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## DISCUSSING GENDER AND HOMOSSEXUALITY WITH STUDENTS OF PEDAGOGY COURSE

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**RESUMO:** O artigo teve origem no decorrer da prática de três docentes nos cursos de Pedagogia, que perceberam as dúvidas e as dificuldades dos alunos para lidar com temas que envolvem a sexualidade no contexto do ambiente escolar. Então, a partir da apresentação do vídeo “Boneca na Mochila” e discussões posteriores, apresentou-se uma situação hipotética para que os alunos do 6º período do curso de Pedagogia de uma instituição particular do Estado de São Paulo escrevessem narrativas tendo como foco um suposto caso de homossexualidade. Desse modo, o trabalho partiu inevitavelmente para as questões em torno de gênero, concebendo esse como construção social e cultural. O objetivo principal deste trabalho é identificar as concepções de gênero de futuros pedagogos e o encaminhamento realizado quando a situação ocorre, possibilitando a discussão em torno da formação docente. Trata-se de uma pesquisa com abordagem metodológica de cunho qualitativo, sendo os dados das escritas analisadas através da Análise de Conteúdo modalidade Temática. Após análise dos resultados, pode-se observar que discutir a homossexualidade no contexto escolar não é algo simples, mas carregado de valores sociais normatizadores e preconceituosos. Apesar de o trabalho ser uma amostra, poucos são os futuros pedagogos que se dispõem à orientação e esclarecimento sobre a homossexualidade sem mostrar concepções de homofobia. Espera-se que os resultados deste trabalho venham somar com as propostas de educação sexual nos cursos de formação docente, pois, para mudar valores arraigados, é preciso de concepções históricas, científicas e culturais.

**Palavras chave:** Sexualidade. Formação docente. Ambiente escolar.

**SUMMARY:** The article originated during the practice of three teachers in the Pedagogy course who realized the doubts and difficulties of students to deal with issues involving sexuality in the context of the school environment. So, from the video presentation “Boneca na mochila” (Doll in a Backpack) and subsequent discussions, a hypothetical situation was presented for students in the 6th semester of Pedagogy of a private institution in the State of São Paulo: the students were asked to write narratives focusing on one alleged case of homosexuality. Thus, the work inevitably rose to issues concerning gender, conceiving it as a social and cultural construction. The aim of this work is to identify the gender conceptions of future educators and the referral performed when the situation occurs, enabling the discussion of teacher education. This is a survey of the methodological approach of qualitative nature, and the data was analysed by the Thematic Content Analysis mode. After analysing the results, we can observe that to discuss homosexuality in the school context is not something simple, but loaded with standard-setters and prejudiced social values. Although the work is a sample, there are few prospective teachers who are willing to offer guidance and clarification on homosexuality, without showing conceptions of homophobia. It is expected that the results of this study will add to the proposals for sex education in teacher training, because, to change entrenched values, we need historical, scientific and cultural concepts.

**Keywords:** Sexuality. School environment. Teacher training.

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### INTRODUCTION

The entrance of the National Curriculum Parameters (NCP) in the school context, enabled discussion surrounding issues of sexuality, since one of the volumes of NCP covers sexual orientation and is part of the cross-cutting themes that present themselves as a content that must be approached on a daily basis by the various disciplines that make up the educational curriculum. (BRAZIL, 1997)

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The cross-cutting themes need to be developed from the first to the ninth year of elementary school, they tackle or present serious and urgent problems that permeate society and should be discussed in the subjects, with the possibility of inclusion of local issues to be addressed in school life. The cross-cutting themes are ethics, environment, cultural diversity, health, sexual orientation, labor and consumption, and the latter only for the final years of primary school.

The presentation document itself emphasizes that some subjects of the curriculum are more likely to discuss some cross-cutting themes than others, citing the contents of sexual orientation that more closely related to the natural sciences in addressing the human body, but can also be extended to discussions of gender (BRAZIL, 2001). This statement creates loopholes so that teachers, in general, can attribute to the Science teacher the whole responsibility for this job, hampering the discussion of the theme, seeing as cross-cutting themes should pervade the other subjects.

