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Turning the Table: Rethinking Sexuality Education for 2SLGBTQ+ Disabled People

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Abstract

Disability and sexuality remain under-explored areas within mainstream sex education, particularly when it comes to centering the experiences and insights of 2SLGBTQ+ disabled individuals. Traditional models of sexuality education have focused disproportionately on risk prevention and pathology. However, disabled people have long developed innovative strategies, frameworks, and understandings of sexuality that exceed the limited scope of such programs. We suggest that a ‘crip’ lens, which reclaims disability as a positive and transformative identity marker, can inform more inclusive and empowering sexuality education. By centering disabled voices and experiences, it is possible to highlight the sexual knowledge, adaptability, and expertise that disabled people bring to intimate relationships. This paper calls for participatory methods that honor disabled individuals as knowledge creators. Ultimately, recognizing the wisdom of 2SLGBTQ+ disabled people can radically reshape broader discussions of sex, pleasure, relationships, and desire, offering lessons not only for disabled communities but for society at large.

Keywords

Disability, Sexuality, 2SLGBTQ, Sexuality Education, Crip Theory

Introduction

In both popular culture and academic discourse, sexuality and disability are frequently treated as though they cannot coexist. Conversations about sexuality often rest on the pervasive assumption that disabled people are inherently non-sexual, childlike, or incapable of intimacy (Santinele Martino, 2022). This assumption not only misrepresents the complexities of disabled people's lives but also undermines their sexual agency, contributing to broader systems of stigma and exclusion. These misconceptions become even more complex when we consider the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals (Two-Spirit,¹ Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, and additional identities), who routinely confront additional layers of stigma, discrimination, and invisibility (Campbell, 2017; Toft et al., 2020). Although disability rights activism and 2SLGBTQ+ advocacy have made important strides, 2SLGBTQ+ disabled individuals still encounter a shortage of comprehensive, affirming sexuality education that aligns with their living realities (Hole et al., 2022; Santinele Martino et al., 2024).

Over the past few years, researchers, educators, and healthcare professionals have attempted to address these gaps by developing sexuality education programs for disabled people. Yet, much of this work relies on a top-down model in which disabled individuals are framed solely as 'recipients' of expert knowledge. In addition, most of these programs focus narrowly on risk reduction—discussing sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy, or abuse prevention—while neglecting more positive topics, such as sexual pleasure and intimacy (Tidey et al., 2022; Turner & Crane, 2016). Such approaches underestimate the richness of disabled people's experiences and reinforce understandings of disability solely based on 'deficit' and 'risk' (Ferrante & Oak, 2020; Schmid, 2024).

Drawing on a 'crip' lens—a framework that reclaims disability as a source of pride, resilience, and creativity (McRuer, 2008)—this commentary makes the case for reimaging sexuality education for 2SLGBTQ+ disabled people. By 'turning the table' and recognizing disabled individuals as authorities on their own bodies, desires, and relationships—who also exemplify how sexual scripts and possibilities can be far more expansive than traditionally imagined—we can radically reconfigure how sexuality education is conceptualized and delivered. A crip lens rejects the idea of disability as a 'condition' to be 'managed' or 'fixed', instead viewing it as a generative space that fosters new ways of experiencing intimacy (Kafer, 2013). Such an approach broadens perceptions of what constitutes an erogenous zone, opens up sexual practices beyond penetration, and challenges the notion that 'finishing' is the ultimate measure of a fulfilling sexual encounter (Santinele Martino, 2024). Disabled people have long pioneered adaptive strategies and inclusive practices that enrich not only their own communities but also the broader, non-disabled population.

