

**TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES IN SEX
EDUCATION AT SCHOOL**

PERCEPÇÃO DE PROFESSORES A RESPEITO DAS PRÁTICAS PEDAGÓGICAS EM
EDUCAÇÃO SEXUAL NO ESPAÇO ESCOLAR

PERCEPCIÓN DE LOS DOCENTES SOBRE LAS PRÁCTICAS PEDAGÓGICAS EN
EDUCACIÓN SEXUAL EN EL ESPACIO ESCOLAR

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ABSTRACT:

The study aimed to analyze the pedagogical practices of sexual education in schools from the perspective of teachers. The participants were 15 teachers who work in elementary education, final years, in private (5), municipal (5) and state (5) schools. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, based on a script with questions of interest on the topic. Such questions organized the collection, reflection and discussion of topics related to sexual education. As a result, it was found that in some schools, when this subject is addressed, it is done through lectures by external guests and is marked by a biological and hygienist perspective, limited to anatomical and biological concepts and focused on methods of contraception and the avoidance of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It counterpoints to what is advocated: sexual education approached and reflected in a multifaceted perspective that addresses sexual and gender diversity, the real-life experiences and needs of students, that explores its criticality and goes beyond the traditional focus to include its positive aspects, healthy relationships, emotional well-being, the development of positive self-esteem and considerations regarding the cultural influences present in Brazilian schools.

Keywords: elementary school; sex education; pedagogical practices.

RESUMO:

O estudo teve como objetivo analisar as práticas pedagógicas de educação sexual no espaço escolar sob a perspectiva de professores. Os participantes foram 15 professores que atuam no ensino fundamental, anos finais, em escolas particulares (5), municipais (5) e estaduais (5). Na coleta de dados, ocorreram entrevistas semiestruturadas, a partir de um roteiro com questões de interesse sobre o tema. Tais questões organizaram a coleta, reflexão e discussão de temas relacionados à educação sexual. Como resultados, encontrou-se que, em algumas escolas, quando o assunto é abordado, isso ocorre por meio de palestras com convidados externos, sendo marcadas por uma perspectiva biológica e higienista, limitadas a conceitos anatômicos e biológicos e focadas em métodos de contracepção e na evitação de infecções sexualmente

transmissíveis (ISTs). Isso se contrapõe ao que se preconiza no sentido de uma educação sexual abordada e refletida em uma perspectiva multifacetada, incluindo a diversidade sexual e de gênero, as experiências e necessidades da vida real dos estudantes. Ademais, defende-se também uma educação sexual que explore a sua criticidade e siga para além do foco tradicional, de modo a incluir seus aspectos positivos, os relacionamentos saudáveis, o bem-estar emocional, o desenvolvimento de uma autoestima positiva e considerações a respeito das influências culturais presentes nas escolas brasileiras.

Palavras-chave: ensino fundamental; educação sexual; práticas pedagógicas.

RESUMEN:

El objetivo del estudio era analizar las prácticas pedagógicas de la educación sexual en las escuelas desde la perspectiva de los profesores. Los participantes fueron 15 profesores que trabajaban en la enseñanza primaria, en los últimos cursos, en escuelas privadas (5), municipales (5) y estatales (5). Para la recogida de datos se utilizaron entrevistas semiestructuradas, basadas en un guión con preguntas de interés sobre el tema. Estas preguntas organizaron la recogida, la reflexión y la discusión de temas relacionados con la educación sexual. Los resultados mostraron que en algunas escuelas, cuando se aborda el tema, es a través de conferencias impartidas por invitados externos y está marcado por una perspectiva biologicista e higienista, limitada a conceptos anatómicos y biológicos y centrada en los métodos anticonceptivos y la evitación de las infecciones de transmisión sexual (ITS). Esto va en contra de lo que se defiende: una educación sexual abordada y reflexionada desde una perspectiva multifacética que incluya la diversidad sexual y de género, las experiencias y necesidades de la vida real de los alumnos, que explore su criticidad y vaya más allá del enfoque tradicional para incluir sus aspectos positivos, las relaciones sanas, el bienestar emocional, el desarrollo de una autoestima positiva y consideraciones sobre las influencias culturales presentes en las escuelas brasileñas.

