Knowledge, Policy and Practice in Education and the Struggle for Social Justice

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Chapter 2

Sex, Sexuality and HIV: ‘Education’, in the Broadest Sense of the Word

Peter Aggleton

I first met Geoff Whitty in 1977 in the basement of a bar in Bath called The Huntsman. I had been appointed to a lectureship in teacher education at what was then the City of Bath Technical College having just completed a postgraduate degree in education at the University of Aberdeen, where I had been taught by John Nisbet.

I was taken to the bar by one of the Postgraduate Certificate of Education students placed with me that year at the college. She introduced me to the other students and to Geoff who was sitting with them, as relaxed as anything, listening and sharing his thoughts. We talked for a bit. At some point, he asked whether I had thought of doing another degree, a PhD, and I replied, no, not really – until I found a ‘good’ supervisor. He looked at me quizzically and both he and I never forgot that conversation. In retrospect, it may have sounded slightly offhand to speak in this way, but at the time I was somewhat tongue-tied and in awe. I have always been shy, as I was later to learn that Geoff was too, and shyness can sometimes cause the wrong things to be said.

While studying in Aberdeen I had come across two of Geoff’s books in the library – the first was entitled Explorations in the Politics of School Knowledge (Nafferton, 1976), edited by Geoff and Michael Young, and the second was another collection entitled Society, State and Schooling: Readings on the Possibilities for Radical Education (Falmer Press, 1977) edited this time by Michael and Geoff, in that order. Both books opened my mind dramatically, to the political nature of knowledge and to the politics of education and schooling. If pushed to identify myself in disciplinary terms, I had hitherto seen myself as a psychologist,
although I had taught sociology and other subjects at a further education college in Worthing before travelling north to Aberdeen, but this was to be a new awakening.

Both at the time and in retrospect, it was the passion evident in both of these books that most appealed to me. The writing itself was at times difficult to understand but the values that underpinned it were clear: we live in a profoundly unequal world and inequalities (of class, gender, race, etc.) are not inevitable, nor are they fair. Instead, they call to be identified, understood and remedied. Perhaps for the first time, but not for the last, I came to understand that good quality social research is, and must always be, value-informed – and the particular set of values that one adheres to really does matter.

After a short while teaching craft caterers, stonemasons, motor vehicle apprentices and others at ‘Bath Tech’, as it was affectionately known, I plucked up courage to approach Geoff and asked to be registered as one of his students. At the time, he was very much involved in writing and teaching the Open University's *Schooling and Society* course, taking forward with others many of the ideas contained in the aforementioned two books. I was teaching the Open University’s foundation course in social science at the same time and my understanding of sociology had grown; we met on various occasions and I began my doctorate with him, part-time, looking at issues of cultural and social reproduction among young people studying in further education.

After gaining an award for full-time study and after Geoff himself had moved to King’s College in London, I finished the degree there – with Geoff as my supervisor and Basil Bernstein as mentor to us both. It was a challenging experience and one that affected me deeply – intellectually, socially and in terms of gender and sexuality. No longer could I see the world in the terms promoted by individual psychology. People both personally and collectively may have a degree of agency, but they exercise this within contexts determined by history, limiting possibilities and, for many, introducing very real constraints. It was the structured nature of these inequalities that interested me most. I found myself wondering, where do they come from, what purpose do they serve, and how can we change things for the better?

I continued to work at the technical college in Bath until 1984 when I was offered a position as a lecturer in sociology at Bath College of Higher Education. One year later, in 1985, I was appointed to the full-time staff in the Department of Education at Bristol Polytechnic. I had worked there part-time for about five years, teaching on a certificate course for teachers in adult and further education, but when Geoff
moved from London to become head of department, I became full time. Together with Len Barton, Gill Crozier, David Halpin, Andrew Pollard, David James and many others, we became pioneers of a kind, putting into practice what we felt was right for late twentieth-century teacher education, seizing the numerous opportunities the Thatcher government perversely provided us with, and transforming the polytechnic’s hitherto somewhat conservative teacher training department into the radical new set-up it became.