Beyond risk and harm: Looking to desire

Historically, sexuality education has been constructed as a one-way process in which 'experts' transmit knowledge to an assumed uniform audience (Davies et al., 2024). Within such framework, disabled individuals—especially those with intellectual disabilities—are often treated as if they lack the capacity to learn about sexuality (Bathje et al., 2021). Not surprisingly, many are often excluded from sexuality education classes under the assumption that they do not need to receive this type of information (Campbell et al., 2020). At the same time, the existing educational materials tailored to disabled people tend to emphasise issues

¹ We draw on the Assembly of First Nations (n.d.) definition of Two-Spirit which is 'a term that generally describes Indigenous people who have both masculine and feminine spirits. In addition, it can mean someone with same-sex attraction or whose gender is diverse. However, gender and sexual orientation are complex and can't be generalized, and each Two-Spirit identity is unique.' While we did not have participants who identified as Two-Spirit, we included this into our criteria to ensure the utmost inclusivity of language.

of consent, risk, and harm (Ferrante & Oak, 2020). While these topics are undoubtedly crucial, this narrow scope to sexuality can inadvertently frame disabled people's sexualities as inherently 'problematic' or 'vulnerable'. What about love, affection, cuddling, 'Netflix and chill', and the many positive dimensions that make up our intimate lives?

For 2SLGBTQ+ disabled people, most sexuality education programs fall short in additional ways. First, most mainstream initiatives rarely address queer identities, relationships, or family structures, implicitly marginalizing people who do not conform to heteronormative scripts (Davies et al., 2023a; Santinele Martino et al., in press). Second, the dominant emphasis on risk prevention overshadows conversations about the emotional and intimate aspects of sexuality (Ferrante & Oak, 2020; Santinele Martino, 2024). While disabled learners may be taught how to prevent sexually transmitted infections, they receive minimal guidance on navigating body image, sexual orientation, or gender expression (Davies et al., 2023a; Ferrante & Oak, 2020). Third, the language used in educational settings often feels oversimplified or patronising, especially for adult disabled learners, reinforcing infantilizing stereotypes (Winges-Yanez, 2014).

Within these contexts, disabled individuals are rarely seen as active collaborators in their own sexual learning. Instead, they are often framed as sexual subjects who must be shielded from open discussions about sexuality and 'protected' from perceived risks. This paternalistic stance mirrors a broader social climate that continues to question the legitimacy of disabled people's sexual agency. Such paternalistic attitudes stand in stark contrast with theoretical frameworks that center autonomy, dignity, and choice, such as Sen's (2005) capabilities approach. Consequently, excluding the voices and experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ disabled people in the development of sexuality education programs undermines these core values and perpetuates patterns of exclusion.

Disabled people as experts in their own sexuality

Contrary to stereotypes that paint disabled individuals as lacking sexual awareness, a growing body of evidence demonstrates that disabled individuals are often exceptionally resourceful in exploring and expressing their desires (Callen, 2020; Santinele Martino & Fudge Schormans, 2020; Santos & Santos, 2018). They routinely develop adaptive strategies to navigate physical and social barriers, as well as pervasive cultural societal prejudices that question their capacity for sexual expression (Björnsdóttir et al., 2017; Santinele Martino, 2020).

In many cases, disabled people serve as educators in their own right—teaching peers, partners, healthcare providers, and even formal educators about the intersections of disability, pleasure, and desire. For instance, a wheelchair user might devise alternative sexual positioning strategies that expand physical possibilities, while a hearing partner might employ visual cues to communicate with a Deaf partner, collaboratively shaping an accessible space for intimacy. Meanwhile, an Autistic individual could rely on assistive communication devices or carefully established routines to articulate preferences around touch and consent, demonstrating advanced negotiation skills often overlooked in mainstream sexuality education. Through the concept of 'access intimacy', disability justice activist Mia Mingus (2017) highlights how disabled individuals cultivate relationships centered on mutual respect and a shared commitment to accessibility. These connections frequently involve transparent discussions about needs and boundaries, ultimately strengthening a sense of intimacy that transcends normative understandings of sex or romance.

