

## 5. Post-millennials and sex education

In the previous chapter, we saw how sexuality actualises itself in some parts of the world as a subversive and disruptive drive, generating interesting social movements such as #MeToo, which started in America. The school systems were also traversed by the storms of protest of the 1970s: young people created highly charged student movements to fight against the system. To some extent, the Sixty-Eight movement made sexual mores freer and it seems that women got what they were fighting for, but actually this is not the case. The 'liberated' body is used by the economy to sell products, sexy comedies, television programmes and advertisements that use erotic content to categorise men and women into stereotypes that were thought to be long gone after the Sixty-eight.

Sexuality is once again a taboo that it is better not to talk about, in-depth studies on the subject seem to have disappeared, sexuality no longer seems to be an opportunity to protest and take to the streets, and schools do not support communication about sexuality, except in medicalised and health-related terms.

Paul Goodman wrote a book in the 1950s/60s which is still relevant 70 years later, in which he states that it is not so much an absurd youth that one should talk about, but a youth that grows up in the absurd. When referring to the excluded and delinquent youth, it is no use talking about an antisocial behaviour if one has not first recognised that the required and recommended sociality is not only unattractive, but also offers no other choices (Goodman, 1964).

And again: how do schools and families meet young people with regard to sexuality today?

Italy is one of the few EU countries (apart from Lithuania, Poland, Bulgaria and Romania) in which sex education is still not compulsory. In most of Europe, the teaching of sex education has been compulsory for many decades. In France, it has been taught since 1973 and secondary schools have to provide condoms to third-year students. In Norway, topics such as masturbation, gender sexuality, etc. have been included in the curriculum, and a programme on early sexuality and pubertal changes has been broadcast on television specifically for fifth-grade children.

In the 1990s, a bill was made to include sex education in the biology ministerial syllabus, but it never got off the ground. In the same years, Silver, the Italian cartoonist of Alberto the Wolf, created a comic strip for middle and high school children on the importance of condom use, which was unfortunately blocked by the Ministry of Education at the time and replaced with a dossier. In 2011, Pope Benedict XVI called sex education a threat to the religious freedom of families, and in the last decade in some political currents, following the media echo obtained by the 'gender theory', it has been argued that gender and sexuality education is a danger.

If we look at the contents promoted in today's sex education programmes, they mostly cover anatomy and disease, or are limited to grey indications about disease prevention, mostly determined by morality and fear. It is incredible that in most school textbooks on the anatomy of the sexual organs, the clitoris is neither mentioned nor depicted. What message does this omission send to young people?

In addition to the lack of scientific information, there are many topics that our textbooks omit and are left to the free initiative of teachers.

We intend a curriculum specifically dedicated to sexuality that also draws on feminism and LGBT experiences, that contains the explanation of 'active consent' and of the practices for creating *safe space*<sup>1</sup>, that shows testimonies of people who have struggled to discover their sexual identity, that teaches respect and encourages students to think about desire, violence, stigmatisation, that knows how to go beyond the binary view of gender in which our own language is trapped. That teaches girls to say no, and boys that an explicit *yes* is necessary.

In this judgmental climate, which is backward compared to Europe and influenced by moralistic thinking, it is not easy for young people to exercise their human right to experience sexuality and express themselves, and Italian schools do not help them.

The WHO, in its 'Standards for Sexuality Education' sets out guidelines that should support ministries in creating appropriate programmes:

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<sup>1</sup> «The term safe space refers to places "intended to be free of bias, conflict, criticism, or potentially threatening actions, ideas, or conversations". The term originated in LGBT culture, but has since expanded to include any place where a marginalized minority (e.g. gender, ethnic, religious) can come together to communicate regarding their shared experiences. Safe spaces are most commonly located on university campuses in the western world, but also are at workplaces, as in the case of Nokia. An inverted pink triangle, surrounded by a green circle symbolizing universal acceptance, to indicate alliance with gay rights and spaces free from homophobia.

The terms safe space (or safe-space), safer space, and positive space may also indicate that a teacher, educational institution or student body does not tolerate violence, harassment, or hate speech, thereby creating a safe place for marginalized people». (Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safe\\_space](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Safe_space)).

Sexuality education means learning about the cognitive, emotional, social, interactive and physical aspects of sexuality. Sexuality education starts early in childhood and progresses through adolescence and adulthood. For children and young people, it aims at supporting and protecting sexual development. It gradually equips and empowers children and young people with information, skills and positive values to understand and enjoy their sexuality, have safe and fulfilling relationships and take responsibility for their own and other people's sexual health and well-being. It enables them to make choices which enhance the quality of their lives and contribute to a compassionate and just society. All children and young people have the right to have access to age-appropriate sexuality education. In this definition, the primary focus is on sexuality as a positive human potential and a source of satisfaction and pleasure. The clearly recognized need for knowledge and skills required to prevent sexual ill-health comes second to this overall positive approach. Furthermore, sexuality education should be based on internationally accepted human rights, in particular the right to know, which precedes prevention of ill health.