The National Early Childhood Education Curriculum Reference (Referencial Curricular Nacional da Educação Infantil - RCNEI) also proposes the possibility of discussing issues of sexuality in the school context, even if briefly, as one of the document's themes is "Expression of Sexuality" (BRAZIL, 1998b, p 17), and in other parts the material: "[...] indicates the incorporation of a gender perspective while advocating the importance of passing on values of equality and respect between people of different sexes; or being careful to deliberately adopt the terms boys and girls instead of children." (UNBEHAUM, 2009, p. 5).

Thus, the teacher training courses, degree courses and, specifically the Pedagogy course, have the need to work around issues of sexuality, not only because official documents present these issues to be addressed in the practices of the classroom, but also because sexuality is a constitutive part of the individual and it doesn't stay outside school, these themes are "present every day at school, and it is the school's obligation to treat them." (LEÃO; RIBEIRO, 2009, p. 7)

This paper has stemmed from the experience of three teachers who teach in the Pedagogy presential and semipresential courses, in various disciplines, and who have realized that students have concerns and needs for information about how to work on sexuality in the school context, because they want to know what steps should be taken when faced with questions about sex, and also on the behavior of children and adolescents on issues of gender.

The teachers realized that, for students of the licentiate's degree, there is a common sense view that many children, from early childhood education, exhibit behaviors with female stereotypes and will be homosexual in the future, therefore the graduate do not know what actions to take and believe that best initiative is to refer the student to psychological care, reinforcing the stereotype that homosexuality is a pathological behavior. It seems that these are explicit and constant thoughts in teacher training and a concern to future and present educators, since many of these students are already working in the teaching profession as interns.

In this regard, Petrenas (2011) conducted a survey exposing data from papers presented at the National Meeting of Curriculum and Teaching Practice (ENDIPE) in 2010, noting that among these works some address homosexuality and highlight the prejudice of teachers, of the school and /or of the system and even the exclusion of homosexual students, reinforcing the lack of preparation of teachers to work around these issues in the school environment, due to unpreparedness and lack of training in their graduation.

Thus, to perform this study, a practical activity was developed with a group of undergraduates in education in the late half of the course, aiming to identify the conceptions of gender that future

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teachers possess, and demonstrate the achievement of the referrals when a situation involving the theme occurs, enabling the discussion surrounding teacher training.

## **SEXUALITY AND GENDER IN TEACHER TRAINING**

To approach the gender matter, it is necessary to understand that as it is with the sexuality, this subject is built cultural and socially, being initiated with the patriarchy adopted in different civilizations, as Stearns (2013, p. 27) explains

Civilizations, in general, deepened the patriarchy and, at same time, defined their details in different ways that matched belief and broader institutions of each civilization in particular. In this sense, putting their own stamp on patriarchy, every civilization united gender issues with aspects of their cultural and institutional structure.

The discussion surrounding sexuality and gender in teacher training has become a subject of research and has been gaining more notoriety starting from the 1990s (LEÃO, 2009; RIBEIRO, 1990, 2004), it can be said that one of the factors contributing to this increase was the implementation of the National Curriculum Parameters (BRASIL, 1997) and specifically the sexual orientation cross-cutting theme.

While considering sexuality as one of the relevant factors of the integral formation of the human being, the school context, as a constitutive place of actions and research, is highlighted in this area, for it to be the place where children and adolescents spend most of their time living with diversity. Because today we have the advent of full-time education that has been emerging in the country, and in this aspect the issues of sexuality are part of the context of basic education, therefore, there is a need to train teachers to approach the theme in the school universe.

For Stearns (2013, p.31) "The civilizations developed, from contacts and trade limitations, the gender-relations systems between men and women, role determination and definitions of the attributes of each sex- were also taking shape "[...].

Another important aspect to point out is that we have the Church as an arising heritage of our colonization, with a prohibitive speech, sacralized the concept of family, gender and sexuality, giving to sex merely a procreative purpose, accepted only in heterosexual relationships within marriage. As for the homosexual relationships, they became target of social rejection and prejudice, institutionalizing heteronormativity as the relationship standard.

