

Portuguese Primary School Teachers' Conceptions and Obstacles to Sex Education in Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' conceptions are a product of the interaction between their scientific knowledge, systems of values, and social and professional practices. Obstacles to teaching sex education may have several origins. This research intends to identify primary school teachers' conceptions and obstacles to teach sex education, more precisely, teachers' opinions and perceptions of difficulties, fears and supports and the contextual factors that can influence their conceptions. The research starting point was the construction and validation of the questionnaire. This instrument was applied to a large sample with 486 primary school teachers from the northern region of Portugal. After data collection, a data base was constructed and statistical tests were applied. The results suggest that: teachers are little favourable to sex education in primary school; the most difficult domain to teach is expressions of the sexuality; the most difficult topics to approach are related to sexual pleasure; teachers prefer the participation of parents, health professionals and psychologists; the reactions and mentalities of parents and conservative milieu seem the most strong fears; the supports teachers considered are colleagues, school director and school group president; the teachers' training needs expressed consist in to give them scientific knowledge, help them to respond easily to children's unpredictable questions and to prepare to develop values awareness. The factors which reflect the strongest influence on teachers' conceptions are: academic qualifications, gender, training courses, religious practice, time of career, area of work, and to have children.

CONTEXT

In Portugal the implementation of sex education has been a difficult process. In our point of view the main obstacle is essentially rooted in social origins. Since 1984 several laws (e.g. Law n° 3/84) have been published to promote this educative area but until now only very sporadic activities have been carried out in a little number of Portuguese schools (Vaz, Vilar & Cardoso, 1996), although laws express that the state must guarantee teachers' training.

Ten years after the first law, between 1995 and 1998, an experimental project was developed in five national schools including primary to secondary schools. In consequence, the report about this project leaded up to new legal documents (Law n° 120/99; Government Decree n° 259/2000) where the compulsory approach to "sexual health promotion and the human sexuality" since primary school is reinforced. Also in 2000, the Ministry of Education has published the book "Sex Education in Scholar

Milieu – guide lines” (CCPES *et al.*; 2000) as a result of the previous report. In this document the goals, knowledge, and appropriate strategies to different school levels are presented. Though all these legal and school orientations have been produced, the majority of Portuguese teachers never do sex education.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The book referred above (CCPES *et al.*, 2000) defines not only the scientific contents but also, the values to consider in sex education, attitudes and competencies to develop in each school level. For primary school, the basic goal is clearly defined:

[...] to enable children to build their «relational Self», through a better knowledge of their body, the understanding of their origin, the affects valorisation, and the critical reflection about gender social roles (CCPES et al., 2000: 66).

The diminished or reduced implementation of sex education at school has developed debates on TV and radio, with the participation of students, teachers, parents and leaders of some movements or associations (e.g. Association for the Family Planning). Our close contact with primary school teachers, in their complementary academic formation and during training courses at the university has showed us a general picture of the primary school situation as far as sex education is concerned.

Having all this in mind, we decided to investigate the cause of primary school teachers’ resistance to approach sex education. Our hypothesis are that teachers have low scientific and pedagogical knowledge in this domain and that other factors, like social representations – as well as convictions, beliefs, and ideologies – (Clément, 1994; De Vecchi & Giordan, 2002) and life history (Khelily, 2002, Oshi & Nakalema, 2005) can interact with the knowledge in the construction of conceptions.

Conceptions generally are well-rooted and may influence the learning process or the integration of new scientific knowledge. A *conception* is based on a set of mental images and models which exist in student’s mind before the learning experience and that actively participate throughout the process of knowledge construction (De Vecchi & Giordan, 2002). If conceptions are not considered in the teaching / learning process, they tend to keep and to be stronger along the time.

Conceptions may be a product of the integration of the systems of values and the social practices as well as the scientific contents (Clément, 1998; 2004).

The schema of figure 1 is a modified model of the didactical transposition, which can be applied to sex education and shows that teachers' conceptions (C) are a product of interaction between their scientific knowledge (K) about this theme, their system of values (V) including opinions, political ideologies and religious beliefs and their social and pedagogical practices (P) concerning religious practices and school approaches.