If today's *post-millennial* generation is mostly not finding an environment that stimulates their curiosity and meets their needs in schools, the web has captured their attention and is able to offer them the most interesting opportunities. Despite the attempts to prevent change, perhaps something is moving. If we look at language, for example, with the advent of the Internet, words related to sex have changed enormously in the last ten years: new words have appeared where there were none before, others no longer exist, some have changed in meaning and this reflects a transformation from below, that is, from 'experiences'.

Far from being numb for the use of smartphones and the Net, on the one hand the youngest learn, on the other hand they cannot protect themselves from the risks of the Net. They learn about sexuality through sites such as Pornhub, but cannot defend themselves against the invasion of unsolicited nude photos and sexual threats on the web. In the absence of correct information, young people struggle to know what to do and run the risk of misusing the platforms available to them, and then experience very painful situations – such as those related to *sexting*<sup>2</sup> – from which it is very difficult to emerge unscathed. According to Philippe Brenot, psychiatrist and anthropologist, author of *Pourquoi c'est compliqué l'amour* (2008), the big difference between post-millennials and millennials lies in the precociousness of their awakening to sexuality caused by the Internet and increased exposure to pornography. In fact, pornographic videos are already circulating in many primary schools hidden from adults. While this phenomenon is disturbing because it conveys to immature minds a view of sexuality in which at least one participant, historically the woman, is a sexual object and the man is a prey to his impulses and often violent, Brenot invites us to consider another point of view.

This phenomenon involves not only males, but also females, and brings sexuality out into the open: he claims that our grandparents used to go to brothels during their military service, then they would talk about their exploits. Today, the focus is mainly on pornography as seen by teenagers who talk about it together. It is the initiation rite of passage into adulthood (Brenot, 2008). At the end of the 1990s, online pornography was still demonised, but today it is the focus of university debates and research.

From the 1980s onwards, a new experimentation – 'post-porn' (Wolf, 2020) – is emerging: it is politically characterised and has objectives of social impact. According to Brenot's analysis, boys and girls are able to metabolise pornography and maintain a certain distance to what they watch, to not take everything literally, to realise that the sexuality displayed in the videos is not reality and is ultimately a repetitive *cliché*. Mostly a bore. What is more exciting would be social networks, which allow one to ask daring questions to peers, big brothers/sisters on the web, to inform oneself about the risks of sexuality, to broaden one's views and to promote live experiences and encounters.

Of course, not all young people are able to distinguish pornography from real life and have a correct knowledge of sexuality, so much so that sales of Viagra or Cialis among young people aged 18 to 30 are increasing considerably. They take these tablets in order to ensure extraordinarily high performances and to avoid the frequent consequences of erectile impotence. It would be interesting to understand which variables help young people to see sexuality as one of the possible experiences of encountering 'human beings' (Giommi, 2021).

When sexuality comes into play, there is a scorn, especially in the heterosexual world, which we are no longer even aware of, as it reflects the commodification of bodies by consumerism and economic advancement: it can range from the use of the female figure as a *showgirl* whose value is to seduce the male appetite, to macho comments on women's bodies made at the family dinner table or among friends, and even to parties where the pack harasses its prey using violence. Scorn implies lowering the value of the other. In a popular Italian saying we find that 'The one

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<sup>2</sup> The term *sexting*, derived from the fusion of the words *sex* and *texting*, is a neologism used to indicate the sending of sexually explicit messages, texts and/or images, mainly by smartphone or Internet.

who despises, is the one who buys' and indeed scorn is often a way of hiding one's own desire and fear of rejection. Scorn is a reactive formation that reflects the need to reduce the other to an object to be manipulated in order not to feel the immense fear of 'peer' contact.

The new generations are increasingly distancing themselves from all this and expressing a rejection that is difficult to decipher: they are referred to as 'post-sexuals' since asexuality as a form of abstinence from sex is increasingly widespread.

