

EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVE ON ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY: POSSIBLE EDUCATION PRACTICES

SEXUALIDADE DO ADOLESCENTE NO DISCURSO DE EDUCADORES:
POSSIBILIDADES PARA PRÁTICAS EDUCATIVAS

SEXUALIDAD DEL ADOLESCENTE EN EL DISCURSO DE LOS EDUCADORES:
POSIBILIDADES PARA PRÁCTICAS EDUCATIVAS

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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative research carried out with 23 educators of public schools in the west of the state of Santa Catarina in 2012. It aimed at identifying their perspective on adolescence and sexuality and strategies to approach the theme. Data was collected using the Sensitive and Creative Method and analysed through thematic content analysis via two different categories: educators' perception on adolescence and sexuality and the strategies used to approach the subject in schools. Teachers regard sexual education a complex and difficult issue and are usually afraid and poorly prepared to deal with it. Furthermore teachers' perceptions differ on the relationship between that development stage and sexuality. While some use traditional methodologies, others adopt a participatory and dialogue-based strategy. We conclude that adolescent sexuality in school is still incipient; it is centred on traditional concepts emphasizing its biological aspects. Introduction of cross-cutting themes is challenging.

Keywords: Sexuality; Adolescent; Faculty.

RESUMO

Pesquisa qualitativa realizada com 23 educadores que atuam em escolas públicas no oeste de Santa Catarina, no ano de 2012, com o objetivo de conhecer a concepção destes sobre adolescência e sexualidade e evidenciar estratégias utilizadas quando discutem o tema sexualidade. Para a coleta das informações utilizou-se o Método Criativo Sensível e a interpretação seguiu a análise temática de conteúdo, discutidas em duas categorias: concepção dos educadores sobre adolescência e sexualidade e estratégias para a discussão do tema sexualidade na escola. Os professores afirmam que a educação sexual é uma área complexa e de difícil abordagem e mostram-se temerosos e pouco preparados para abordar o assunto. Apresentam divergências de entendimentos acerca do processo de adolecer e da sexualidade. Enquanto alguns utilizam metodologias tradicionais, outros adotam estratégias participativas, com enfoque maior para o diálogo. Concluiu-se que a discussão da sexualidade na adolescência, no âmbito escolar, ainda é incipiente, centrada em concepções tradicionais e discutida por áreas do conhecimento que estudam as questões biológicas. Sendo assim, observa-se dificuldade em incluí-lo como um tema transversal.

Palavras-chave: Sexualidade; Adolescente; Docentes.

RESUMEN

Investigación cualitativa realizada en 2012 con 23 educadores de escuelas públicas del oeste de Santa Catarina con el objetivo de conocer su concepto de adolescencia y sexualidad y de poner en evidencia las estrategias utilizadas para discutir el tema de la sexualidad. La recogida de datos se realizó según el Método Creativo Sensible y la interpretación según el análisis temático de contenido, discutido en dos categorías: concepto de los educadores sobre la adolescencia y la sexualidad y estrategias para discutir la sexualidad en la escuela. Los profesores afirman que la educación sexual es un asunto complicado y difícil de manejar y se sienten inseguros y poco preparados para enfocarlo. Tienen distintos puntos de vista respecto del proceso de transformarse en adolescente y de la sexualidad. Mientras algunos profesores emplean metodologías tradicionales, otros adoptan estrategias participativas y enfocan más el diálogo. Llegamos a la conclusión de que, en las escuelas, la discusión de la sexualidad en la adolescencia es incipiente, que está centrada en los conceptos tradicionales y se discute en áreas que estudian cuestiones biológicas. De esta forma, es difícil incluirlo como tema transversal.

Palabras clave: Sexualidad; Adolescente; Docentes.

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a fundamental element in the life of men and women. It involves practices and desires related to satisfaction, affection, pleasure, feelings, freedom and health.¹ As an intrinsic part of a person's life it goes past the biological aspect to reveal itself as a psychological and social phenomenon, influenced by social beliefs, values, family and moral norms and taboos.²

It is related to life, emotions and individual satisfaction. During adolescence, sexuality is an element that contributes to the formation of an individual's identity. At this stage it involves the acceptance of one's own body, the discovery of the other as a source of love or desire, the getting-together, the relationship with family members, groups and professionals.³

Sexuality is still a delicate and difficult subject to approach that remains at times unspoken between parents and their children. The former's policy is frequently to leave the responsibility to educators that are obliged to approach it in the school environment, surrounded by an atmosphere of mysteries and taboos that hinders communication.