Palabras clave: educación primaria; educación sexual; prácticas pedagógicas.

Introduction

This article is the result of a Master's thesis that deals with the perspective of teachers in the last years of primary school on pedagogical practices in sex education at school. The motivation for this study came from empirical observations, through consultations in the context of clinical psychology, with pre-adolescents who, at the onset of puberty, showed an intensification of sexuality, which sometimes generated curiosity and interpersonal, social and family conflicts related to sex and sexuality. These adolescents were sometimes referred to psychological care by the school itself, complaining that they were behaving in ways that were considered inappropriate by those who were educating them. In this process, issues related to gender identity, sexual interest expressed in different ways, such as flirting, kissing, masturbation, orgasm, and curiosity about sex and sexuality were taken as examples of inappropriateness.

In this context, it was observed that parents ask teachers about these issues, and vice versa. In some rare cases, they seek psychological help, which raises the question of how well

prepared teachers, managers, and parents are for such demands. This also led us to question the way in which teachers deal with sex education with pre-adolescents in everyday school life.

To this end, the main objective of this study was to analyze the pedagogical practices of sex education in schools from the teachers' perspective, from an interdisciplinary perspective, which means that we sought to understand the phenomena and build knowledge about the subject in a global and comprehensive way. This is because an interdisciplinary methodology guides both researchers and teachers in analyzing phenomena from different perspectives (Souza *et al.*, 2022).

When considering interdisciplinary proposals, there is a need to integrate the union between health and education professionals to analyze pedagogical practices on sex education (Ferreira; Piazza; Souza, 2019). In this sense, for Hames and Kemp (2019, p. 67), "[...] reflections on sex education point to the expanded role of science and biology in these discussions, as well as to the importance of a qualified dialogue with other areas of knowledge". These areas include the human sciences, such as psychology. With this understanding in mind, it should be noted that the data collected were analyzed from the interdisciplinary perspective of knowledge production.

Sexuality education is often an issue that frightens school professionals and families, as there is a belief that working on these discussions could encourage children and adolescents to start having sex (Souza; Ferrari, 2019). At present, however, there are other concerns. Among others, educators, and family members find it strange that in the contexts in which pre-adolescents are inserted, there are continuous debates on topics such as sexuality, gender relations, gender identity, sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive health, which may deviate from the heteronormative idea of society (Nunes, 2021).

Therefore, it seems appropriate to discuss in this introduction the concepts of sex and sexuality because, although they are complementary, they do not have the same meaning. In these terms, sex refers to sexual intercourse and is part of sexuality. Sexuality, on the other hand, is broader and includes pleasure, affection, touch, the body, the body image that each person has of himself or herself, verbal and nonverbal communication (looks, smiles, and touches, among others), gender (female and male), sexual and gender identity (how a person perceives his or her gender), and sexual education (sexual and affective attraction) (Figueiró, 2018).

According to Figueiró (2018), teachers must overcome the fear of a negative reaction from fathers, mothers, or people associated with conservative movements when it comes to sex education. This attitude will help children, adolescents, parents, and educators seek sex

education as a way to prevent sexual abuse, sexual violence, and sexual exploitation of children, adolescents, and young people, without neglecting the discourse on teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

In this study, sex education is considered to be all teaching and learning about human sexuality, whether at the level of knowledge or discussion and reflection on values, norms, feelings, emotions, and attitudes related to sexual life (Figueiró, 2020). Given this, it is understood that sex education can take place at any stage of a person's life. It is present in everyday spaces through formal and/or informal values and discourses related to sexuality.

