

CONTINUING EDUCATION IN SEX EDUCATION: A STUDY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Marcela Zoratti de Souza¹
Cláudia Landin Negreiros²
Miriam de Lima Hellmann³



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ABSTRACT

In this article, an excerpt from the master's dissertation defended in the Graduate Program in Science and Mathematics Teaching (PPGCEM) at UNEMAT is presented. The objective of the study was to promote an online continuing education course on sex education, providing participating teachers with a space to share experiences and doubts. A qualitative approach was used, using a training research methodology, whose data were collected through questionnaires and the interventions of teachers during the training meetings. In the analysis of the results, the interpretative perspective of Severino (2007) was adopted, which revealed the lack of teacher training in relation to sex education, indicating the need to offer continuing education in this area.

Keywords: Sex Education, Teachers, Training.

¹ Master

² Doctor

³ Master

INTRODUCTION

Sex education is a fundamental component of young people's education, which can provide relevant information about sexual health, healthy relationships and even consent. Thus, when we discuss the current scenario, it is necessary to consider that the formation of people as individuals of gender and sexuality is not exclusively attributed to the school. As Louro (2008) points out, this influence occurs through various social institutions, historically interconnected to this educational process, such as the family, the church, legal and health institutions, cinema, television, music, advertising, magazines and the internet, including social networks, social networking sites and blogs. In addition, shopping malls and market and opinion research play a significant role in this context.

It is true that the educational institution has an essential role in the integration of students, providing a space for experiences and acquisition of new knowledge through the exchange of cultures and social interactions. Also, that it is up to the school to foster the full growth of the student through a liberating education. In this context, it is, therefore, incumbent on the educator to explore various perspectives and adopt different educational approaches, always maintaining respect for the students' previous wisdom.

By promoting debates, discussions, clarifications and resolution of doubts on the subject of sexuality, the school enables young people to experience it consciously, as sex does not represent the only way to express sexuality, but one among many.

The individual experiences his sexuality on a personal level, but his formation is shaped considering the values and norms of society (Chauí, 1985; Bozon, 2004; Meira et al., 2006). While sex is related to the genitals and/or sexual activity, sexuality encompasses the way people deal with their pleasures and desires, being influenced more by culture than biology. (Louro, 1998).

Sex education has undergone significant changes over time. In the past, teaching on this topic in schools was limited to human physiology and reproduction, focusing mainly on the transmission of biological information. However, from the last decades of the twentieth century, new approaches emerged in sex education, aiming at a broader and more inclusive perspective. There was a transformation of concepts, perceiving sexuality as an essential element of human existence, encompassing emotional, social, cultural and ethical aspects. This movement was driven by different factors, such as advances in gender studies, the fight for sexual and reproductive rights, and the importance of education that promotes sexual health and prevents diseases.

From the mid-1980s, there was an increase in the demand for work related to sexuality in schools. This increase was due to the concern of educators with the significant growth of unwanted pregnancies among adolescents and the risk of HIV contamination among young people. Initially, it was believed that families resisted the discussion of these issues in schools. It is currently known that some parents request sex education in schools, as they recognize its importance for children and young people, in addition to understanding the difficulty of addressing this topic openly at home. (Brasil, 1997, p. 111).

Such content is usually worked on in the last years of elementary school, a period of significant transformations for these students. It is essential, then, to provide information that helps them develop a healthy and conscious perspective on their own sexuality, empowering them to deal responsibly and safely with issues related to sexual health throughout their lives.

Educating sexually is much more than teaching the contents of the biology and physiology of sexuality; - To educate sexually is to create opportunities for the student to express their feelings, anxieties and doubts, reflect on their attitudes and review prejudices; - to educate sexually, it is necessary to know how to listen; - the student must be seen as an active subject in the teaching-learning process and must have plenty of space to speak and listen to his colleagues; - The teacher must be the person who creates the conditions for the student to learn, instead of being a simple transmitter of knowledge. (FIGUEIRÓ, 2006, p. 7).

Additionally, the teachers pointed out the lack of resources on certain sexual topics as one of the difficulties when addressing the subject in class (OLIVEIRA, 2018). It is notable that most studies in the area of education focus on Elementary Education (BUENO; FRANZOLIN, 2017; MANO, 2009).

Sexuality can be understood as a central dimension of the human being that includes: understanding and relationship with the human body, emotional bonding, love, sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, sexual intimacy, pleasure and reproduction. Sexuality is complex and includes biological, social, psychological, spiritual, religious, political, legal, historical, ethical, and cultural dimensions that evolve throughout life. (UNESCO, 2019 p. 17).

According to Ferreira (1996), the modern school is following a path that demands a reflection on teacher training. It is crucial that this training is continuous to provide students with satisfactory results and allow the use of up-to-date and contemporary pedagogical practices, in collaboration with educators who are up to date. This is even more crucial when dealing with such a sensitive subject, which often results in evaluations by families or even by the school's own professionals. Despite facing several difficulties, it is essential to address this topic, as it is related to the moment of life in which students find themselves.

