



Innocence, knowledge and the construction of childhood. The contradictory nature of sexuality and censorship in children's contemporary lives

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BOOK REVIEWS

Innocence, knowledge and the construction of childhood. The contradictory nature of sexuality and censorship in children's contemporary lives, by Kerry H. Robinson, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, vii + 170 pp., £26.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-60763-6

In *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood*, Robinson takes on an ambitious task. Her aim is to frame an argument which challenges adult and societal perceptions of childhood, including notions of childhood innocence, power and political relationships between adults and children, and the autonomy and citizenship of children. The book provides a critical examination of the intricate factors which play a role in the construction of childhood, particularly in relation to sexuality and children's access to 'difficult knowledge', a term developed by Britzman (1998).

The argument presented is neatly embedded in theory. For example, Britzman termed the phrase difficult knowledge through employing a Freudian psychoanalytical framework and proposing that learning is a psychic event in which resistance to knowledge is critical in developing pedagogies. Robinson integrates this with Foucauldian ideas (Foucault's power/knowledge nexus) to form her argument that adults determine difficult knowledge and this leads to the perception that there needs to be a level of 'censorship' for children in relation to topics which prove challenging for adults, such as sexuality.

A principal tenet of the book is that the regulation of children's access to sexual knowledge, believed by many adults to serve as a form of protection for the child, has detrimental implications for the child's short- and long-term well-being. Robinson argues that sexuality education, pedagogical practices, the everyday interactions of children, and legal discourses in schooling (evident in Australia, the UK and the USA) play a fundamental role in the production of children as heteronormative sexual subjects. With the focus on the implicit need for children to develop critical confidence, resilience and competency skills, Robinson argues that it is essential for children to have access to open and honest discussions and knowledgeable information about sexuality in order to develop agency as sexual citizens. Robinson further points out that obtaining such information should begin at a very early age as this allows parents to open a channel of communication with their child about sexual matters and prevents the formation of taboos around sexuality-related topics (broadly defined).

The notion that adults are unknowably undermining the ability of children to become competent individuals as adults through controlling exposure to 'difficult knowledge' is a challenging one to grasp. This is probably due, in part, to the impact and pervasiveness of the discourse of childhood innocence. In the book, Robinson offers a short historical overview of the origins of childhood innocence from the seventeenth to the twenty-first century. This leads on to a further critical examination of how the innocence discourse regulates childhood sexuality, with reference to Sigmund Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1976). Relating strongly to the discourse of innocence is the influence of protection, with both providing a platform for the desexualisation of children. Robinson points out that these discourses impact greatly on politics, the adult/child binary and the

regulation or censorship of knowledge around sexuality. She states that such regulation may in fact increase the vulnerability of children, which aptly indicates why such discourses, despite general perceptions, are not in the child's best interest. This forms the key foundation of Robinson's argument and reinforces the need for a fresh stance on childhood sexuality.

Chapters 5 and 6 draw upon recent qualitative research by Davies and Robinson (2010) and Robinson (2012) exploring children's (4–5 year olds) sexual subjectivities in the Australian state of New South Wales. Numerous examples of interview/focus group material from children and parents within the text provide evidence that young children engage in a process of constructing their sexual subjectivities through piecing together bits of accessible information about sexuality. The examples focus on concepts such as marriage and love, which are not as tightly regulated as other areas of sexuality. Robinson offers short analyses of the responses of the subjects in the text, for example, the relationships between children within one group (an older girl asserting her status as an older and more knowledgeable member of the group through distinguishing between children playing out a wedding and marriage between adults). Heteronormative paradigms are strongly reflected in the findings of this research, illustrating Robinson's point that the nature of societal perceptions of childhood sexuality, the discourse of childhood innocence and regulation of 'difficult knowledge' contribute to the construction of normative and gendered sexual citizens. Here, Robinson's pervading theme of the teaching of heteronormativity is refreshing and very applicable to children's contemporary lives.

Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood offers a controversial analysis requiring flexible thinking from the reader. The book covers many topics and makes bold statements about childhood sexuality, the fetishisation of childhood innocence and the moral panic around 'stranger danger'. Furthermore, it challenges the stereotypical views of childhood sexuality education and the power relations which govern the manner in which children are encouraged to learn.

Robinson presents a sound argument for a shift in thinking and in the final paragraph she sums up by counteracting a number of common myths held by society. For example, 'talking with children about sexuality is developmentally inappropriate' and 'children who transgress normative gendered behaviours in childhood will turn out to be gay'. Addressing potential barriers which may be impeding effective sexuality education in children serves as a powerful point on which to conclude the discussion. This book can be seen as a step forwards in the reconceptualisation of children's sexuality education and is a highly insightful and thought-provoking read. Although it does not provide a direct plan in terms of applying Robinson's ideas to real-life situations, it certainly achieves its aim of providing a fresh and fundamental framework on which to build. It is clear that there is wide scope for further research and discussion on implementing strategies to improve childhood sexuality education.

In pursuing this book and its comprehensive examination of the contradictory nature of sexuality and censorship in children's lives, readers should be prepared to challenge discourses present in everyday life and to begin to question how and why certain knowledge is subjugated and the implications of this. If readers do this then it is appropriate to say that this book could successfully initiate a critical shift in thinking on this controversial topic. As mentioned in the promotional blurb, this book is useful for those involved directly in children's education; however, it would also prove insightful for those from other disciplinary backgrounds, such as psychology and sociology.

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The sexualization of girls and girlhood: causes, consequences and resistance, edited by Eileen L. Zurbriggen and Tomi-Ann Roberts, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, x + 328 pp., US\$59.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-973165-7

Since the middle of the twentieth century, the symbolic figure of the 'sexualised child' or, more particularly, the sexualisation of girls has proved a powerful and popular trope with politicians, child advocates, media commentators, activists and some academics. An increasing amount of attention has been devoted to the sexualisation of childhood (or more specifically the sexualisation of 'girlhood') from these quarters. The strength of this book on the topic is that it addresses a variety of aspects of these processes. The book is divided into five sections. The first addresses the question of 'what is sexualisation'; the second explores 'cultural contributions' to sexualisation and the consequences of these; the third examines 'interpersonal contributions' to sexualisation and the consequences of these; the fourth analyses 'intrapersonal contributions' and their consequences; and the fifth discusses 'resistance, activism and alternatives'. An additional strength is that the effects of sexualisation on 'sexual minority' girls are considered by Elisabeth Morgan Thomas in Chapter 7 and the effects of sexualisation on boys and men are considered by Deborah Tolman in Chapter 5.

Some have argued that there is as yet no agreed definition of what sexualisation is, but for their starting point the contributors to this volume adhere to the definition developed in the American Psychological Association Report of the APA Task Force on the sexualisation of girls (2007). From this perspective, sexualisation comprises four elements and occurs when:

A person's value is determined only or primarily by sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics; Sexuality is inappropriately imposed on a person; A person is held to a standard that equates a narrow definition of attractiveness with 'being sexy' and A person is sexually objectified; made into a tool for others' sexual use and pleasure, rather than treated as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making. (p. 4)

In Chapter 1, however, Roberts and Zurbriggen remind us that 'all four of the conditions need not be present to constitute sexualisation; as any one is an indication' (p. 4). Here,