From this perspective, the research question or problem consists in communicating what one wants to resolve and understand through scientific processes (Marconi; Lakatos, 2021). In this sense, the intention was to carry out this research because it is understood that pedagogical practices are essential in sex education in schools. This is because cases of prejudice, gender violence or even sexual violence and exploitation have become increasingly common in society and require effective action to break down myths, social and cultural taboos and conservative norms surrounding sexuality. Such actions can be activated when knowledge and education are provided by teachers in the school context. Therefore, this study sought to produce answers to the following question: What are teachers' perceptions of sex education pedagogical practices in the school environment, in the last years of elementary school?

Methodological path

This study adopts a qualitative research design because, according to Flick (2009, p. 17), "[...] the specific relevance of qualitative research for the study of social relations is due to the pluralization of spheres of life". Thus, teachers who had taught for at least one year in the last years of primary school were interviewed, without defining the subjects they taught at the time of the interview. This is because adolescents' interest or doubts about sexuality can arise from innumerable possibilities, for example, in mathematics or geography classes.

The method used to access the participants was snowball sampling - a chain of informants that does not lead to an a priori definition of the number of participants in the sample. This non-probabilistic approach is widely used in social research, where the selection of participants is made through chain references in a network (Baldin; Munhoz, 2011). This process continues until *saturation* occurs, when participants begin to repeat information already presented in previous interviews without adding anything new or relevant (WHO, 1994). Audemard (2020) points out that through the use of key informants, the snowball sampling method gives researchers access to the population they wish to study.

Thus, five teachers working in community schools, five in public schools, and five in private schools participated in the study, for a total of 15 participants. The saturation point of data collection was reached after the fifth teacher from each of the educational systems.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, with questions of interest to the topic developed by the author of the study. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The eight stages of qualitative content analysis research described by Flick (2009) were followed in the analysis of the corpus consisting of the responses to the interviews. This was done to produce the results presented in the sections *The silencing of sex education in school* and Teachers general perception of sex education in school.

The study was approved by the Committee for Ethics in Research with Human Beings, registered under opinion number 5,413,463, and followed the assumptions established in resolution number 510/2016 of the Plenary of the National Health Council. All research subjects and their institutions will remain anonymous.

To preserve the identity of the participants and keep the information confidential, they have been identified only by their main areas of knowledge, work, grades, and the school network where they teach. To preserve their anonymity, there is no indication of gender, age, or length of service.

The interviewees were identified as follows: each was given the letter *P*, for teacher, and a number from 1 to 15, according to the numerical order in which they were interviewed¹ (1 for the first, 2 for the second, and so on). In addition, teachers from the municipal school system were identified with the letter *M*, teachers from the state school system with the letter *E*, and teachers from the private school system with the letter *P*.

The subject also identified respondents they were teaching at the time of the interview, as shown in Chart 1 below:

Chart 1 - List of participants, their subjects, and the school network in which they teach

Interviewee	Subject being taught	Education Network
P1E	Mathematics	State
P5E	English Language	State
P8E	Science	State
P9E	Science	State
P14E	History	State
P2M	Science	Municipal
P3M	Physical Education	Municipal
P7M	Arts	Municipal
P10M	Geography	Municipal
P13M	Science	Municipal
P4P	Portuguese	Private

¹ Interviews conducted in 2023, granted to the researcher/master of this article, in the city of Lages, Santa Catarina.

P6P	Science	Private
P11P	Mathematics	Private
P12P	History	Private
P15P	Science	Private

Source: the authors, primary data (2023)

Chart 1 shows that the largest number of participants (7) teach science, something that was not intended or foreseen in this study. It's likely that the method of nominating the next participant (snowball sampling) was indirectly or unconsciously influenced by the fact that the subject of the interviews was close to science teachers. After all, in relation to subjects that deal with sex education, Biology and Science are prominent, something already present in the literature (Queiroz; Almeida, 2017).