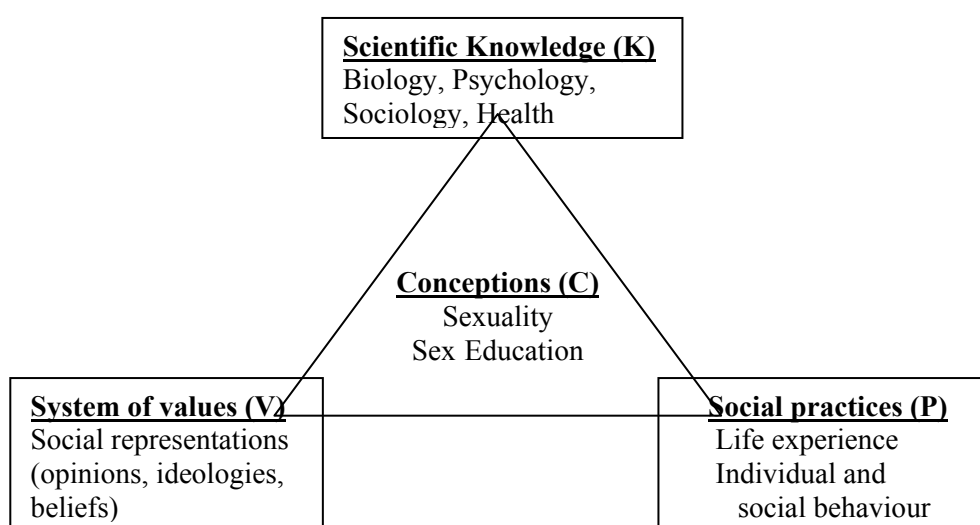


Figure 1: Conceptions (C) as an interaction between K, V and P.

Social representations reflect the system of values and can be obstacles to the acquisition or mobilisation of scientific knowledge (Clément, 1998). Obstacles can be of several origins: epistemological, didactical, psychological, and social (Clément, 2003). In terms of sex education in Portugal we can establish this typology of obstacles as follows:

- *Epistemological obstacles* correspond to everyday life constructed conceptions (familiar situations, opinions, beliefs) that are in opposition to the scientific interpretations (Bachelard 1938, Clément, 1998; 2003). Religion, by attributing a sin connotation about sexuality and pleasure, can be an obstacle to the biological and psychological interpretation of sexuality. The traditional gender roles (male/female; father/mother,...) can also be thought of as “natural”, being an epistemological obstacle to the understanding of their socio-cultural dimension (Clément 2001).
- *Didactical obstacles* are related to the interference of previous learning in the construction of conceptions, and are influenced by the teacher or by documents like

textbooks or school posters (Clément, 2001; 2003; Carvalho, 2003). The majority of the Portuguese textbooks present the sexual and reproductive functions in a minor way compared to the other human vital functions as this topic shows up the end of the chapter, occupying less page area, having less activities for students than other topics. Moreover, relevant concepts are missing and even scientific errors can be found (Teixeira, 1999, Alves *et al*, 2005).

- *Psychological obstacles* are related to personal reasons that lead individuals in learning situations to reject new scientific conceptions (Carvalho, 2003). This kind of obstacles results from the individuals' personality (Clément, 2001) and his or her sexual biography (Kehily, 2002). We also have found out, when talking with several primary school teachers, that some of them recognise their own sexuality as an important obstacle to do sex education in school. This has been reinforced by a qualitative study analysing the relations between teachers' sexual biography and their pedagogical practice about sex education (Kehily, 2002) indicating that «*their approaches to teaching and learning have been shaped by their past experiences as pupils and as gendered sexual objects*» (p.229) and that «*experience is translated into pedagogic practice in complex and unexpected ways*» (p.230).

- *Social obstacles* are associated to the political aspects and the teachers planning of the didactical situation (Clément, 2003). In Portugal, until the April 1974 revolution, sex related issues were not to be discussed openly and even schools for boys and girls were then separated. Even after the revolution, the Catholic Church and some Parental Associations lobbied for the revocation of the law n° 3/84 which guarantees sex education as a fundamental component of education rights. The government itself is still considering sex education as a potential area of social conflict between institutions and conservative social groups. Some teachers also feel afraid to deal with this topic because of their professional career (Vaz, *et al.*, 1996). A previous Portuguese study on human reproduction and scientific culture (Teixeira, 1999) attributes great importance to social values, like religion, as being an obstacle to sex education.