For Paul Goodman, the only antidote to the objectifying view of sexuality proposed by pornography is for adults to speak clearly and directly about sexuality. Inconsistency encourages the 'sadistic-sexual impulse', which is not a *paraphilia*, i.e. another form of love (ch. XVI), but is exactly the opposite. Goodman writes:

Serious Thought is agreed on the simple natural function and there are colorful little abstract treatises for children, it is inconceivable for a publisher to print a sober little juvenile story about, say, playing doctor or the surprising discovery of masturbation. A character in a juvenile (or adult) adventure story may not incidentally get an erection as he may wolf a sandwich or get sleepy. It seems obvious that, here as everywhere else, the only antidote for the sadistic-sexual comic books that are objected to, is the presentation of factual truth and a matter-of-fact tone; whereas what we have, permissiveness combined with withdrawal from real contact, precisely produces the sadistic-sexual need. This is the bread-and-butter of psychological theory; why is it not said in the annual investigations of the comic books? Again, although most public spokesmen are for a "healthy frankness," the public schools are run quite otherwise. Let me recall a typical incident recently in California (spring of '59). A high school science teacher employed the bright-idea project of tabulating the class's sexual habits as an exercise in fact finding. This got him into terrible hot water, and the School Board carefully explained, "What we teach is human reproduction, much as we discuss the functions of the human eye or ear," that is, without mentioning light or sound, color or harmony, or any other act or relation. (I am writing this equably and satirically, but the stupidity of these people is outrageous.)

Goodman (1964, p. 73)

"Permissiveness combined with withdrawal from real contact" manifests itself in various ways, for example, when we as parents realise that our children, even small children, are exposed to explicit sexual scenes through the media and we relinquish any responsibility of an open dialogue with them. Strange thing: we give up the power to influence them dialectically, but we take the power to dictate rules, impositions, values.

Sexuality is a topic that brings not only young people, but also adults into contact with their own intimacy, vulnerability and fears, as well as with numerous cultural introjections, and this certainly makes the start of a confrontation more complex. Talking directly about sexuality means opening up to an equal exchange in which the adult not only influences the younger, but above all accepts to be influenced and challenged by them: the adult is motivated by curiosity, takes an interest in their minds and thoughts, is willing to get involved affectively and to create authentic relationships, even acknowledging his/her own insecurities.

The same thing happens at the clinical level: we believe that parity is not a neglect of the professional's therapeutic responsibility, but rather requires a high level of empathic, sympathetic and cognitive attention in order to grasp the possibilities that the patients bring to the session. Thus, also on a pedagogical level, giving equal dignity and listening to what young people bring would help the educators themselves to develop a more spontaneous and ecumenical attention.

The difficulty the school system encounters in including sex education in the curriculum and in speaking directly about sexuality is not only related to moralistic thinking, but also to the patriarchal culture that influences the power structure. It means that in families, schools and institutions in general, power does not circulate among the members, but is held by adults, or by those who are stronger (due to wealth, culture, family or other background). With a structure like this, power cannot fluctuate within the system. Since sexuality implies an equal exchange between those involved, who agree to open up their boundaries – and, thus, receive, let in, give, penetrate, care, listen, and listen to each other – if schools want to do sex education, they must stop entrenching themselves in the role of continuous parenting and leave young people free to conquer spaces for themselves, supporting their voices. In order for sexuality to become a learning experience, like any subject of study, the teacher must *be able to relinquish control and leave the power to the pupils, without becoming powerless, so that all those involved gain more power through mutual recognition.*

Sexual aggression, as we shall see in Chapter 14, is the experience of 'aggressing with passion' and is what creates a learning context: it is generated when teachers in the classroom passionately go-towards (*ad-graedere*) their pupils, confront them, offer testimonies, get involved, question themselves and are in love with the content they transmit. Young people are very sensitive and receptive when faced with a genuinely interested adult and tend to give them a certain degree of power, which they reject when power is imposed from above.

This line of thought is developed in the educational sciences by various educators and philosophers, including Bertolini (1999), Mottana (1996) and Massa (1986), who argue *the central role of Eros in the pedagogical relationship*: Eros is seen “as the foundation of an inter-subjective relationship which, characterised by reciprocity, enlivens both actors in the relationship, stimulating them to overcome their current personalities. Eros from ‘background’ becomes a pedagogical ‘choice’, not easy banal spontaneity, but authentic professionalism (Bertolini, 1999).

Mottana states that, ultimately, Eros is the only authentic agent of the transmutation of the educational relationship from a practice of informational commerce into a union of living presences (which are the bodies, hearts, flesh and deep knowledge or tastes of the protagonists of this not simple affair). The inspiration of Eros lies hidden beneath the many layers of the culture of control and eduction. But it lies there, and the more it lies there, forgotten and soothed, the more, when it manifests itself, it happens with the dark and violent hues of abuse and emptiness of meaning (Mottana, 2019).

Fear of abuse is common to both the clinical and the educational contexts: it is avoided by silence and distance, thus creating interstices (gaps in meaning) which are then occupied by the abusers.

We agree with the above-mentioned pedagogues that the inspiration of Eros requires genuine operational courage and contact with one’s own desiring dimension.