The silencing of sex education at school

A survey conducted by Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021) examined the effectiveness of sexuality education in countries such as the United States, Israel, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Kenya, Mexico, South Africa, Ireland, China, Germany, Spain, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Netherlands. The aforementioned authors found that part of this system of change is the development of sexual issues relevant to each stage of the life cycle, including childhood and adolescence. For decades, these studies have been conducted in countries with more comprehensive sex education. However, this does not seem to be the reality in Brazilian schools or teacher training courses.

In general, the participants' statements indicate that the opportunities for students to learn, reflect and discuss issues related to sexuality education are in their infancy. Of the 15 teachers interviewed, four reported that sex education, when it takes place, is done through lectures or guidance from other professionals. The following statements support this:

P14E: In the school where I work specifically, the director and the team that she has put in place actually call in a psychologist. He works in the community network; he has this training. And he's been invited to give lectures, more general ones, then more specific questions and individual care.

P6P: I have a lot of autonomy, let's say. And the coordination team is always together, sometimes when I need to discuss something that might be a more delicate subject, I ask the psychologists to join me, right?

P9E: There are these lectures. I don't see the lectures that are given as productive. I don't see anything productive. I don't see anything good in taking forty students out of a classroom and giving them an hour and a half of lecture. Talking, talking, talking, talking about a subject that is sometimes 'not my question'. If so-and-so has a question. Because they're not mature enough to understand everything they're saying.

So they talk, talk, talk... And I go away laughing, and I haven't taken anything away; I haven't absorbed any of that knowledge. So I don't see... I see these lectures more as a... as an extracurricular activity (our emphasis).

Interviewee P9E does not perceive the pedagogical practice of giving lectures to students as productive or effective. In addition, he complements his speech, literally, with what he observes during the lectures he has attended:

P9E: [...] Where the students go there, to the video room, and then a bunch of kids come and watch videos of the first and third, fourth, month of pregnancy. Seeing a birth where the part is hidden by a slit, right? That's giving birth. I see the child crying. Then I see someone putting a condom on a cucumber, so since you can't show the... not just the male, they're made of cucumber, right? So you start to think it's untrue. Because you can't show everything, so you can't show everything about sexuality. You can't show everything? Because if I give a lecture instead of a penis, I put a cucumber in it because showing a penis is ugly. Understand?

According to these teachers, at the school where they work, sex education is taught through lectures. One of the teachers, P9E, reported that he did not consider this practice to be a beneficial strategy for student learning. The interviewee's comments lead us to reflect on the *physiology of sex* approach to sex education, in which only occasional moments of talking about pregnancy prevention and contraceptive methods are ineffective and do not cover the diversity of topics related to sexuality (Figueiró, 2009).

The importance of topics related to sex education requires a broader understanding than just specific talks on specific topics. It needs to be established as a space for thinking that goes far beyond the physiology of sex and, above all, far beyond the view that sex education is only a matter of specialists giving superficial lectures. It's important that students have multiple opportunities to see, review, discuss, and re-discuss a topic because sex education is a formative process and therefore a long one. In this way, it seems both appropriate and necessary to deconstruct the idea that sex education is done by calling in professionals to give lectures to students (Figueiró, 2009; Siqueira *et al.*, 2022).

In this regard Figueiró (2020) argue that emancipatory education in schools aims to promote thought and debate about what is related to sexuality and how to live it responsibly. These authors reiterate that the teacher's role is not limited to lectures by specialists or biological information, but also includes giving students the opportunity to clarify their doubts, express their feelings, and review taboos and prejudices to build a less repressive society in relation to sexuality so that they can experience it without guilt or shame. In this way, students are provided the opportunity to construct their own personal positions, re-signifying what they receive from

the other systems in which they live. In this way, important moral values are formed: respect for oneself and others, justice, fraternity, love, and equality.