Scarcely two years passed though when the world was shaken by the advent of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) – an incurable disease which, in the West at least, was seen primarily to affect gay men, sex workers and people who injected drugs. There was no effective treatment and, for some time after the first cases were diagnosed, no clear understanding of the condition’s aetiology. Panic set in. In the UK, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, and in the USA, President Ronald Reagan, among others, viewed the disease as an opportunity to reclaim a supposedly lost morality. Thatcher attempted to ban the first national survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles, claiming that the average British household would be affronted to be asked questions about sex, while Reagan was US president for nearly five years before he uttered the word ‘AIDS’ in public, and engaged with a health crisis that would kill more than half a million people in the USA.

Others were more circumspect, especially after a viral cause in the form of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) was identified and cases of AIDS were diagnosed among people with haemophilia and blood transfusion recipients and among a wide range of adults (and later children) in the countries of the Global South. Into the vacuum created by government inaction stepped a host of new social actors, including well-meaning clergy and other religious leaders; physicians and nurses who had cared for some of the first people to be affected by HIV; lesbian, gay and bisexual community groups; HIV activists; social and behavioural researchers; and many others. The beginnings of the fightback had begun, with people and affected communities taking matters into their own hands. Where governments and national authorities feared to tread, gay men, lesbians, sex workers, drugs workers and others took the lead, founding one the most effective social movements for change the twentieth century was to see.

But what did teacher education do? Nationally in Britain, very little, since few teacher educators wanted to claim special expertise in responding to an issue that seemed to affect sexual and social minorities, and others felt it quite improper for children in schools to be taught
anything about sex and drug use. A combination of denial, refusal, embarrassment and shame stalked the corridors of many a teacher training institution. Even well-established health education courses in England preferred to stick with talking about diet, nutrition, smoking and physical activity than engage with an epidemic that raised questions about sex, sexuality and drug injection.

Geoff took a quite different view. Seeing HIV as being as much a social issue as a medical one, and viewing the manner in which the epidemiology of the epidemic played unwaveringly into the fissures and fractures of an unequal world, here was an opportunity to more properly understand and make a difference through education. Together, we were lucky in winning a series of major research contracts at Bristol Polytechnic, initially from agencies such as the Health Education Authority (created in 1987 from the earlier Health Education Council as a special health authority with a specific remit to tackle AIDS) and charities such as the AIDS Education Research Trust (AVERT) but later from a variety of government departments. One of the first projects we worked on was an evaluation of the government’s *AIDS: Your Choice for Life* video resource for schools. I recruited Marilyn Toft, who had been working as a teacher at Hartcliffe School in Bristol, to lead the work and we began a collaboration that lasts until this day.

But the early years of the HIV epidemic were tough and called for stamina and diplomacy in considerable quantities. Some of the key issues concerned the messages that needed to be promoted as part of an evidence-informed response to the epidemic. Conservative morality was everywhere at the time. Books on sex and sexuality (both same-sex sexuality and otherwise) were hard to obtain other than through specialist booksellers such as Gay’s the Word in London. Her Majesty’s Customs and Excise intercepted, delayed and sometimes destroyed imported material from the USA on topics such as anal sex, which were deemed inappropriate or obscene. And if they were not intercepted at the border, such materials could be intercepted by the institution where you worked! I recall one day Geoff bringing over to my office a parcel of books containing copies of the *Joy of Gay Sex* and the *Joy of Lesbian Sex*, which had been placed on his (the head of department’s) desk already opened by a well-meaning administrator with a note asking, 'Is this really suitable for a Department of Education?' On another occasion, he had to confront a senior member of staff who came to his office to express the view that it would damage the polytechnic’s relationship with primary schools were it to become too widely known about that the department was working on education about AIDS.
In the face of such adversity, Geoff’s commitment to issues of sex, sexuality, drug use, education and health was unwavering. He let it be known that the work would continue and indeed expand, that Bristol Polytechnic’s Department of Education would host the 1st National Conference on the Social Aspects of AIDS in September 1986, and that new accommodation would be found for the rapidly growing research and development team. Within a very short period of time, this team had increased in number to around 20 in total with its work contributing to nearly 70 per cent of the department’s research income at the time.