Meyer (2004) points out that the processes of significance are involved with the production of gender and sexuality subjects of certain types, and in this bias, gender refers to all forms of social, cultural and linguistic constructions involved with processes that differentiate women from men, "including those processes that produce their bodies, distinguishing and naming them as bodies endowed with sex, gender and sexuality" (p.15).

Petry and Meyer (2011, p. 195) confirm that gender, as an organizer of culture, and in conjunction with sexuality, modulates the heteronormative way of how men and women "should" behave, how their bodies may be presented and how interpersonal relationships may be formed, in these scenarios. The heteronormativity aims to regulate and standardize ways of being and living the bodily desires and sexuality. According to what is socially established for people, in a biologist and deterministic perspective, there are two - and only two - possible locations for people related to the human sexual anatomy, that is, feminine / female or masculine / male.

Some researchers have pointed out the need of themes related to sexuality and sex education regarding gender to become a constitutive subject in the grid of teacher education courses (GONINI, 2014; MOKWA, 2014; LEÃO, 2009; FIGUEIRÓ, 2006).

One can understand that gender studies are linked to sexuality and the issues surrounding specific gender studies are relatively recent, especially in the field of education, since this matter began to be discussed in Brazilian territory by feminist social movements, and so it began to distinguish gender and sex. (LOURO, 1997)

The issues surrounding gender are socially and culturally constructed, therefore, triggered in the society to which the individual belongs, being a continuous historical process. Thus, the school cannot stay out of this process, since it is part of society it is also a privileged social, cultural, and historical site. The NPC itself determines this question, considering that:

Respect the diversity of values, beliefs and existing and behaviors related to sexuality, while guaranteeing human dignity; [...] Recognize as cultural determinations the characteristics socially attributed to the male and the female, while being positioned against discrimination associated with them. (BRAZIL, 2001, p. 133).

Discussing sexuality and gender from early childhood education is critical, because according Furlani (2011, p. 119) "[...] sexual education, from early childhood education, can articulate studies of gender relations in the process of training of children and the youth."

Addressing gender issues in teacher training is essential, since the teaching career is composed basically of women and:

[...] It's important to make clear that the concept of gender is constructed, and it is necessary to tackle the issue of female inferiority, including their own teacher training, because most teachers are women. While synthesizing gender issues, it is emphasized that the school context is necessary to understand that the way men and women behave in society corresponds to an intense sociocultural learning that teaches us to act as dictated by cultural and social standards, so the school in their daily life is still far from understanding this logic. (PETRENAS, 2011, p. 221).

Thereby, addressing sexuality and gender in teacher training is a task that cannot go unnoticed. Such issues should be part of the curriculum of these courses, with specific subjects or to complete the interdisciplinarity, enabling discussions that contribute to the deconstruction of values and re-educating future professionals within a critical and emancipatory perspective about sexuality and the genre.

## **METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES**

This present study is a survey with methodological approach of qualitative nature, that has the goal of understanding the interpretation around gender of students attending the sixth semester of a Pedagogy course at an university in the State of São Paulo.

At the time of intervention, the licensees were at the cross-cutting themes class at the end of the year of 2012, a compulsory subject that comprises the pedagogy course. Throughout the course, not only for the semester, in various formal and informal conversations, the licensees had worries about how to deal with students who may exhibit behaviors that are considered nonstandard, including boys who apparently have female attitudes as conceived by the general standards of society.

So, at the previously mentioned class, the teacher was developing themes related to sex education as provided by PCN itself, to address the conceptions that the group had of gender. A practical activity was conducted, by displaying a short film titled “Boneca na Mochila” (Doll in a Backpack) made by the ECOS institute (Communication on Sexuality).