Such approaches may converge on the complexity of uniting and linking these realities in school (Figueiró, 2020). For Zaw *et al.* (2020 p. 2), "[...] sex education in schools is important for the reproductive health of children and adolescents; however, it can be challenging to find ways to adapt it to the needs of a particular society".

Considering the results obtained from the participants' speeches and the considerations made in the previous paragraphs, it can be seen that when it comes to sex education in schools, there is almost total silence for teachers, school administrators, guardians and students. In this sense, emancipatory education is an expression that is coined in books and theories, although it is hardly present in everyday school life.

In this respect, the central criticism of educational institutions that do not implement emancipatory sex education and do not encourage students to be critical in this regard is that they perpetuate repressive paradigms. This traditionalist approach not only fails to challenge existing paradigms about sexuality, but also prevents students from developing a critical and reflective understanding of the subject.

The absence of sexuality education that promotes emancipation and critical thinking is a major flaw in the educational system. This is because the essence of education is not only to impart knowledge, but also to develop individuals capable of critical and autonomous thinking. In the same way, emancipatory sex education represents an opportunity to prepare students to deal with sexual issues in a safe and responsible way, since it promotes a deeper and more respectful understanding of the subject (Yared; Melo; Vieira, 2020).

Furthermore, this context reflects a devaluation of scientific rigor and the need for evidence-based pedagogical approaches. This contributes to the perpetuation of myths and misinformation about sexuality, which negatively affects students' education and their ability to make informed and responsible decisions (Figueiró, 2018).

From the same perspective, Fernandes and Atabb (2020) argue that in Brazil, sex education in schools should be free and equal, to break the different myths and possible traumas that punitive and classificatory sex education can generate in an individual's life. The authors clarify that sex education is related to the self-esteem of individuals and their ability to build defense mechanisms against abusive acts. Thus, they recommend that people live respectfully and in a healthy way with those who have different choices from their own, becoming capable of reacting and taking a stand against any attitude that could violate the dignity and rights of others.

In this sense, emancipatory sex education is not only limited to the content taught, but also to the way in which educators position themselves in relation to the subject and how they encourage students to develop their own capacity for analysis and questioning. Many teachers, due to a lack of specific training or adherence to conventional paradigms, end up not promoting an environment that encourages students' autonomy and responsibility in their sex education (Figueiró, 2018).

From another perspective and analysis, it is worth noting that the term *sexual orientation* was first mentioned in the National Curriculum Parameters. On the other hand, the term *sexual education* is currently used in the National Common Curricular Base and in the Basic Curriculum of the State of Santa Catarina. There are different meanings among them. Sexual orientation refers to "[...] a more elaborated mechanism according to which the counselor, based on experience and knowledge, helps the student to analyze different options, thus enabling him to learn new ways" (Vitiello, 1997, p. 95). In other words, it takes place in any context in which the student may be placed, since there is the prospect of providing information about sexuality as a space for reflection and questioning of attitudes, taboos, beliefs, and values about relationships and sexual behavior.

From this, it can be seen that the responses of the participants who perceive the occurrence of lectures on the subject come mainly from teachers in the public school system (3) and one teacher in the private school system. It is assumed that these lectures take place in the public school system due to Law No. 18.337, which entered into force on January 6, 2022, which "[...] establishes the Defense Time Program, an interdisciplinary action with the aim of preventing and refuting any type of school and domestic violence, sexual abuse, and drug use in public state schools, and adopts other measures" (Santa Catarina, 2022, p. 1).

Article 2.1 of this law also states:

art. 2 To implement the Program, each school unit may create a working team, made up of teachers, staff, students, public safety and education specialists, parents and representatives linked to the school community.

§ Paragraph 1. In order to achieve the Program's objectives, lecturers or speakers may be invited to provide explanations in which school and domestic violence, sexual abuse and drug use will be refuted (Santa Catarina, 2022, p. 2).

Although the approval of this law, which came into force in 2022, is considered a step forward, the strategies for implementing this program still seem inefficient.