A singular initiative was started in 2017 by Paolo Mottana himself, lecturer in Education Sciences at the University Bicocca of Milan. He contacted Anna Pollio, a teacher, and Lucio Basadonne, a filmmaker, to work on the most banned topic at school in Italy: teaching children about pleasure. The intention is to bring an educational movie into schools to open a dialogue and challenge the censorship applied to sex by the government, teachers and adults. In other words, to talk about sex education that is not exclusively precautionary and health-related but focuses more on the joy than on the danger of having sex. In other words, to emphasise the feelings, emotions, physical details and thoughts that make up the entire sexual experience. In this project – Making of love – Anna and Lucio give total space and word to eight young people, after realising that a project on sex education created and marked solely on the vision of adults limits its potential. These eight young people, through a workshop, make a documentary film and, in response to the shortcomings of the Italian school system, decide on their own initiative to write a book, involving various professionals through interviews.

In this project, power was able to circulate between generations, giving birth to a virtuous circle.

Reciprocity was a conquest of the sexual and feminine revolution of ‘68: by breaking the confluence with the dominant culture, it worked to achieve a balanced and equal ground between the sexes, whereby women were recognised the same behaviour as men in various contexts, including in the couple relationship. Majid Valcarengi, the first Italian conscientious objector and founder of the magazine *Re nudo*, defines ‘68 as the years of consent. The way consent is experienced today mirrors a superficial culture: equality is spread only in appearance (Cereghino *et al.*, 2020).

Consent is a permission that must be given freely and concerns everything that belongs to us: data, images, our personal space, our own body. Consent is the whole set of invisible, personal rules that must be established so that our relationship with the other is protected and we can derive pleasure from it. No one has ever really taught us what these ‘rules’ are: in fact, consent has always been a taboo because of cultural preconceptions and automatisms whose legacy we still suffer from today. Though, it is essential to become aware of our bodies and our identity from an early age. Giving consent is a choice, never an obligation. Especially because it is our duty to define its field: consent is a universal right of everyone. Without distinction of gender (*ibid.*).

There is much talk of consent, but very little experience of it. Once again, we are faced with an attitude of tolerance combined with a lack of real contact, as Goodman noted in the 1950s. Freedom has increased, but within the same cultural automatisms: this means that human relations are still not really reciprocal and individuals cannot freely construct rules for their own relationship. Today we talk about consent, but without a dimension of research that helps people find themselves and their own measure with reality. The darker side of the dominant culture results in violence when a human relationship cannot be distinguished from possession. Sexuality is disconnected from the emotional resonance (Galimberti, 2021). Valcarengi states that this is evident by observing how human self-consciousness has evolved in the two sexes. The feminist movement pushed the woman to do some work on herself, to find a mental space to work on her own frailties and strengths. For men, since 1968, this aspect has been shrinking. There are few places and approaches where men can develop their inner selves and give up the competitive dimension, allowing themselves to express their own vulnerability. Without an experience that rebalances the sexes, there can be no experience of the female and male sexes reciprocity and therefore not even consent. That is why it

comes to violence. The only difference is that before Sixty-Eight, violence did not scare us; now that it is banned, it upsets us. But if we do not work on reciprocity, the only way out after a rejection is violence (Cereghino *et al.*, 2020). Today more than ever, young Italians need to be taught about sexuality and there is a need for a new vision of teaching that involves them and makes them part of – and therefore responsible for – the education they need<sup>3</sup>. How?

We have an extraordinary example from the past to draw inspiration from: the Greek culture. Before and after it, there was the single thought, where the teacher could not be criticised, nor surpassed. He could be ‘killed’, or the young person followed his thinking. It is difficult to find educational contexts in which the teacher listens and is challenged by the pupil.

Anaximander was the first to criticise his teacher Thales while referring to his thought and continuing to give it value. There is no ultimate truth, but a truth that makes sense in a context and at a given time and needs to be surpassed the following day for culture to move forward (Rovelli, 2011). As if to say that today’s solution is tomorrow’s problem. In this way, Greek culture developed the democratic confrontation that gave rise to science.

With regard to sex education, the lack of a regulation at ministerial level could offer the opportunity for an innovative approach, where pleasure can be freely discussed, where sexuality is not separated from the intimate sphere and interpersonal contact (between adults and young people and among young people themselves), which supports equality and allows a free, direct, judgment-free dialogue between peers in a safe context. Where young people are encouraged to take power by taking responsibility for the education they need and through which new visions can finally emerge.

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<sup>3</sup> An interesting sex education manual that speaks directly to young people is *Make Love* (Henning, Olszewski, 2012). The authors deal with performance anxiety and fears on the basis of the principle that arousal is innate and sexuality is learnt. Photos play an important role in the book. The photographer, in fact, to counter the images circulating in young people’s heads, sought out couples of young Berlin lovers and portrayed them. They are real couples sleeping together in reality. This is clear from the photos. They show closeness and intimacy without being voyeuristic and the sex as it is.