In consequence of the changes in Portuguese laws concerning sex education, new school programmes have been developed. The actual primary school programme, established in 1990, includes sex education across the four primary school years:

- first year: *sexual identity*;
- second year: *body, family relationships and social roles*;
- third year: *reproductive and sexual function*; and

- fourth year: *body safety*.

Being aware of the obligatory topic of sex education in Portuguese primary school and that teachers avoid to teach it, in this work we intended to identify teachers' conceptions and the obstacles to sex education implementation. Our research is based on the didactical transposition model, in which external and internal didactic transpositions are considered (Clément, 1998). The *external didactical transposition* concerns the construction of the school programmes, in reference to the new scientific knowledge produced by the scientific community, to the social practices and to the system of values, being decided by policy-makers. The *internal didactical transposition* includes the way in which school programmes are effectively applied by textbooks and teachers' pedagogical practices. The aim of this research is situated in the second phase of didactical transposition: between the "knowledge to be taught" and the "taught knowledge". Our general research question is: Why the knowledge to be taught is not taught?

To get the answer to this question we defined the following main goal:

- To identify primary school teachers' perceptions about obstacles those prevent them to teach sex education.

The specific goals are:

- To know teachers' level of agreement with sex education in primary school;
- To identify the subject matter in which teachers have more difficulties;
- To know teachers' opinion about different participants in children's sex education;
- To identify teachers' fears and perceptions of supports in problematic situations related to sexuality approaches;
- To know teachers' agreement with specific training courses concerning sex education;
- To identify teachers' contextual factors (individual and socio-cultural) that can interact with their professional practice of sex education.

METHODOLOGY

To attain the above objectives we constructed and applied a questionnaire to identify teachers' perceptions about school sex education and obstacles to implement it. The construction of this questionnaire was based upon: *literature review* related to sex education and health promotion to define the questions about sex education areas of knowledge, specific topics, participants and community involvement (CCPES *et al.*,

2000; Vaz *et al.*, 1996), values system, like religion, religious practice and political tendency that can interact with pedagogical practice (Clément, 1998; Teixeira, 1999; Kehily, 2002; Walker *et al.*, 2003); a *previous study* to identify primary school children more frequent questions (Anastácio & Carvalho, 2002); and on the close *contact with primary school teachers* which provide us information about perceptions and feelings related to fears, delicate situations, supports and training needs in sex education (SE).

To validate the questionnaire a pilot test was carried out with 30 primary school teachers. Subsequently, minor changes were introduced in the questionnaire to be applied to the large sample. The internal consistency and reliability of the scales was tested using the Alpha Cronbach and $\alpha > 0.72$ for all variables.

Of the full questionnaire dependent variables (presented in Lickert scales) we used the following ones for the present work: 1) agreement with SE along school levels, 2) difficulties in the four areas of knowledge of SE (Expressions of sexuality, body growth, reproductive and sexual health, and interpersonal relationships); 3) feelings to approach sexuality specific topics; 4) participants in children SE; 5) fears in SE domain; 6) supports that teachers regard in case of difficulties, and 7) teachers' training needs. The factors we analysed were gender, training courses, to have children, age, time of career, academic qualification, marital status, area of residence, area of work, religion, religious practice and political tendency.

The sample was the convenience sample type and included 486 primary school teachers from 6 CAE (Educative Area Centre) of the northern region of Portugal. Questionnaires were applied anonymously. To obtain permission for the questionnaire application, firstly we contacted the CAE by letter and afterwards we contacted the president of the selected schools by telephone. In the nearby school we went there to give the questionnaire to the president and combine a day to turn back to collect them. For distant schools sent questionnaires by mail into an envelop containing also another stamped and addressed envelop to be returned.

After data collection, a data base was constructed in the SPSS software, version 13.0. With this tool a statistical analysis was carried out: descriptive statistics, which will be presented in graphs, and inferential analysis, which will be presented in text or tables, using the *t*-Test and the non parametric testes as Kruskal-Wallis (to analyse the set of groups) and Mann-Whitney (to compare the pairs of groups).