In this respect, four participants in the survey felt that sex education did not take place at school. This understanding is supported by the following statements:

P1E: [...] there's not much guidance from the family or from the school. You can see that they don't have a lot of information from what they say, from what they say to each other, from what they see their elders doing, it's the way they do it. They follow each other because they don't have any guidance.

P7M: No, not at all.

P10M: And now I realize that it's the teachers; they think it's better not to say anything so as not to cause conflict, you know? I realize today that it's a subject that is not discussed very much, and sometimes this demand even comes from the students, like they ask, but okay, and how are we supposed to know about this subject?

P13M: It's a bit of a taboo, they're just starting to get curious about it, from preschool on, but it's still not talked about much. Because it's still taboo to talk about it. Because parents and even some students think that to talk about sexuality means to encourage sex, intercourse. That's it.

The reports indicate that teachers perceive that sex education doesn't take place for reasons related to the avoidance of conflicts, since they still represent social and cultural taboos. This suggests that there are fears, misinformation, and a lack of arguments that limit or prevent them from talking, discussing, and reflecting on the topic in the classroom, reinforcing the silencing of the topic. As Schutz, Martinez and Salva (2019, p. 452) write: "spaces for discussion and reflection about children's sexuality are almost nonexistent, and the unspoken prevails."

Sex education teaching practices

The constant investment in the transformation of standards in education involves learning processes and pedagogical practices that relate to teaching and the way it takes place. Thus, pedagogical practices have different definitions in the literature.

In this study, the perspective of Caldeira and Zaidan (2013, p. 02) was used as the central concept of pedagogical practices, which are presented as follows: "[...] a complex social practice that takes place in different spaces/times of the school, in the daily lives of the teachers and students involved in it and, in a particular way, in the classroom, mediated by the interaction of teachers and students' knowledge". It is also considered that pedagogical practices are constructed not only in the space and time of the school, but also in the daily lives of teachers and students, according to factors influenced by the systems in which they live.

Based on this, and although the interviewees perceive that sex education does not take place in the school where they work, they defend the idea that sex education takes place in everyday life, in the coexistence of people, in a subtle and unplanned way. It's important to

consider that, on the way to proposing education in its broadest sense, institutionalized education seems to be limited to the idea that people who live together and go to school are *asexual*. Most of the time, sex education takes place in this space through a hidden curriculum. And although it is always present in school life, this curriculum is not revealed and is often not even noticed.

The fact is that everyone is sexually educated from birth. Over time, they absorb socially expected attitudes and behaviors. In the process, they often encounter conflicts between desire, repression, and guilt. At school, these socio-cultural processes are exposed and reproduced through the attitudes and behaviors of teachers and students. Among other reasons, the school becomes a favorable space for the development of educational actions in the sphere of sexuality (Araujo; Augusto; Ribeiro, 2009). An example of this is what three of the interviewees said when asked how they perceived the events related to sex education at school:

P1E: *I see it very much. More with the girls than with the boys. The girls already talk; they're already more open. The boys are a bit shy and embarrassed; they're even ashamed to talk; the boys keep to themselves more... sometimes the girls in the secondary school, who are a little bolder, say something. I answer, and they say: "Gee teacher, but it's not like that."*

P5E: *For example, the sixth graders, especially the boys, draw penises everywhere. It's on their desks, it's on their chairs, it's in all the English dictionaries, they draw it. They have a need to draw penises on everything. It's absurd!*

P3M: *[...] the other day a tampon fell out of a girl's backpack and the boys were embarrassed when she picked it up.*