Given the lack of communication at home, adolescents turn to friends and school fellows, as well as to internet, books, and magazines as a source of information.⁴ It is important to highlight, however, that the exchange of ideas between parents, children and well-informed educators can help adolescents to understand their own sexuality.⁵

The school is an institution that promotes knowledge and where adolescents spend much of their day. At school, educational practices can foster reflection and discussions that can broaden pupils' knowledge of everyday issues, including sexuality and the vulnerability of this life stage.⁶

Sexual education in schools demands specific knowledge, teaching skills, availability, as well as the teacher's confidence to address the issue. Nevertheless, it is still strongly influenced by the biological sciences that prioritize the functioning of the human body rather than the adolescent's specific interests.⁷

Such state of affairs is still observed in some schools in which education practices focuses on topics such as sexual health, birth control and disease prevention. These practices are individualistic and deal with risk awareness and the need to negotiate safe sex with a partner⁷, disregarding adolescents' personal needs and cultural issues that are part of their background and that influence their behaviour.

The association between education and health is essential; universities, through research and extension projects, are the mediator of a partnership that aims at promoting discussions with educators about the deconstruction of biological concepts on sexuality and encouraging the collective construction of new approaches and teaching techniques.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research carried out with 23 educators participating in the extension project "Adolescence and Sexuality". The project focused on social integration and was linked to the program Interaction University and Public School that aimed at training students and teachers of Basic Education. The project was awarded the CAPES New Talent Program 2010 (edict No. 33/2010) carried out at the Nursing Department at the State University of Santa Catarina (UDESC) in 2012.

The research was conducted during the first contact with the teachers, before the beginning of the discussions. Inclusion criteria were: to be a teacher; to work in the public schools of the 29th Regional Development Bureau of Santa Catarina; and to take part in the extension project. A total of 25 educators participated in the activities; of these two did not agree to answer the questions.

Data was collected using the Creative and Sensitive Method (MCS)⁸ whose Creativity and Sensitivity Dynamics (DCS) is the main device for the production of data for scientific research. It combines group discussions and artistic production during which time participant observation and group interviews are held.

The MCS comprises five stages:

- a. organization of the environment and welcoming of the group;
- b. presentation of the participants;
- c. explanation of dynamics and individual or collective activity;
- d. presentation of productions and collective analysis;
- e. data validation. Data validation was not employed, since the method was used only as data collection tool.

The following questions were raised: **how do you perceive adolescence? What is sexuality? What are the strategies used by the teachers to discuss sexuality with adolescents?** These questions were answered by the six groups of participants, who were identified by the letter G (group) and the respective group number. Each group discussed and answered collectively the questions. During the activities teachers used brown paper, marker, magazine clippings and coloured glue.

The information collected was analysed using thematic content analysis⁹, consisting of three stages: pre-analysis, material exploration and treatment of results.

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Santa Catarina (UDESC), Resolution No. 08/2011. It was carried out in accordance with ethical and legal principles on research involving human subjects, certified by Resolution No. 196/96¹⁰.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Debates on the research subject were conducted in small groups and shared with the main group afterwards. This process allowed the creation of two categories of interpretation: "educators' ideas on adolescence and sexuality" and "strategies for the discussion of sexuality at school".

CATEGORY 1: EDUCATORS' IDEAS ON ADOLESCENCE AND SEXUALITY

Teachers that took part in this study consider adolescence as the development stage between childhood and adulthood, characterized by a complex process of bio psychosocial development. They often associate it with sexuality, body changes and the recognition of desire.

There are physical, psychological, social and cultural transformations. Physical changes are: shame, menstruation; psychological: the construction of identity, conflict, several choices; social, cultural and sexual achievements [...] (G2).

According to them early adolescence is marked by puberty, which is characterized mainly by the instability of physical growth, body changes, surge in hormone production, sexual maturity¹¹.