RESULTS

According to individual and socio-cultural factors the sample was composed of 486 primary school teachers, 426 (87,7%) of them were females and 58 (11,9%) were males, with mean age of 43,4 and 41,6 years old and mean time of career of 21,4 and 18,3 school years, respectively. The majority of them were married (72,1% of females and 70,7% of males), lived in urban area (64,0% and 59,6%), had children (80,6% and 75,4%) and had no specific continuous training course (88,8% and 82,5%). About the religion the great majority was Catholic (97,3% and 88,9%) in spite of only 51,6% of females and 44,2% of males considered moderately religious practitioners.

The analysis of the dependent variables, which provide us the knowledge of teachers' conceptions and obstacles, requires a precise although synthetic presentation of each one.

1. Agreement with SE along school levels

In general primary school teachers are more favourable to sex education in secondary and elementary school than in primary and nursery school (Figure 2).

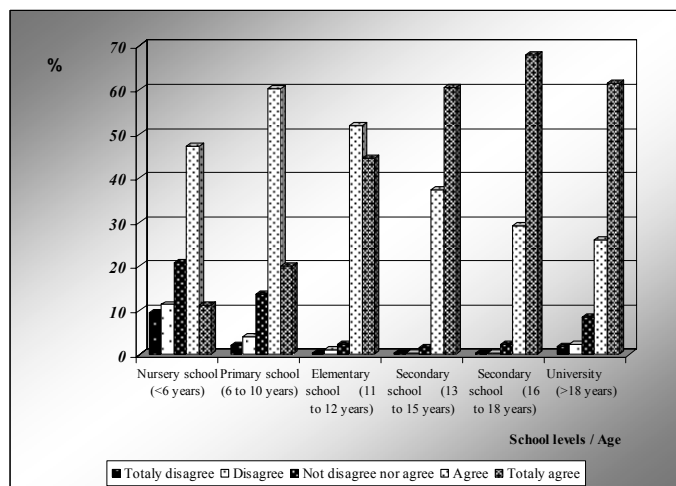


Figure 2: Agreement to sex education along school levels.

The factors that seem to affect more this conception are:

- academic qualification, in which teachers with lower qualifications were significantly less favourable than those with complementary formation for nursery school ($p=0,015$) and those with license for elementary school ($p=0,015$);

- continuous training course, those who did it are more favourable to sex education in primary school ($p=0,051$) and university ($p=0,011$) than those who did not;
- political tendency showing that teachers of left wing agree significantly more with sexuality approach in nursery ($p=0,024$) and primary school ($p=0,006$) than those of right wing tendency.

2. Difficulties in the four areas of knowledge of SE

The area in which teachers expressed more difficulties to deal with was “expressions of the sexuality” and the easiest one was “interpersonal relationships” (Figure 3).

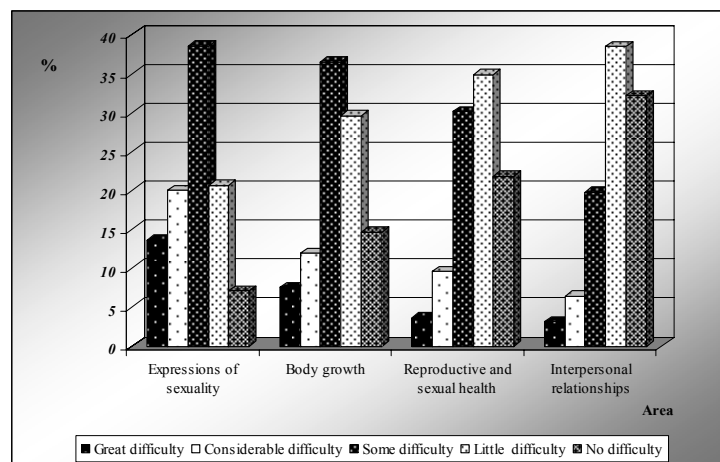


Figure 3: Difficulties in the four areas of knowledge of sex education.

