

# Teaching Sexuality and Gender

## What *Sex Education* and *Un Professore* Show Us

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### Abstract

Television series have long been recognized not just for entertainment but also for their educational potential. This video essay explores *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019-2023) and *Un professore* (Rai 1 2021- ), focusing on their capacity to address gender issues within educational settings. Through an analysis of these series, this study examines how a sex therapist and a teacher engage with students on topics such as sexuality, inclusion, and bullying, utilizing narrative techniques that surpass traditional lecture methods in fostering understanding and dialogue. The video essay features an audio commentary that highlights the significance of these interactions, assessing their potential to serve as real-life educational models. This research underscores how serial dramas can effectively engage European teenagers with complex themes of gender equality, proposing their strategic use in schools to support a constructive dialogue around gender and social issues.

**Keywords:** Tv Series, Gender, Sexuality, Teaching, Representation



Television has historically served not only as a source of entertainment but also as a vehicle for informal learning and social discourse. This video essay explores how *Sex Education* (Netflix 2019-2023) and *Un professore* (Rai 1 2021- ), two contemporary teen dramas, engage with questions of pedagogy, representation, and identity formation. By centering their narratives around high school settings, these series not only depict classroom learning but also position themselves as potential learning tools for audiences, particularly young viewers.

This analysis situates *Sex Education* and *Un professore* within broader discussions on media pedagogy, queer representation, and the evolving role of streaming platforms in shaping cultural discourse. Drawing from scholars such as Lynne Joyrich (2014), Tanya Horeck (2021), Jack Halberstam (2011), and Maria-Jose Masanet and David Buckingham (2014), what emerges is an exploration of how the series contribute to wider discussions surrounding gender, sexuality, and education.

### Television as a Pedagogical Tool

A key premise of this analysis is that television operates as a site where dominant ideologies are both produced and refracted, generating tensions and contradictions that can open spaces for negoti-

ating social norms (Joyrich 2014). Serialized television in particular allows for long-term narrative engagement with social issues, providing space for character development and thematic depth. This video essay considers how these series offer a dual approach to teaching: first, by portraying explicit pedagogical practices within their narratives, and second, by themselves serving as affective and educational experiences for viewers.

As Masanet and Buckingham (2014) suggest, entertainment media can function as an informal site of sex education for young people, offering representations that complement or fill gaps left by formal schooling. In this sense, *Sex Education* and *Un professore* engage with themes of sexuality, identity, and personal development in ways that extend beyond traditional classroom environments.

## Sex Education

### Queer Pedagogy and Media Accountability

Launched in 2019, *Sex Education* presents an explicit and highly resonant depiction of adolescent sexuality, relationships, and the failures of institutionalized sex education. Set in the fictional Moordale Secondary School, the series follows Otis Milburn, a teenager who, inspired by his sex therapist mother, offers informal counseling to his peers. Through humor and emotional depth, the show tackles issues such as sexual orientation, consent, asexuality, and reproductive health.

One of the most compelling aspects of *Sex Education* is its engagement with failure as a productive and generative force, echoing Jack Halberstam's (2011) reflections on how resisting dominant cultural logics of success can open up alternative pedagogical possibilities grounded in equality. By portraying the awkwardness, missteps, and moments of vulnerability experienced by its characters, the series underscores the value of learning through trial and error. This approach aligns with queer pedagogical perspectives that challenge rigid, heteronormative models of identity and instead foster fluidity, uncertainty, and ongoing growth.

This pedagogical potential became central to Netflix's own framing of the series. After the release of the first season, *Sex Education* was criticized by religious and conservative groups in France for its explicit content and open treatment of sexuality. In response, Netflix positioned the series as an educational resource. In January 2020,

alongside the launch of the second season, Netflix released in France *Le Petit Manuel de Sex Education*, a 60-page guide addressing topics such as menstruation, consent, contraception, and homosexuality. Promoted across social media and in schools, the guide reframed the series not as a risk or provocation, but as a tool for raising awareness and fostering dialogue among young audiences. In doing so, Netflix not only reaffirmed its public commitment to social responsibility but also pursued a process of accountability, as described by Boudon and Sonet (2021), leveraging educational content to enhance its cultural legitimacy and market positioning..

## Un Professore

### Life Lessons Through Philosophy

Unlike *Sex Education*, which is explicitly focused on sexuality, *Un professore* approaches education through the lens of philosophy.