But from time to time a different kind of support was needed, and in the provision of this Geoff was a rock to be relied upon. In my earlier research with young people, I had learned from Geoff and other writers such as John Clarke, Stuart Hall, Tony Jefferson, Angela McRobbie and Paul Gilroy that the outcomes of any ‘fightback’ could be contradictory and to a degree unpredictable. Subcultural resistance, for example, could contribute to the reproduction of class, gender and racial inequalities in a very profound way, and the youth ‘revolutions’ of the 1960s and 1970s were as much about individualization and personal struggle as they were about social change. So it was with HIV and AIDS. As senior politicians and government officials (including within the Department of Health in London) sought to suppress and repress, so the reaction grew. Under the influence of efforts to shut it up and keep it quiet, sexuality was let of out the box in a way it never had been – as something that was there, all around us in a sense, calling for attention. The personal and political were never more intertwined, as sexual and gender minorities, sex workers and drug users, struggled together with straight friends and allies to confront the stereotypes and prejudices that the HIV epidemic had unleashed.

While for some this was all too much, for others it provided the opportunity to tackle broader issues such as the rights of lesbian and gay teachers in polytechnic and university departments of education. Marjorie Smith, who was then a special needs lecturer at Bristol Polytechnic, led the charge, supported by students and a variety of colleagues, calling for its Department of Education to take a public stance on the matter. While her actions and those of the group she represented triggered a more wide-ranging equalities review within the department, they created freedoms and a change of climate that were a harbinger of things to come. I myself was able to come out as an openly gay man working in a senior role in a well-respected institute of teacher education, something that had not been possible before. I smile now when I recall being asked, ‘Are you a married man?’, during an earlier interview at
another institution. In near terror, I said nothing; such was the silence and fear at that time. Much had changed since then of course, some of it under the influence of the pressure for structural change triggered by HIV, but some of it as the result of individual acts of agency by kind and forward-looking individuals such as Geoff himself. It should be noted that Geoff’s care for others extended well beyond the institution in which he worked, and he would often be there for friends who were navigating difficult personal circumstances. It was well beyond the call of duty for him to be involved, but he did what he felt right, with compassion and understanding at all times.

I learned much about both the personal and the political from Geoff: through the articles and books he encouraged me to read, through the writing we did together and through the professional interventions we made locally and nationally. Being a gay man in teacher education was and is not easy – too many stereotypes (and the odd unhelpful individual) abound – and the cloak of victimhood is too easily assumed. As with all inequalities – of gender, class, disability and race – those of sexuality call for recognition and response in ways that are genuinely empowering for the persons concerned. We need the strong to stand up for us, and Geoff did this in no small way, both at Bristol and later at Goldsmith’s College in London where we took the core of the Bristol HIV team in 1989 following Geoff’s appointment as Goldsmith’s Professor of Education Policy and Management.

By now, the interests of the group had expanded to embrace a wide range of policy and practice considerations. We named the group the Health and Education Research Unit (HERU) and its members included Elaine Chase, the late Helen Thomas and Ian Warwick, who had been with us at Bristol. We recruited an extraordinarily talented group of support staff and researchers, including Paul Tyrer, Austin Taylor-Laybourn, Bridget Sansom (Sojourner) and the late Kim Rivers. With the passage of time, our work came increasingly to focus on organizational and institutional aspects of HIV, sexuality and health and adopted a broader international focus. Just like in England, most mainstream educationalists and health educators, in Europe and elsewhere, had little to say about HIV when the epidemic first appeared. Its closeness to sex and sexuality frightened so many of them away.