The more influent factors in these perceptions of difficulties seem to be:

- gender, because female registered significantly more difficulties than males in the areas “body growing” ($p=0,028$) and “expressions of the sexuality” ($p=0,001$);
- age, with the group of below 30 years old differing from the group of 36-40 in “body growing”, “expressions of sexuality” and “reproductive and sexual health” ($p=0,045$, for all) and also from the group of 46-50 in “expressions of the sexuality” ($p=0,015$);
- training courses (more precisely, sporadic courses), teachers who did them reveal significantly less difficulties than the other ones who did not, which could be found in all areas: (“expressions of sexuality” and “interpersonal relationships”, $p<0,001$; “body growing”, $p=0,002$; “reproductive and sexual health”, $p=0,025$); and to have children, in which teachers who are parents expressed more difficulties than those who are not, also in all areas, being the mean differences statistically significant for “body growing” ($p=0,042$),

“interpersonal relationships” ($p=0,019$) and “reproductive and sexual health” ($p=0,002$) and closed to the significant level for “expressions of the sexuality” ($p=0,051$).

3. Feelings to approach sexuality specific topics

The teachers’ more constraining topics are “eroticism”, “pornography” and “sexual intercourse” while the less embarrassing ones are “body differences”, “affectionate relationships” and “gender roles” (Figure 4).

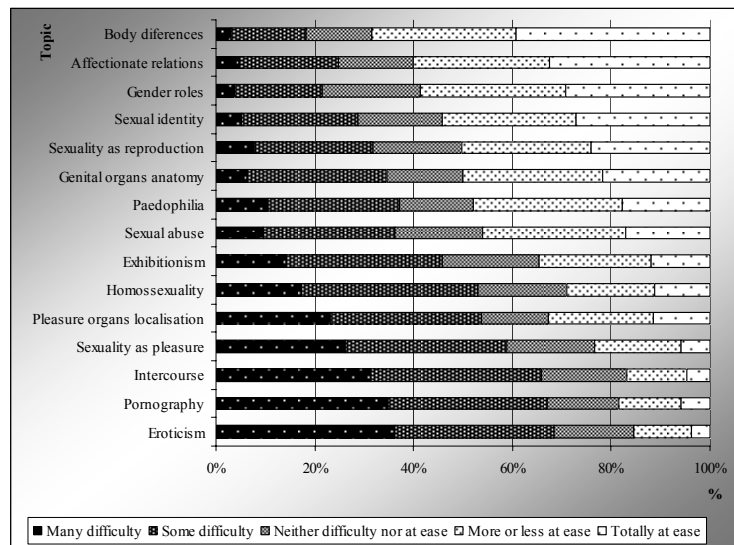


Figure 4: Feelings to approach specific topics of sexuality.

The factors that appear as the more interesting in teachers feelings about the presented topics are:

- gender with significantly differences between females and males in the topics “localization of the pleasure organs” ($p=0,040$), “sexuality as pleasure” ($p=0,011$), “eroticism” ($p=0,001$) and “intercourse” ($p<0,001$) where females revealed more difficulties;
- to have children indicating that teachers who are parents have significant more difficulties than the other ones to approach “sexuality as reproduction” ($p=0,002$), “affectionate relationships” ($p=0,004$), “eroticism” ($p=0,047$), “homosexuality” ($0,002$), “exhibitionism” ($p=0,001$), “sexual abuse” ($p=0,041$) and “intercourse” ($p=0,006$); area of work with teachers in urban area having less difficulties to deal with “affectionate relationships” than those working in suburban ($p<0,001$) or rural areas ($p=0,036$), “pornography” than

those from rural area ($p=0,024$) and “sexual identity” than those of suburban area ($p=0,036$);

- religious practice where the very much practitioners being significantly more at ease than the moderately practitioners to approach “sexuality as reproduction” ($p=0,024$) and “body differences” ($p=0,006$) and the non practitioners being significantly more at ease than the moderately to approach “sexuality as pleasure” ($p=0,042$) and “homosexuality” ($p=0,030$);
- training courses with teachers who did it being significantly more at ease than the other ones in the majority of topics, as the Table 1 shows.