The changes that occur in adolescence are influenced by values assimilated in the social and cultural environments in which they live – extrinsic factors that interfere with adolescent sexuality. "These changes are influenced by [...] fashion, media, friendship, bad language, life projects, values, career choice, and first sexual intercourse. All this influences sexuality and values". (G2)

Some teachers added that adolescence is characterized by conflict, indecision, physical and psychological changes, identification with peer groups: "[...] it is a stage of changes, many questions, few answers [...]. It is a stage of self-knowledge, of the individual as a being, the student as a being. He sees himself in the group and alone with himself". (G3)

As related above, these educators understand that the process of growing toward maturity presents similar physical, biological, psychological and social changes. We can add that adolescence is influenced by sociocultural elements consolidated through constant social, sexual, gender, ideological and vocational reflections.¹¹

Thus, it is possible to say that educators see adolescence as a stage closely related to a process of identification of the adolescents with themselves and later with the people they live with and their surroundings. In the quest for self-knowledge, adolescents identify with the family and, especially, with friends that will help them to build their own set of values and construct their personality, behaviours and the universe of other elements that make up this being in the world.

The relationships within the group are usually modelled by leaders with which members identify themselves. In that context, individual attainments temporarily disappear because adolescents abandon their own ideal for the ideal of the group¹². Living with the group can lead to changes in clothing, communication and behaviour that signify the desire to belong and draw attention.

Some teachers associate their conceptions of adolescence with the body changes observed at this stage; they relate the body to an expression of sexuality and believe that through its manifestations of pleasure, emotions, feelings and fantasies happen.

[...]A moment comes when you have to become an adolescent, which then goes to the body, a body with several images; he does not know how to behave, skin colour, glasses he wears, a slim body, a fatter body, what to do? So who am I? Where am I going? (G5).

[...] adolescence is characterized by manifestations of pleasure, emotion, feelings and corporeity [...] (G2).

[...] it is a time of discovery, a state of mind, loving oneself, feeling pleasure (G5).

Therefore, in their view, the body is closely related to sexuality, considering that in defining adolescence they highlight body and hormonal changes typical of sexual maturity.

Questions, discoveries, group identification and the burgeoning body characterize not only physical sexual maturity, but also all aspects related to sexuality under construction. Living in a group promotes the game of relationships, seductions, the pursuit of pleasure; it is through the body that adolescents get closer, incorporate into, adapt to the group and express their sexuality.

Another group had a holistic view of sexuality: "Sexuality is the whole; it is the way we see ourselves and how we engage in the group; it's where we are as an individual and as a group. It permeates our entire existence" (G4).

Sexuality is an intrinsic and inseparable part of the individual but the construction of adolescent sexuality is influenced by family, state, church, school and media, each with a different set of beliefs, values, prejudices and taboos, i.e. the context in which the adolescent lives influences their knowledge and life.¹³

The way teachers discuss sexuality at school is the result of how they understand it: an integral and inseparable component of adolescent development, expressed in body and group changes that lead adolescents to the search of pleasure and emotions. They recognize that sexuality is a feature of human existence and sexual education is an ongoing process that requires the constant watchful eye of their parents, teachers, health professionals, at all times. Furthermore teachers try to demystify taboos and overcome prejudices, allowing the devel-

opment of life-enriching ideas and concepts and the association of knowledge.

CATEGORY 2 STRATEGIES FOR THE DISCUSSION OF SEXUALITY AT SCHOOL

During the research we observed that teachers find it difficult to develop the subject with adolescents, often hindered by the lack of didactic, pedagogical and technological resources. They point out personal limitations to search, especially on the Internet, trusted sources of information that could close the gap between theory and practice, subsidizing teaching methods. This may be observed in the following discourse: "guidelines to help teachers mitigate feelings of distress [...]. We get physics and chemistry textbooks, but have to look elsewhere (for sex education); it gets difficult to put theory into practice" (G1).

Another difficulty is the discussion of sexuality as a cross-cutting theme: since not all teachers are able to develop the subject, biology teachers are put in charge, as may be seen below:

[...] the problem is: a student has a question on Sciences, Biology, Portuguese Language or maths. Then, he wants to know about sexuality or about sex. The teacher does not feel prepared to answer it (G4).

The National Curriculum Guidelines emphasize that sexual education is not compulsory and has to be developed as a cross-cutting theme and elaborated when it arises.¹⁴

Cross-cutting approach implies that teachers have to master contents beyond their area of expertise. In the case of sexuality, it is necessary to consider their teaching qualifications, because this is a subject that requires knowledge, availability, interest, and the teachers' personal affinity for it.¹³

For this to happen, sex education needs to be understood as an education process whose goal is the discussion of issues related to sexuality, focusing on its various dimensions, especially values, beliefs and attitudes.¹⁴

A study carried out in elementary schools in Lisbon with 362 individuals including adolescents, parents and teachers revealed that sex education in schools generates controversies: teachers do not think adolescent sex education is the school's responsibility given the lack of appropriate training programs.¹⁵

It is not necessary for teachers to be experts in sex education, but to have theoretical knowledge about sexuality to be able to reflect about it. Teachers need also to bridge the gap between theory and practice through the selection of teaching and learning strategies in order to promote discussion and encourage the adolescents' active participation in the whole process.¹³

Another strategy is the presence of health professionals, particularly nurses, in the school. They would be able to act

upon the effectiveness of care practices through nursing visits, health education with adolescents and their families. The following discourse reinforces the idea: "[...] it is a difficult subject to work with; it is always good to have someone that controls the jargons and is not afraid of talking and answering their sometimes awkward questions" (G4).