It was within this space that a new set of researchers, advocates and practitioners emerged – many of them influenced by close-hand experience with the epidemic itself; others fired by the desire to do good in a situation that others eschewed. They were strange times in many ways – our days were filled with upset and dread, not least because for
a while some of us feared that, in the eyes of the Thatcher government, gay men were viewed as ‘disposable in their entirety’ (Watney 2000). But there was also the excitement of working across disciplines and across the research, policy and practice divide. Annabel Kanabus, one of the founders of the HIV education charity AVERT, wrote, ‘It is hard now to describe what it was like in those early years. The fear, the uncertainty, the sickness and the deaths. But it also brought together people who had a common aim of overcoming the problems, people whose lives would never otherwise have crossed’ (AVERT n.d.)

The alliance between doctors, social scientists, community workers and activists that would prove so central to the response to HIV was beginning to take shape, and HERU was central to this work. While others brought with them their expertise in public health, community organizing or psychology, what we brought was a distinctively educational stance – not ‘education’ in the limited sense of schools and schooling but education ‘in its broadest sense’ – as a set of values and practices concerned with politics and the opening up of issues for debate; rights and responsibilities, both individual and collective; and as a force for good and a power for change. This was the approach to education that Geoff later pursued after becoming director of the Institute of Education in London. It involved being committed, politically astute, strongly theorized, and policy- and practice-relevant, all at the same time. We began to be noticed and have an impact.

In late 1992 I was invited to join the full-time staff of the World Health Organization’s (WHO) Global Programme on AIDS, as chief of social and behavioural studies and support. I took with me into that environment much of what I had learned from Geoff but gained new insight into international policymaking and policy change while working at a high level with governments all over the world. I clung to optimism in the face of adversity, as had been Geoff’s approach, and was constantly reminded of the need not to become disillusioned when things did not go as expected, and when intractable hurdles presented themselves. Some of the biggest challenges at that time (and to this day) involved ensuring that understandings of sex, sexuality and relationships remain culturally and socially informed – by this I mean neither ‘reduced’ to the ‘input-output’ frame of reference characteristic of much of mainstream public health, nor transformed into risk behaviours and practices as some psychologists and public health specialists would have it. Instead, what people do and believe sexually carries meaning – both individually and culturally – and this must be understood in relation to the time and place at which it occurs. Understanding these meanings and working
with them educationally is what HIV prevention, stigma reduction and the care of people living with and affected by HIV is all about.

Had I never met Geoff, and had I not developed a sociological imagination through our work together, I might never have understood. But more than this, Geoff’s commitment to understanding and tackling inequality opened my eyes to the deeper, more structural forces behind the global epidemic. People who are marginalized – including sex workers and drug users, people who are poor, women and girls in many contexts, people who are racially or ethnically dispossessed or discriminated against, and gender and sexual minorities – all come off worse in the HIV epidemic. Programmatic intervention therefore demands far more than the provision of facts, services and skills. Instead, it requires structural change, of the kind that was by the early 2000s able to make HIV antiretroviral medication available to countless millions of people worldwide, at a speed and in a way never believed possible and never before achieved.

Continuing to work closely with the UN system throughout much of the 1990s and 2000s, I returned to the UK and to the Institute of Education, to which Geoff himself had moved, initially as Karl Mannheim Chair in the Sociology of Education and then later as its director. With my move to Geneva and Geoff’s change of institution within London, HERU had been relocated to the Institute of Education and the Department of Policy Studies. Scarcely had I arrived at the Institute, however, than I was asked by Peter Mortimore (the then Institute director) to take on the directorship of the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU), a position I was to hold for 10 years.