The video deals with the anguish of a mother who is called to school because her son, aged around six years old, was caught with a doll. The event is broadcasted at the radio press, which makes clarifying articles on the subject. The scene takes place primarily in a taxi, as the boy's mother establishes a dialogue with the taxi driver, and it also exposes many divergent and diverse opinions. Both the interviewees' statements (made by psychologists, sociologists, sexologists), as well as opinions given by the boy's own mother and the taxi driver, favor reflection and the exchange of opinions of students of Pedagogy, subsequently producing a fruitful dialogue and complex approaches.

After the students watched the film and started several discussions, an activity was proposed so that they could address the following fictitious situation:

### **What would you do**

My name is Sonia, I'm 30 years old and I teach for a little over six years. Before that I was a secretary in a medical clinic.

Last year, I started working as a teacher in public schools in a city in the Rio de Janeiro State, which is near where I have always lived.

As a rookie teacher at school, I was warned that I would work in what was "possible", ie, the class that no one wanted. So I was assigned a Class of Intensive Recovery which is supplemental instruction for students who had failed several years and were now at the end of the cycle to complete the 5th year.

The age range was around 11-14 years old. Earlier, the students were very suspicious among themselves, I confess that it was a challenge, but in the course of the year, due to many achievements and conversations, there was great progress in our relationship and in the relationship between their own colleagues.

I remember that when I got to school early in the year, I thought to myself: "THIS YEAR IS VERY PROMISSING."

But I never imagined that I would win this challenge, and specially the mutual relationship between us, teachers and students, students and students.

I hadn't figured it would come to that, because in mid-October, a rather aloof boy said he wanted to talk to me, and after much conversation he opened up and told me:

- Miss [...] I am in love with my best guy friend and something has already happened between us, but my family would kill me if they knew it! Teacher, what should I do?

And here was my dilemma, I was always so open and liberal, how could I respond to this issue, after all, I am not sure what to think about homosexuality.

After reading this situation, the students had to propose an outcome for the story, writing in about ten lines how they should proceed in this situation to help the student. No requirement was imposed for the activity, and from the 25 students in the room only 15 completed the proposal.

The data from the writings was analyzed by content analysis (Bardin, 1977), and among the various techniques of content analysis, this research has focused on thematic analysis, because "[...] theme is the unity of signification that frees itself naturally from a text that is analyzed according to criteria related to the theory that serves as a guide to reading." (BARDIN, 1977, p. 105).

Through thematic content analysis, indicators were found that allow demonstrating latent and explicit content about the researched topic, from the identification of three key themes or grids of meaning that articulate with each other and which were named as follows: Age of Uncertainty; Denial of Homosexuality; Teacher Orientation.

The results were subsequently presented to students in the course, in order to highlight the problems of stereotypes and established standards, as well as to grasp the importance of school and family in shaping values and disentangling prejudices. All students signed the Clarification of the Research term for later publication.

Now we will briefly discuss the grids of meanings found here.

### **WHAT NOW, PROFESSOR? WAS IT JUST THE AGE OF UNCERTAINTY? IT IS BETTER TO TALK TO THE FAMILY**

Certainly, many teachers have gone through situations similar to this, because we know that students often see in the teachers people with whom they can share their expectations, feelings, fears and joys. This is a matter of trust. But, for this, the teacher needs to be prepared and supported in scientific knowledge and also be sensitive enough to advise, in the best way possible, in order not to cause more anguish.

Our society is heterosexual, rooted in heteronormative values anchored in the binary gender, man and woman, denying the differences, considering only heterosexuality as normal. Explains Butler (2005) that heterosexuality notes "the cultural intelligibility grid through which the bodies, genders and desires are naturalized" (p. 29), therefore, the school follows this standard or even imposes it. Thus, the school itself has difficulty dealing with the different, because it has the role of producing people to meet current social features.

One of the teachers' reactions was to question the student about their feelings, a way of avoiding further teaching on the subject of homosexuality, and even handing it over to other professionals, as can be seen in the writings collected in the activities:

[...] I think I'd ask to my student not to comment more about it with others and seek assistance with professionals in the field of Psychology, so he could finally act wisely [...]. (Participant 1).

[...] At this age everything is very unstable, including relationships, perhaps because they are best friends he may be confusing things a bit [...]. (Participant 7).