Thus, this article derives from a selection of a master's thesis, completed in 2024, which sought to implement a continuous professional development program on sex education. The need for this program becomes evident, since the researcher identified obstacles in her pedagogical performance and recognized the importance of training educators in this theme.

METHODOLOGY

The study covered a series of initiatives related to sex education, which allowed the educators involved to share meanings and experiences. Although the theme addressed is focused on the final years of Elementary School, there was a significant participation of High School teachers and also in the first years, due to the online and accessible nature of the training. This is a qualitative research, under the research-training approach, characterized as a methodology that foresees the possibility of change in practices, as well as in the trajectory of individuals in training.

According to Oliveira (2016), the qualitative approach can be seen as a journey of reflection and analysis of reality, which unfolds through different methods and techniques for understanding a topic of study in its historical context. In relation to research-training, Josso (2010, p. 247) highlights that the process of this type of research brings significant benefits to the development of the participants, but also presents challenges arising from the necessary integration between research and training. In summary, it is essential that each person shows interest in learning and contributing to the construction of knowledge, thus promoting the advancement of research.

Data analysis was conducted based on the answers to the questionnaires provided to the participants during the training, as well as their comments throughout the course. Initially, a questionnaire was applied on the theme and, later, another at the end of the training. Regarding the analysis of the comments, the interpretative approach of Severino (2007) was adopted.

In total, six meetings were held with approximately three hours each. In each session, a speaker was invited to discuss a specific topic. After the presentations, the participants were able to share their doubts and opinions on the subject. Chart 1 follows with the dates of the meetings, the topics covered and the respective speakers.

Table 1: Formative Meetings

Date of the training meetings	Theme of the meetings	Speaker
1st Meeting: 04/04/2023	Presentation of the Research Project and the teacher training course.	The researcher - PPGCEM The advisor - PPGCEM
2nd Meeting: 11/04/2023	BNCC Thematic Axes	Member of the policy and technology management team in educational space. SEDUC-MT
3rd Meeting: 11/04/2023	Gender Identity	Pedagogical Management Coordination of DRE Cuiabá-MT
4th Meeting: 18/04/2023	Domestic violence and sexist abuse of children and adolescents	Clerk of the Civil Police of Mato Grosso.
5th Meeting: 25/04/2023	New approaches to sex education	Basic education teachers in the state network of Mato Grosso
6th Meeting: 02/05/2023	The Menstrual Cycle and Its Challenges for Underserved Communities	Social Worker - City Hall of Tangará da Serra-MT

Source: Prepared by the Authors (2023).

At the 1st meeting, more than 40 participants were present, at which time the project was presented by the researcher and the theme was addressed by the advisor. –

In the 2nd meeting, with about 42 participants, the subject addressed was the Thematic Axes of the BNCC, presented by a professor who is a member of the policy and technology management team in educational space.

The 3rd meeting addressed the theme of Gender Identity, with approximately 32 participants, and the speaker provoked reflections on the importance of developing work on this topic with students.

In the 4th meeting, domestic violence and sexual abuse of children and adolescents were discussed with the presence of the Civil Police clerk, who shared various information on the subject. We had the participation of 39 people on this occasion.

At the 5th meeting, the theme addressed was New perspectives on sex education, with presentations by Basic Education teachers from Mato Grosso. They brought different ways of approaching content and sex education, from traditional methods, such as cardboard games, to more contemporary approaches, such as games on digital platforms.

In the 6th and last meeting, the theme addressed was The menstrual cycle and its challenges in needy communities, with about 39 participants present. The speaker and Social Worker brought valuable information on the subject. - After the meetings, the participants' interventions were recorded in transcripts to identify the predominant points. Within the course, three axes were outlined, which will be explored later and after this step,

we searched, within the questionnaires, questions that brought these axes to lead to data analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Through data analysis and with the purpose of meeting the established objectives, below we describe the content on the Difficulties Axis of approaching the theme in the classroom. The information was collected and presented following the following sequence: initial questionnaire, discussions at the course meetings and, finally, the final questionnaire.

12. In your opinion, is this an easy or difficult topic to be addressed? Why?

"It's not easy, but not impossible. I believe that with training and self-training it is possible to break the prejudiced barriers that surround the theme." P12

"A little delicate." Vacuum cleaner

"Sexuality as a whole, because there are many paradigms that must be broken." P6

14. Do you have difficulties in approaching the topic? If so, what is the difficulty(s)?

"I have it in relation to taboos by fathers and mothers and by the school itself." P17

"I don't have or wouldn't have so much difficulty in addressing the theme. I have difficulty dealing with dialogues during the approach with resistant people." P22

"Not difficulty... but sometimes a care of how to introduce such a situation.... such images so as not to run the risk of being misinterpreted". P15

Regarding educators and the approach to the theme, Figueiró (2006) reports that:

[...] acting as a sex educator is not as simple as it may seem, and that it is not enough to have received prior "preparation" – for some, it is not enough to even have an "advisory" group, in which supervision and support can be counted [...] when the educator tries to start a practice,

Several hindering factors come into play – it seems, most of them of an emotional nature, even when the difficulty seems to be only technical, related to the choice of teaching strategies [...] (Figueiró, 2006, p.27-28).