Within this context, other educators highlight the silence as a strategy to address adolescent sexuality: "among the strategies we mentioned, silence is the more effective. The silence in the face of our doubts; we have to be confident to deal with it" (G2).

The strategy of silence can be analysed in three different ways: it may represent the fear of answering some questions; it may instigate new questions that lead adolescents to search for new answers; it may be seen as a tactic to have control over the situation and not feel exposed.

The teachers emphasized dialogue – combined with videos, games, illustrations, question boxes, projects, among others – as a strategy that favours the interaction with the adolescents

Mediations, chats, and projects on sexuality at school: we are doing this project and it is being very well-accepted by the students, and I think we need to make known the way we are working with videos, talks (G4).

Lectures, talks in the classroom, in the hallways. [...] Maps of the reproductive system in the classroom, boxes of questions for those who want to remain anonymous and for the teacher to answer [...] the puzzle of the reproductive organs and videos on subjects such as the baby's development in the womb, how it is born, among other things (G5).

Dialogue is, therefore, of the utmost importance to the relationship of teachers and pupils because it enables horizontality, sharing and closeness, helping them to build a trusting relationship, fundamental requirement of the education process.

The establishment of a dialogic relationship requires time and availability, as well as skills, especially the teacher's, who must take care not to pass judgement on the students' questions and has to answer them straightforwardly and clearly, enabling the construction of new knowledge that develops their ability to make decisions.¹⁶

A study carried out in Ribeirão Preto with 13 teachers corroborated these findings. The study aimed at identifying the knowledge of elementary school teachers about sex and sexuality. Such research demonstrated that talking stimulates the debate and the problematization of themes that encourage the students to think for themselves. It is, therefore, an essential strategy to deal with sexuality in school. Other learning resources, such as films, slides, posters and audio-visual materials are also valuable.¹³

Given such findings, the authors understand that the choice of strategies to discuss sexuality with adolescents in schools lacks a democratic and horizontal stance of educators: they should attempt to view the issue from the adolescents' perspective and allow them to reveal their questions and doubts, as well as to implicate them in the teaching and learning process through knowledge sharing activities.

Sex education activities should be based on participatory methodologies. Their use depends not only on knowledge and skill: they have to be understood and put into practice. Participatory methodologies combine participation and stimulus to reflection, creativity and initiative of everyone involved in them.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Sexuality is still shrouded in contradictions, misunderstandings and doubts, so discussion about it is never exhausted.

Discussing and reflecting about the subject is relevant to help adolescents to cope with the process and to give subsidies to parents and teachers to address the issue. Dialogue is fundamental and needs to be warm, informative and be adopted by school, family and health professionals.

The approach should not be punitive or frightening about the risks of unprotected sex. Rather, it is appropriate to establish practices to get close to the adolescents to help them construct their own knowledge about sexuality, in its broadest sense, as an integral part of their being.

The researchers observed that teachers are aware that sex education is a complex and difficult area to approach. They see themselves as actors in the process and understand that the school is the chosen place at which sexual education will take place; however, they seem to be apprehensive and unprepared to deal with it. Educators understand that flexibility is essential and they need to be receptive and well-informed.

There were discrepancies among the teachers about how to approach adolescent sexuality: while some favour the biological aspects of the process, using more traditional strategies, others believe that both adolescence and sexuality are inseparable and inherent to the human being in constant development. The latter adopt more participatory strategies focusing on dialogue and allowing pupils freedom of manifestation.

The conclusion of the authors argument is that sex education in school needs the connection of various areas of knowledge, among them health care, for the development of strategies for individual and collective interventions.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The limitation of the present study is that the results cannot be generalized to other situations because it was carried out within a regional context. However, it presents useful data that might enrich future discussions about sexuality and adolescents, considering the teachers' needs, limits and experiences.

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