[...] Before any "Counseling" I would reflect with the boy, if what he feels is really what he thinks it is. Aren't the feelings being confused? Since love is so close to companionship, "complicity" and friendship combined with a hormonal explosion that comes with adolescence and the discovery of sex? (Participant 13).

Homosexuality would be seen as a secret or a negotiation that cannot be disclosed? It is up to those involved in the matter to put these issues under discussion, showing that being "different" does not mean that you have to have to hide and blame themselves for their behaviors and feelings.

Based on the guidelines of the NCP for the final years of primary school, the manifestations of sexuality occur at all ages; the professionals at schools generally ignore, hide or repress these manifestations, or believe that this is a subject that must be handled exclusively by the family (BRAZIL, 1998a).

For the school and its participants, this behavior, this desire, becomes a nuisance, something undesirable and difficult to solve. In the words of one participant, the ideal is for the family to take the

appropriate action: "He would talk to the people responsible for him [...] anyway, if the parents do not accept their son, I would advise, regardless of sexuality, to never stop loving him because society throws enough at him already"(Participant 5).

Society has a very influential weight on values and, consequently, the school takes these values that have been imposed, and does not try to break prejudices and stereotypes, because:

The school is undoubtedly one of the most difficult sites for someone to "accept" their status as homosexual or bisexual. With the assumption that there can only be one type of sexual desire and that this innate type must target an individual of the opposite sex, the school denies and ignores homosexuality (probably denies because it ignores) and thus, offers very few opportunities for teenagers or adults to confess, without guilt or shame, their desires. The place of knowledge remains, regarding sexuality, as a place of ignorance and lack of knowledge. (LOURO, 2010, p. 30).

The situations described show that these future teachers have no autonomy and security to address the matter, seeking assistance in other professionals often showing prejudice in their attitudes. These future educators need a lot of guidance and search for theoretical framework to support their practices, and when they give back the situation for the family to resolve, they have no preparation to guide or forward them to a competent professional.

## **WHAT NOW, PROFESSOR? DENIAL OF HOMOSEXUALITY**

We have found that the national education had advances in regards to the issue of sexuality, having the PCN as a reference document for teachers. However, we realize that in these documents the issue of homosexuality was the margin, ie, is not addressed in their volumes, leaving gaps on the subject that, more often, is not addressed in the classroom.

When you do not want to address certain subject, it is better to deny or resort to Divine help, because it avoids the commitment of possible behaviors and even the necessity to admit what was said to the family. The reports verify this type of situation.

[...] I would tell him to think very carefully before taking any action, because we know that homosexuality is not widely accepted in the society. [...] I would add that if he is sure that his sexual orientation is not conventional, that he should seek to study and have a profession to enforce respect from his family, society and so that he feels valued. Because we often see homosexuals in prostitution, and this is not a positive attitude (Participant 10).

[...] Then, when I got home, I would ask God to give me wisdom and discernment to know how to handle these situations (Participant 11).

If the school is an integral stage of promotion of identity, with considerable influence among children and youth, as there are groups that are perpetuated for many years in the sense of friendship and exchange of experiences, it is necessary that the subject of homosexuality is addressed in the classroom context. According to research conducted by Silva Junior (2010), which presents data from the News Agency for Children's Rights (ANDI), 7% of suicides committed by young people are related to conflicts of sexual identity, and that the testimony presented in the document reinforces the need to restructure the school towards educational programs that address sexual diversity.

The difficulty that teachers have when dealing with sexuality and, even the homosexuality present in society, produces a distancing from the themes, which could at least be minimized if there were

explanations in teacher training, from historical, scientific and cultural perspectives. As Britzman (2010) points out, sexuality is not a problem by itself, but it is the place where problems are perpetuated.