Table 1: Feelings to approach sexuality topic related to training courses

	N		M		T-Test	
	Yes	No			<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Continuous training course						
Genital organs anatomy	55	414	3.71	3.25	2.54	0.011
Localization of the pleasure organs	55	408	3.20	2.60	3.12	0.002
Sexuality as reproduction	55	413	3.75	3.29	2.48	0.014
Sexuality as pleasure	54	413	2.81	2.39	2.41	0.016
Homosexuality	52	410	3.08	2.65	2.31	0.021
Exhibitionism	53	407	3.19	2.82	2.03	0.043
Paedophilia	53	412	3.55	3.13	2.24	0.026
Sexual abuse	53	412	3.64	3.10	2.96	0.003
Intercourse	51	412	2.61	2.20	2.38	0.018
Sexual identity	35	329	4.06	3.42	2.91	0.004
Sporadic training course						
Genital organs anatomy	143	314	3.50	3.23	2.16	0.031
Sexuality as reproduction	144	312	3.53	3.25	2.22	0.027
Sexuality as pleasure	143	312	2.61	2.35	2.14	0.033
Affectionate relationships	143	311	3.86	3.51	2.92	0.004
Paedophilia	142	311	3.39	3.09	2.25	0.025
Sexual abuse	141	312	3.38	3.08	2.34	0.020
Intercourse	141	310	2.42	2.17	2.14	0.033

4. Participants in children sex education

In primary school teachers opinions the main participants in children sex education should be parents, health professionals and psychologists. They put themselves in the fourth position in this process.

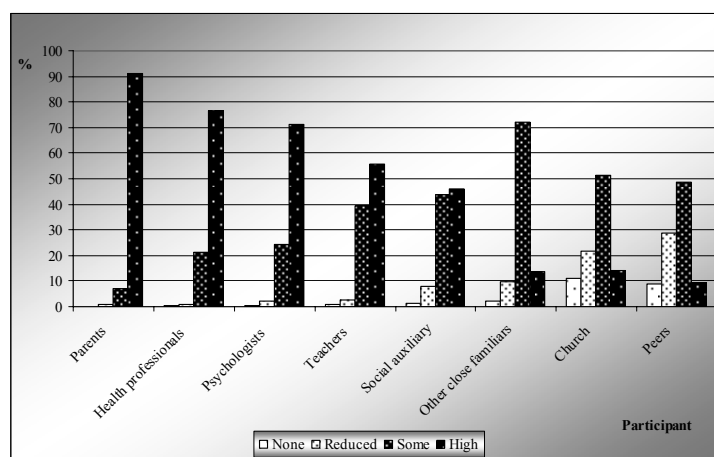


Figure 5: Participants in children sex education.

This conception seems to be influenced essentially by:

age, with younger teachers being the most favourable to their participation differing significantly from the 46-50 years old ($p=0,015$), and the older teachers being the most favourable to psychologists participation differing from the younger ones ($p=0,030$);

academic qualification, in which who had less qualification were significantly less favourable to teachers participation than those who had license ($p=0,015$) or complement ($p=0,030$) and who had complement were more favourable to social auxiliary than who had CESE ($p<0,001$) or license ($p=0,015$);

marital status, showing that divorced teachers being more favourable to the participation of health professionals than the single ones ($p=0,030$) and of psychologists than either the single ($p<0,001$) or the married ($p=0,012$);

continuous training courses, indicating that those who frequented them were more favourable to teachers' involvement ($p=0,006$);

area of work, with those working in rural areas more favourable to their own participation than the other ones working in urban area ($p=0,006$).

5. Fears in dealing with sex education

Teachers' fears are essentially concerned with parents' mentalities and reactions as well as the conservative milieu. In opposite they revealed less afraid to reactions of social auxiliary, school group president and school director (Figure 6).