In these three reports, it can be seen that there are misconceptions for the teachers, which may stem from a lack of understanding of the biopsychosocial factors of this age group. It can be seen that these responses highlight the differences in behavior between boys and girls. The excerpts show evidence of gender roles and perceptions. Adjectives indicating a certain passivity and/or simplicity for girls are often attached to the female gender. For example, when P1E mentions that *girls talk more, they are more open, boys get a bit shy and embarrassed...* and then repeats that there are girls who are *tetchier*. This is also evident when she mentions the embarrassment felt by boys when they see a girl picking up a tampon that has fallen out of her backpack, as reported by P3M. In the same vein, there is also the remark about the *gender swapping* of students mentioned by P11P:

P11P: *But I see that in the eighth and ninth grades, this question of curiosity is more of an active perception. The question of touch. Also, the changing of genders, right? Do you like a girl today? Tomorrow a boy, today a girl, tomorrow a boy? It happens that way, my God, right?*

In these narratives, certain gender roles are emphasized in the form of stereotypes that may be part of what these respondents believe to be right or wrong. And when they are repeated in everyday life, even unintentionally, they mark polarized discourses about gender roles that have been constructed by adults and reproduced by children and adolescents. This is because their perception of the world is largely the result of the social environment they share, and so they are conditioned to be prejudiced and sexist, which makes it difficult for them to learn to respect diversity and differences (Ferreira, 2021).

In addition, there are the teachers' own characteristics, which are sometimes reflected in personal resistance or difficulty in approaching the subject (Jardim; Brêtas, 2006). On the other hand, pressure from family members/guardians or other members of the school community is also common, since the discussion of sexuality is inevitably linked to controversial issues related to prejudices, religion, ideologies, politics, etc., which often lead to tense and conflicting situations when discussing sexual behavior in school (Maistro, 2006).

From this perspective, we derive the understanding that teachers are not aware of the hidden curriculum that permeates and transverses their actions. After all, even if involuntarily and not consciously, their decisions, attitudes, teaching materials, etc. are permeated by the dominant ideology that underpins their practices (Gonini; Petrenas, 2021). In the case of sex education specifically, it is understood that in Brazil, in the school space, there are divergences and interferences over its object of study. As a result, adolescents' learning process is hampered, as biological concepts, medical and political concepts and others are sometimes taken into account when defining teaching practices linked to the subject.

In addition, the participants were asked how they deal when the subject of sexuality comes up in their everyday classes. At this point, it was clear that eight out of the fifteen interviewees reported that they respond when such questions or comments arise. It was analyzed that these interviewees try to resolve doubts the moment they arise, which demonstrates a more active approach when the subject comes up during their lessons. Although these teachers are well-meaning, the fact that there is little continuing training on how to approach the subject in a reliable and appropriate way may lead them to respond according to their experiences and perspectives. This generates a hidden curriculum about what is right and wrong when it comes to the subject.

In this study, seven science teachers were interviewed, three of whom said they had more flexible teaching practices to deal with students' real questions. This fact deserves attention because questions about genitalia, gender, and sexuality have always occurred and are believed to continue to occur. Thus, the lack of explanations and the gaps, when they persist,

often lead young people to seek information in places where it can be dangerous, false or inappropriate (Abreu, 2021).

This study has therefore shown how insecure the participants feel, not only in terms of their knowledge of the subject. This can be seen when they talk about their fears based on institutional rules. For example, one of the interviewees reported that when asked about situations related to sexuality or sex education that occur in everyday school life and that cause concern, their supervisors do not respond at all and do not know what to do about it. In addition, we can see their difficulty in dealing with issues related to gender and sexual diversity, as well as their difficulty in talking about what is not included in the curriculum, such as their experiences, disagreements, feelings, fears, etc.