Almost always, homophobic bullying begins at school and spreads beyond it. The official program of the Federal Government "Brazil without Homophobia" (BRAZIL, 2004) points out issues that should be worked in the school context, to prevent prejudice to homosexuality. We know that program did not materialize due to government vetoes, generating severe criticism as it would be an attempt to officially make the school environment become a living space consisting of diversity. On the issue of diversity, Junqueira (2009) points out:

Make school a truly educational environment for all people in a critical, democratic, transformative, liberating and emancipating perspective requires, among other things, that diversity is considered, as a right and a fact of stimulation and enrichment. [...]. However, historically speaking, not having noticed it, Brazilian society is losing precious chances of becoming a developed society, sovereign, fair and caring [...], the direct interaction between different people entails learning and growth opportunities, as the diversities / differences (including sexual and gender) can be an important teaching resource (JUNQUEIRA, 2009, p.404) emphasis added.

If the existing prejudices in society are reproduced in school, it is also in that space that we can clarify, fight and resist forms of discrimination, going beyond tolerance to respect and believe that we grow and learn through the differences. Thus, it is necessary to work these issues at school with respect, without prejudice, and always remembering that the school is secular and multicultural.

## **WHAT NOW, PROFESSOR? TEACHER ORIENTATION**

The school, as noted earlier, is an important area of guidance and formation of values. Consequently, the formation of the identity of students is presented and inserted in a process that is constitutive of gender because "[...] this is equivalent to say that the subject is constituted socially, ie, it's wrought in and through social relations". (SAFFIOTI, 2004, p. 35)

The sexual orientation theme, as recommended by the NCP itself, is fundamental in the school context and, according to the research, future educators are also concerned in guiding the student, as shown by the reports:

[...] I would start an educational class to show both sides of the situation with informative videos, lectures, educational games, theaters, and I would also recommend books, so that the child could solve his doubts (Participant 5).

[...] I would direct the student, talk a lot, I would never judge [...]. I would also teach him about sexually transmitted diseases, I would speak openly. I would take advantage of the situation and give an educational lecture for students to take knowledge of the situations that happen (Participant 8).

The information regarding sexuality must be correct and not express sexism; thus, the teacher education courses should lead such discussions for classes, addressing issues of gender, sexuality and homophobia. These issues should also be present in routine primary education, favoring an ethical commitment to education.

A proposed curriculum geared for citizenship must necessarily worry about the diversities in society, one of the concrete bases in which they practice ethical precepts. It's the ethics that guides and demands of all, from the school and educators in particular, proposals and initiatives aimed at overcoming prejudice and discrimination. The contribution of the school to democracy is to promote the ethical principles of



freedom, dignity, mutual respect, justice and equity, solidarity, dialogue in everyday life; is to find ways to fulfill the constitutional principle of equality, which requires sensitivity to the issue of cultural diversity and resolute actions in relation to the problems generated by social injustice. (BRASIL, 2001, p. 36).

Ethics permeates all teaching activities and it is important to be aware of all the methodologies and procedures used in teaching, because thoughtless attitudes can trigger prejudices and stigmas that will be valued by other students.

The collective rethinking and discussion among teachers is critical, noting that entrenched practices based on heteronormativity must be questioned and discussed, and certainly, knowing how to work collectively, while discussing and valuing differing opinions, begins within teacher education, and this is a discussion that should be critical, emancipatory and free of values that are derived from common sense.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the narratives from the situation presented, we realize that future educators, mostly teachers, have little knowledge of gender issues, conceiving that homosexual relationships are likely to have consequences that can destabilize the school context. The most common action is not to discuss the issues of homosexuality in the educational universe, reinforcing the heteronormative values.

The results have showed that some speeches are standard-setters and consequently resulting in behaviors with homophobic characteristics without even realizing it, because they involve both biologizing and pathological aspects as well as religious.

Given the narratives analyzed, it is interesting that we found that we must question the process of teacher education, because only the change of the curriculum will not affect significantly the values and school culture, because what we see are entrenched concepts of prejudice that must be understood to be overcome.

Deliberations and curricula change specific issues listed on the formal aspects, but they do not immediately transform minds and hearts and, consequently, regular practices in the classroom. Therefore, the training of education is fundamental, from graduation to the ongoing teacher education, to seek the deconstruction of values to reeducate, so that we can reach an emancipatory sexual education.

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