The PCN also emphasizes the importance of training for teachers to be able to address the content:

It is necessary for the educator to have access to specific training to deal with sexuality with children and young people at school, enabling the construction of a professional and conscious posture in dealing with this theme. Teachers need to get in touch with their own difficulties in the face of the theme, with theoretical questions, readings and discussions related to sexuality and its different approaches; prepare for practical intervention with students and have access to a group space for the production of knowledge from this practice, if possible with specialized advice. Training should occur in a continuous and systematic way, providing reflection on

the values and prejudices of the educators involved in the work of Sexual Orientation. [...] (Brasil, 1998, p.303).

During the meetings, the participants shared several opinions about the difficulties in addressing the topic, including the challenges of school administration, since many administrators fear the reaction of parents or the exposure of the institution, which ends up complicating the approach by teachers. In many cases, teachers still face a lack of knowledge on the subject, as well as a lack of materials for effective class. In view of these and other situations, we will now analyze the contributions of the participants in the meetings.

"And another thing that struck me was also the speech of some of them, right, that sometimes in their speech, I asked if they had someone to talk about it at home, and they did. Not at home we can't talk about that! So, I think that school is a fundamental space to address this topic, because most young people, adolescents, their father knows that they were dating that they are going to have sex, but there is a taboo in the family, and it is not even talking about sex, they are the general themes that are involved in sexuality". (P 06 E: 04/04/2023)

"We try to position ourselves. Sometimes we take it to the classroom. And many times we are judged for taking it too. Last year I ended up being judged in a school for taking the topic to a first-year classroom. When I explained about sexuality in the classroom. Contraceptive method, that kind of thing. And a father ended up questioning me, saying that it was not material to take into the classroom. So we think a lot about it. Right now I score a lot. And I think a lot when I talk about it, because it ended up generating a fear in my person of talking about the topic in the classroom, right?" (P 17 E:04/04/2023)

According to Hoz (1998), sexuality in education is a broad subject, encompassing various facets of human experience. Thus, it is extremely important that both the family and the school actively participate in the discussion of this topic.

In this excerpt, we present two observations made by the participants, one of which mentions the lack of openness of the class to discuss the topic at home, highlighting: "In our house, it is not allowed to talk about it!" The other participant reports having addressed the subject and having been confronted by a parent, who stated that it was not appropriate to discuss that content in the classroom. Through these reports, it is possible to perceive the various difficulties faced by teachers when trying to deal with the theme. In addition, there was another similar observation.

"There is a large number of parents who reject this type of subject, do not work at home and reject that the school also works". (P 04 E:11/04/2023)

It is visible that, most of the time, parents do not have the appropriate scientific knowledge to discuss the subject. When trying to approach it, gaps can arise that increase the curiosity of adolescents, leading them to look for information from unreliable sources. If doubts persist and are shared with others, they can open up space for unwanted situations. The difficulties in dealing with this content are noticed not only among parents, but also in school institutions.

"The school's PPP, and we see how archaic it is, what is written there is often a copy from somewhere, which was taken from somewhere, which they "found beautiful" and not the reality of the school. We need to change this, we have a very large diversity of people in the school who circulate in the school, our students have diversity and not everyone is supported, the PPP needs this change". (P12 E: 18/04/2023)

As highlighted by Nachard (2002, p. 5), the school has the responsibility to create a space in which diverse views, values and beliefs about sexuality can be openly shared and debated.

According to Louro (2001), the option for deconstruction as a method reveals a perspective capable of challenging and questioning established dualisms, such as masculine/feminine, man/woman, heterosexuality/homosexuality, and other forms of polarization that are generally accepted, but which deserve to be critically examined and deconstructed. Therefore, the school cannot fail to address a topic that is so essential for the development of students and for the construction of a fairer society.

When the school places obstacles to address certain content, as is the case with sex education, which is so important for students, it ends up maintaining the taboo around the subject and harming the healthy and safe development of students. The lack of adequate information and guidance about sexuality can lead to a series of negative consequences for these young people, such as unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and abusive relationships. To promote inclusive and comprehensive education, it is essential that schools overcome barriers and create a welcoming and safe environment to discuss the topic, encouraging awareness, responsibility, and mutual respect. Another important point to be addressed is the fight against prejudices related to the topic. We will analyze the opinions and attitudes of the participants during the training.

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