A 'crip' lens on sex and intimacy: Recognizing disabled desires

The term 'crip', once a pejorative slur, has been reclaimed by disability activists as an emblem of collective identity, community, and resistance (McRuer, 2008). A crip perspective contests the idea that disability equates to tragedy, inadequacy, or limitation. Instead, it treats disability as a complex, lived experience that can offer meaningful insights into community-

building, creativity, and interdependence. Applying a crip lens to sexuality education involves questioning normative assumptions about who is ‘desirable’ and what sexual expression can look like (Campbell et al., 2020; Santinele Martino, 2024).

Many 2SLGBTQ+ disabled individuals already adopt crip strategies in their intimate lives—*queering*, *subverting*, and *experimenting* with new sexual scripts (Santinele Martino & Moumos, 2023). Rather than viewing bodily differences or impairments as ‘obstacles’, disabled people treat them as openings for reimagining new ways of experiencing pleasure (Smilges, 2020; Wright & Manuel, 2024). For instance, pain is often associated as an undesirable aspect of disability (Jobson, 2024; Wechuli, 2022), but a crip approach recognises how pain can be harnessed for transformative possibilities, such as BDSM (bondage and discipline, domination and submission, sadism and masochism) practices (Jobson, 2025). Additionally, crip approaches places greater emphasis on non-genital forms of pleasure, or explore sensory and emotional realms of intimacy that standard ‘coital imperatives’ frequently overlook (Liddiard, 2020; Long, 2018; Wright & Manuel, 2024). For instance, Quinn (2023) illustrates how a young man with Down Syndrome experiences crip intimacy by forming connections with his ‘sockfriends’—non-human objects that serve as companions—thereby challenging desexualising stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities. Similarly, Rainey (2018) discusses how routine caregiving tasks, such as assisting someone with showering or dressing, can become opportunities for sexual play. Rather than relying solely on penetrative sex or standard ‘coital imperatives’, these examples show how sexual encounters can expand into explorations of comfort, sensory stimulation, role-play, and other forms of connection that accommodate diverse sensory and mobility needs (Kattari et al., 2021; Kattari et al., 2023).

By shifting the focus from individual ‘deficits’ to collective well-being, crip approaches encourage structural changes, universal design, and inclusive practices, ultimately making sexual pleasure more accessible. From producing sexuality education materials in multiple formats (e.g., tactile, visual, or audio formats) to designing sex toy suited for diverse physical abilities, the shift toward crip-informed design can benefit a wide variety of users. Davies and Neustifter (2023), for instance, describe a workshop series for fat bodies titled *Fat Fuckers*—a deliberate crip intervention that not only affirms fat people’s desires and sexuality but also incorporate accessibility considerations through adaptive furniture, cushions, and open sexual communication. Moreover, arts-based approaches such as theatre, drawing, or the creation of comic books offer additional pathways for criping sexuality education. Theatre-based workshops can employ role-play and improvisation activities to explore themes like consent, body image, and emotional intimacy in non-clinical, creative ways. Drawing sessions, such as through body mapping (Lys et al., 2018), encourage participants to visualise and reflect on personal experiences, desires, and boundaries, often sparking conversations that might be difficult to initiate otherwise. Meanwhile, comic-book projects can depict diverse bodies and relationships, portraying sexual pleasure, intimacy, and communication in accessible and engaging ways.

By emphasising the generative potential of disability, a crip approach empowers disabled individuals to see themselves not as individuals who need ‘fixing’, but as contributors to broader conversations about sexuality. Crucially, these insights also hold transformative power for non-disabled audiences, revealing how mainstream scripts about ‘acceptable’ methods of touch, pleasure, or desire can be restrictive for everyone. Crip sexualities broaden the range of human intimacy by introducing new language, techniques, and discourses that emphasise embodiment, inclusivity, and connection (Santinele Martino, 2024).

