is central to bringing queer joy into even the most conservative context. We also know that to get to a place where queer joy can be accessed by more sex educators, they will require training, investment and buy-in from administrators and departments of education.

And so, we gesture toward the idea that queer joy is not a fully idealized language—and by running counter to the current transphobic and queerphobia climate of New Brunswick’s political scene, it turns acts of inclusion (or, in our case, queer existence) into a transgressive and subversive educational practice. Despite its promises and possibilities, some teachers may find that this language is not easily reconciled with the formal practices of sexuality education. And with New Brunswick’s current Conservative government, there is risk as well. Still, we continue to think through Gilbert’s (2021) assertion that sex education classrooms are contentious, complicated spaces, full of competing discourses. While queer
and joyful sexuality education cannot offer a quick fix for New Brunswick’s current educational problems, we wonder if it can be a site where new perspectives on sexuality can be shared and explored. Sex education can be a site that recognizes the queerness and joy that already exists in the classroom.

**Embracing Queer Joy**

Sex ed is a particularly charged space (Gilbert, 2021). But Roberts and Labuski (2022) offer us a rethinking:

> Bodies are disciplined in sex ed spaces: differences are minimised, risks and conformity are maximised, and viscerality is kept at bay. As an exercise in wonder, however, sex ed spaces can actively court and imagine sex, both as it is lived and what it might become in our futures. (p. 157).

Despite New Brunswick’s Conservative context, we work with teachers who continue to ask for support and resources to teach a more comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education, and demand for a more just and equitable schooling system. Together, we have experienced rich moments of creative practice wherein the missing discourse of pleasure and queerness was actualized, articulated, and critically investigated. In an urban workshop with teachers, one participant noted:

> And now I’m coming to this realization that a pleasure-based approach to sex ed would basically give my students the sex ed that I never received…And even in elementary school, a pleasure-based approach to sex ed can teach students to find joy and pleasure in their relationships, their friendships, their own bodies and how to express their identity in authentic ways. And then in all grades, it can talk about asexuality, sex and disability, self pleasure and pleasure across all different body types. And I think the good news is that we can talk about pleasure and sex ed in New Brunswick because we can totally link it to all the outcomes which is pretty cool.

At times, queer joy has facilitated this work. Sometimes it has also been complicated and risky. As Shuster and Westbrook (2022) write, “if [we] do not attend to joy, [we] cannot contribute to knowledge about how to foster it” (p. 15). Many sex ed teachers can attest to the deep-rooted barriers we face in our work, particularly in light of the blooming queerphobia and transphobia in our communities. Still, New Brunswick is and has always been a queer place (Burkholder et al., 2023), and for this reason, queer joy has a home here, including in our sex ed curriculum, pedagogies, and practice.

Our hope is that teachers and young learners might benefit from the embrace of queer joy—within and beyond New Brunswick, Canada. Joyful queer-affirming classrooms make schools safer for all youth (Kosciw et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2021), and our sense is that sex ed teachers can make their classrooms safer for everyone by inciting queer joy in their practice. In sharing our experiences mobilizing queer joy alongside 43 New Brunswick teachers, we have revealed how queer joy offers teachers a language to face discriminatory institutional practices. Queer joy pushes back against the consistent normalization of violence that conceals around queer and trans bodies in sex ed settings in all-too-familiar ways (Wright, 2023b). It mobilizes the messiness of sexualities, pleasure, and bodies to respond to the status quo and offers nuance to teaching (and learning alongside!) youth. Queer joy pushes back against conservative political contexts—including queerphobic and transphobic discourses and policy, a rise in anti-trans legislation and global anti-sex education protests (see: Barbee et al., 2022; Ellis, 2022; Goldberg & Abreu, 2023; Kottasová, 2023; Vida, 2019)—and instead eases us into a sense of adventure and possibility. As we move towards a queer and joyful pedagogy, we also move towards shaking up the hegemonic and deficit projects of conventional sex ed. New Brunswick classrooms are full of queer and trans youth who are quite confident in who they are—it’s time to meet them with the support and resources that they need, and to also learn from them. Through queer joy as theory and method, we can acknowledge the messiness and wildness of sexualities in our classrooms. In other words, it’s time to lean into the magnetic and contagious force that queer joy offers the sex ed classroom.

**References**


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