In addition, the fact that sexuality is not talked about in class when the topic comes up in everyday life sends an important message to students about sexuality education because attitudes, silences, looks, gestures, or, in short, nonverbal - unplanned - behaviors happen in everyday life and are related to informal sexuality education. For example, if an 11-year-old girl doesn't know about menstruation or how babies are born, it is possible to infer that she has had sex education. The simple fact that there is no one to talk to about these topics leads her to conclude that adults don't want to talk about them and that perhaps it is a subject that should not be discussed. This becomes an education on the subject because "[...] in school, the science teacher teaches about the circulatory, digestive, respiratory systems, etc., and doesn't talk about the sexual system or talk about it superficially" (Figueiró, 2020, p. 17). Not talking about sex education, or even refusing to talk about sexuality from a biological perspective, can lead adolescents to understand that this subject is irrelevant or inappropriate. Therefore, these issues are addressed in science classes, as analyzed in the research.

From this perspective, seven science teachers responded that in the schools where they work, sex education is limited and directed to science classes, and that their responsibility is passed on to the teachers of that subject because they have more authority to talk about sexuality. According to the reports, however, these teachers don't feel sufficiently prepared to deal with these issues. Thus, it can be seen that the interviewees highlight their difficulties in teaching topics related to sexuality education, especially regarding the emotional and affective issues of the students, which can arise during the lessons or at any time in the school day. It can be concluded that science teachers have limited knowledge of technical and content terms and approaches. Furthermore, it is clear that this knowledge does not seem to be sufficient to address students' doubts, curiosities, and needs about the subject.

Final considerations

In response to the objectives set in this study, we identified the pedagogical practices of sex education in schools from the perspective of teachers. In this regard, the speeches of the interviewees revealed: (i) their fear of talking about the subject when it goes beyond technical content; (ii) insufficient knowledge of the possibilities of approaching the subject, especially when feelings, affections, and emotions are involved; and (iii) fear of how the subject will have repercussions outside the school environment. Sometimes these fears are based on the fear of the reaction of the students' families, sometimes on their perception of a lack of preparation in dealing with the subject.

As a result, participants felt that school administrators often limit classroom discussion of topics considered *controversial*. Among the findings of this study, it was observed that in most of the schools where they work, pedagogical practices in sex education do not take place in an interdisciplinary way, something that may be common in other school settings. It is also noted that some teachers, when asked by students about the subject, react and explain in the way they think is correct, i.e., some limit themselves to what they think they should answer; others direct the question to the science teacher; and some do not answer the questions because they are not part of their subject. However, there are many views in the literature that sex education is the responsibility of the family, school administrators, educators, and policymakers (Astle *et al.*, 2020).

Science teachers also report that they don't feel adequately prepared to deal with issues related to sex education in their classes. Finally, they reported their difficulties in approaching sex education about students' emotional and affective issues that often arise in the classroom. This suggests that science teachers have limited knowledge of technical and content-based terms and approaches. Moreover, these approaches don't seem to be sufficient to address students' doubts and needs on the subject. Therefore, it appears that sex education in these spaces is indeed limited to science classes, and its approach is insufficient.

In this study, the participants were also asked about their perception of the pedagogical practices of sex education in school. In this regard, it can be concluded that currently sex education, when approached by teachers, has a biological and hygienic perspective, limited to anatomical and biological concepts and focused on contraceptive methods and the avoidance of STDs.

Considering the results of this study and what is emphasized in the literature, and although sex education is limited and insufficient in schools, this process takes place in

everyday life, even indirectly, in the coexistence between people, in a subtle and involuntary way. It is clear, then, that sex education takes place in this space through a hidden curriculum and through the perspectives and attitudes of some teachers in their approaches to certain subjects related to gender and affectivity.

Finally, it is essential to build public policies that reinforce and take into account the daily practices and problems teachers face, as well as their knowledge and fields of work, based on lived realities and not just on deceptive speeches. This includes the education and training of teachers. In this study, the difficulties and limitations of the teachers' approach to the subject in question become clear, something that urgently needs to be reviewed. After all, many of them deal with different contexts (social, educational, family, personal, etc.) in their work that are not properly addressed in the (official) texts of the curricula, such as sex education. Basically, we argue that teachers should be listened to and taken into account more by public policymakers since they are the 'front line' of education.

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