Shifting the focus: A collaborative approach to sexuality education

Truly ‘turning the table’ on sexuality education demands moving beyond paternalistic pedagogies and adopting collaborative, participatory models that center the expertise of 2SLGBTQ+ disabled people. Such a shift requires both structural and cultural shifts in how

sexuality education is conceptualised, developed, and implemented. One promising route is participatory research, in which community members and scholars co-design studies (Schubotz, 2019). This way, disabled people serve as co-researchers, shaping each phase of the study (Ollerton & Horsfall, 2013). When 2SLGBTQ+ disabled people are integral to the design process, sexuality education programs are more likely to reflect the actual complexities of disability, gender identities, and sexualities (Curtiss et al., 2023; Jones & Murphy, 2024).

Similar principles of collaboration can be applied to curriculum design. Educators, disability advocates, and 2SLGBTQ+ community members can unite to create course materials that capture the diverse sexual experiences and identities among disabled people (see: Curtiss et al., 2023; Schnellert et al., 2023). This includes, for example, covering asexuality and aromantic identities, polyamory, or kink and BDSM contexts—domains disabled individuals may already be exploring on their own. Furthermore, an inclusive curriculum also needs to incorporate intersectional frameworks, acknowledging how racism, colonialism, and poverty compound the marginalization faced by 2SLGBTQ+ disabled individuals (Davies et al., 2023b). For instance, a Two-Spirit disabled person may blend cultural traditions, gender identities, and colonial legacies that shape their approach to intimacy; ensuring that such perspectives appear in educational materials recognizes the multi-layered realities of disabled lives.

Some disabled people have formed informal, peer-led support networks that facilitate the sharing of adaptive strategies, healthcare advocacy tips, and resources for exploring sexuality (Friedman et al., 2014; Sweet et al., 2019). Formalising these networks into peer-led workshops—whether online or in-person—can extend the impact of grassroots knowledge (Schmidt et al., 2020). Peer-led education resonates powerfully because it comes from those who have firsthand experience. Ultimately, collaborative efforts can only achieve long-term success if they are backed by supportive policies. Government agencies, schools, and healthcare organizations must commit funding and resources to inclusive sexuality education programs, recognizing disabled people's right to access comprehensive information and support. Such systemic investment must also protect individuals from discrimination, ensuring they feel safe expressing their 2SLGBTQ+ and disabled identities (Morgan et al., 2011).

Conclusion

For far too long, sexuality education for disabled people has relied on paternalistic, top-down instruction shaped by ableist and heteronormative assumptions. Mainstream curricula typically focus on deficits, risk management, and simplistic guidance, ignoring the vibrancy of disabled people's desires, pleasures, and identities. This commentary has proposed a crip-informed perspective as a counterpoint—a way to subvert these entrenched norms and recognize 2SLGBTQ+ disabled individuals as creators, educators, and thought leaders in sexuality education.

A crip lens encourages us to view disability not as a hurdle to overcome, but as a site of creativity and deeper insight. Disabled people's adaptive strategies—whether alternative communication methods, reimagined sexual scripts, or more thoughtful understandings of consent—highlight ways to enhance and humanise sexuality education for everyone. By valuing collaborative and participatory approaches, we can shift from positioning disabled people as 'recipients' of knowledge to recognizing them as co-producers of sexual health resources.

Ultimately, reorienting sexuality education for 2SLGBTQ+ disabled individuals is not merely about improving outcomes for a marginalized community, but also about challenging restrictive notions of sexuality at large. When disabled voices lead discussions about sex and intimacy, they bring a wealth of lived experience that expands our collective understanding of pleasure, boundaries, and what it means to connect with others. This vision has the potential to unsettle harmful stereotypes and foster a more expansive, creative, and

inclusive view of human sexuality. As researchers, educators, healthcare providers, and activists, our task is clear: we must nurture spaces where 2SLGBTQ+ disabled voices can flourish, rework curricula to reflect their perspectives, fund their initiatives, and dismantle institutional barriers that perpetuate exclusion. In doing so, we honour the myriad experiences of disabled individuals and open fresh possibilities for how all of us can live, love, and learn.

Conflicts of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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