While both *Sex Education* and *Un Professore* engage with themes of adolescence, identity, and education, the differences in their production contexts are crucial to understanding their representational strategies. Netflix, as a global streaming platform, operates within a transnational market logic that prioritizes diversity, bold storytelling, and content that can circulate across multiple cultural contexts. RAI, by contrast, is Italy's national public broadcaster, shaped by specific institutional constraints, editorial guidelines, and a historically more conservative approach to representation. Its programming is oriented towards a domestic audience and often reflects the cultural and social expectations of national television. As a result, *Un Professore* adopts a more subdued and allegorical approach to themes of queerness and pedagogy, relying on the figure of the teacher as a moral and intellectual guide within a recognizably Italian context. These structural differences influence not only tone and aesthetics but also the level of narrative risk each platform is willing—or expected—to take.

The series follows Dante Balestra, an unconventional high school teacher in Rome who uses philosophical discussions to help his students navigate personal and societal challenges. By integrating thinkers such as Kant, Nietzsche, and Foucault into everyday dilemmas, the show presents philosophy as a tool for critical engagement with the world.

Dante's teaching style stands in stark contrast to that of his colleagues, who adhere to traditional, transmissive methods of education (Parsemain 2019). His approach aligns with constructivist pedagogy, which encourages active participation and the development of critical thinking rather than passive absorption of knowledge. In this way, *Un professore* reinforces the idea that education is not confined to the classroom but is an ongoing, interactive process that extends into students' personal lives.

Furthermore, the series addresses questions of gender and sexuality, albeit in a more implicit manner than *Sex Education*. Issues such as masculinity, power dynamics, and intergenerational conflicts are explored through philosophical debates on everyday concerns related to identity and relationships.

### **Representation, Intersectionality, and Queer Narratives**

Both series navigate the complex landscape of queer representation, balancing between authenticity and the pressures of mainstream marketability. As Joyrich (2014) notes, television has historically been a site of both queer visibility and assimilation. While contemporary series feature a growing number of LGBTQ+ characters, an ongoing debate remains about whether such representation challenges or reinforces dominant ideologies. In the Italian context, a variety of recent serial dramas across platforms have introduced queer characters and themes with differing levels of depth and narrative centrality. Netflix's *Baby* (2018–2020), *Summertime* (2020–2022), *Zero* (2021), and *Adorazione* (2022) explore sexuality and identity within youth-oriented storylines. Prime Video's *Bang Bang Baby* (2022) and *Prisma* (2022–) take on queerness more explicitly, with *Prisma* offering a nuanced portrayal of gender fluidity. RAI's *Un Professore* (2021–) and *Mare Fuori* (2020–) frame LGBTQ+ identities within institutional or carceral settings, while RaiPlay originals like *Nudes* (2021) and *Mental* (2020) address adolescent experience and mental health with space for queer representation.

One critique leveled at both *Sex Education* and *Un professore* is their tendency to follow an "agenda" of inclusivity, where representation risks becoming a checklist rather than an organic narrative development. For instance, the later seasons of *Sex Education* introduce a trans-led student council, while *Un professore* expands its cast to include characters representing diverse racial identities

and physical disabilities. These portrayals, while valuable, also raise questions about the commodification of diversity and the extent to which such representation serves the interests of platforms rather than marginalized communities.

Nonetheless, as Parsemain (2019) argues, media representation plays a crucial role in shaping identity and fostering discussions around gender and sexuality. The presence of queer characters and narratives, even within mainstream contexts, contributes to broader cultural shifts, challenging rigid binaries and offering alternative frameworks for understanding the self.

### **Conclusion: Reflection, Reality, and the Role of Television**

Ultimately, *Sex Education* and *Un Professore* demonstrate how television can serve both as a mirror of contemporary social realities and as a space for engaging with them. By alternating between moments of queer joy and scenes of constraint or marginalization, these series reflect the contradictions many young people navigate in their everyday lives, reinforcing the idea that learning—whether about identity, sexuality, or philosophy—is often non-linear and unfinished. As Joyrich (2014) suggests, television operates as both reflection and refraction: these series don't just represent social issues, they contribute to how such issues are perceived and discussed. At the same time, their pedagogical potential should not be taken for granted. In a media landscape shaped by platform strategies and institutional agendas, it becomes all the more important to approach these narratives critically—to recognize not only what is shown, but how and why. It is through this critical engagement that viewers can begin to discern, contextualize, and respond to the messages embedded in serialized storytelling.

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