It was within this environment that a set of further skills came into play, skills that had been acquired first at Bristol and later at the WHO in Geneva. TCRU’s remit at the time was for the health, care and well-being of children, young people and their families across family, health, social care and other settings. The unit was relatively small when I arrived, and some of its staff felt it odd to be based in an Institute of Education when much of the unit’s work focused on children, parents and families. During the first couple of years of my directorship, there was much talk about the need to ‘break away’ since the unit’s mission was felt to be so poorly understood by the Institute’s senior management. All this was to change however, aided by the election of a New Labour government concerned to ‘join together’ policies, services and administrative arrangements for children, young people, families and education that had hitherto been kept apart.
TCRU’s major programme of research funded by the Department of Health came quickly to be complemented by two additional programmes. Safe Passages to Adulthood, which aimed to promote sexual health and well-being among young people in developing countries, was funded by the UK Department for International Development. A collaboration between the University of Southampton, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the Institute of Education, the programme ran for seven years in total, with TCRU providing the ‘educational’ backbone to much of the work. It was later joined by an additional programme of research funded by the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), which included studies on work and family life led by Peter Moss and by Julia Brannen, as well as some highly innovative work on social pedagogy, under the directorship of Pat Petrie. But it was in fields beyond these specially commissioned departmental programmes that TCRU’s influence also began to grow. The first three evaluations of the National Healthy Schools Programme in England (jointly funded by Department of Health and DCSF) were undertaken from within the unit and a series of studies (some funded by DCSF itself and led by Ian Warwick) returned to the theme of sexuality by putting homophobic bullying in schools on the national agenda. Their legacy was profound and laid the foundations for the zero-tolerance policy shift endorsed by all the major UK political parties and that remains in place today.

Although Geoff had not been keen on my move to TCRU so soon after joining the Institute of Education, he was strongly supportive of all this work and indeed of the research unit itself after he became Institute director in 2000. The fact that we were able to undertake high-quality research so closely aligned to national and international policy agendas was in some ways a product of its time. The New Labour governments from the late 1990s until 2010 were remarkable for the partnerships they built with key academics and the institutions in which they worked. Subsequent coalition and Conservative governments in the UK have preferred to keep university researchers at arms-length when it comes to social policy formulation and implementation.

Internationally, TCRU research at this same time – supported by Geoff institutionally and intellectually – had tremendous impact. With funding from the WHO, technical guidance was developed on a broad range of topics including sexual health promotion and HIV prevention and care among vulnerable young people. Funding from United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) led to the development of the first international framework on Education and HIV:
A Strategic Approach. Support from UNAIDS led to the development (with Richard Parker at Columbia University, New York) of the conceptual framework on HIV-related stigma, discrimination and human rights, which underpinned the 2002 and 2003 World AIDS Campaigns. Work with UNESCO informed and aided the development of their Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education, first published in 2009. Such was the reputation of the Institute of Education, that around the same time the New York-based Ford Foundation commissioned an ongoing formative evaluation of its Global Dialogues for Sexual Health (the largest funding initiative of its kind ever undertaken) from TCRU with myself as its director. Over the next seven years, extended periods of fieldwork took place in the USA, Latin America (Brazil, Mexico and Peru), Africa (Egypt, Nigeria and South Africa), South Asia (India) and South-east Asia (Vietnam and the Philippines).

In 2009 I left the Institute to take up a new role as inaugural head of the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Sussex. I had a house in Brighton, having lived there since the early 1990s, and the commute to London was taking its toll. But not so long after that I would be on the move once again.

Australia calls (us both)

Throughout my time at the Institute of Education and at the University of Sussex I held a visiting professorship in the National Centre in HIV Social Research at Macquarie University in Sydney and then at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). In late 2011, I was asked by UNSW to take up a professorship in education and health. I moved to Australia in early 2012 and currently lead research on topics as diverse as sexual citizenship among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth; sex-based sociality and crystal meth among gay men; and love, sex and relationships among indigenous Australian young people.

By this time, Geoff had retired from the Institute of Education, becoming director emeritus in 2010. Just a few years later, he was appointed Global Innovation Chair for Equity in Higher Education at the University of Newcastle in Australia and we were able to catch up with one another again. Although we never worked together in Australia, we met regularly and in his usual way Geoff introduced me both to some former colleagues and new friends. We always had dinner on each of his extended visits to Australia. We talked about many things, although I have learned much more about Geoff since his passing through obituaries,
notes of appreciation and the kind words of others. His life was one of high standards, high expectations and an unswerving commitment to social justice. When times were hard or unexpected opportunities arose, he never shied away from taking finely calculated risks and making difficult decisions. For me, he was a committed supervisor, an extraordinary manager and the dearest of friends. I miss him very much and will continue to do so for years to come.

References