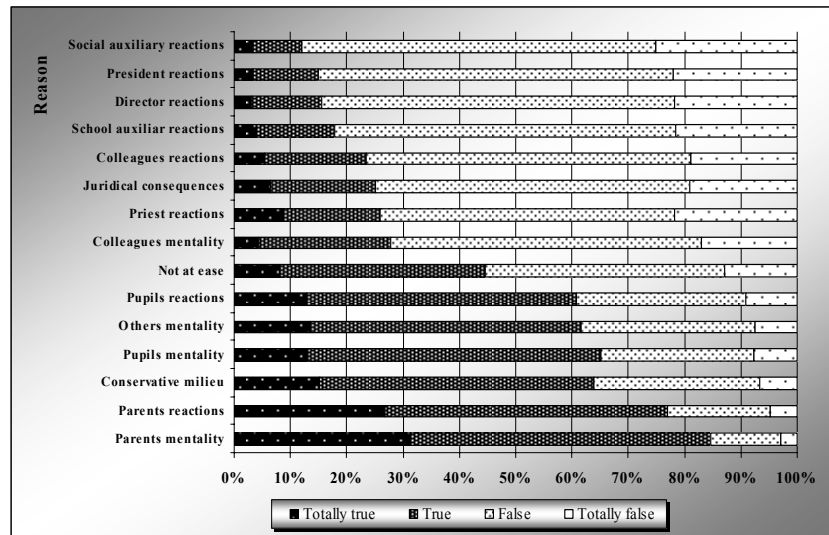


Figure 6: Fears in dealing with sex education.

The more influent factors on teachers fears seem to be:

- *gender* as we met significant differences between females and males – having females more fears than males – for “parents’ reaction” ($p=0,011$), “parents’ mentalities” ($p=0,049$), “pupils’ mentalities” ($p=0,039$) and “other persons’ mentalities” ($p=0,045$);
- training courses, in which we found significant differences for the item “not at ease” indicating that teachers who did either continuous ($p=0,007$) or sporadic ($p=0,004$) training were more at ease; area of work, where teachers working in rural area had significantly more fears than those working in suburban area for “parents’ reactions” ($p=0,006$), than those working in urban area for “other persons’ mentalities” ($p=0,021$) and than the other two groups for “conservative milieu” ($p<0,001$);
- religious practice indicating significantly more fears from the moderately comparing to the very much practitioners for “juridical consequences” ($p=0,030$) and to the none practitioners for “not at ease” ($p=0,012$).

6. Supports that teachers count in case of difficulties

In critical SE situations teachers consider they can get support from their colleagues, school director and school group president. In contrast, they are not confident of either the priest or the legal support.

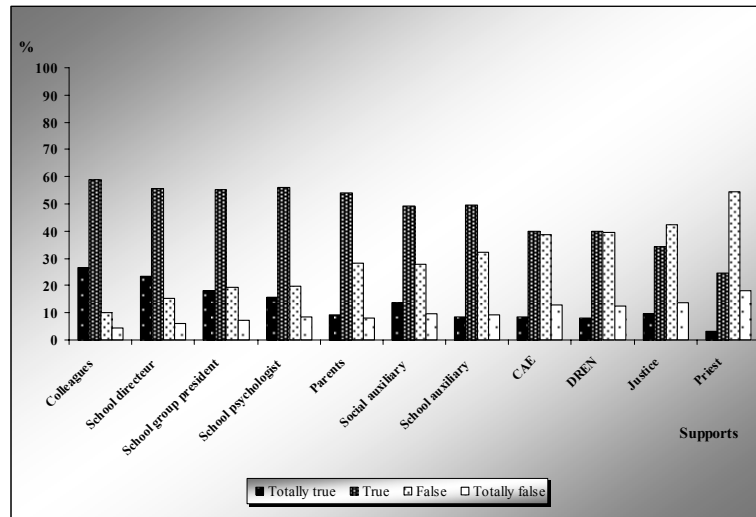


Figure 7: Supports in case of difficulties related to sex education.

Perceptions of supports seem to be influenced by:

sporadic training courses, because we found that teachers who had attended them felt significantly more supported by parents ($p=0,002$), scholar psychologist ($p=0,006$) as well as by social auxiliary ($p=0,013$) than those who did not.

However, the strongest factors conditioning supports perceptions are religion and religious practice as we can see in Table 2. “Supports” is the dependent variable where religion revealed more influence, indicating that teachers without religion consider less the several supports than the Catholics. Moreover, non practitioners teachers give significantly less importance for the majority of supports than the moderately ones.

Table 2: Supports influenced by religion and religious practice.

Religion	N	Me	R>	R<	U-Test
Colleagues	450	2	None	Catholic	7.00 0.027
School auxiliary	436	2	None	Catholic	7.96 0.018
Priest	418	3	None	Catholic	9.23 0.015
Scholar psychologist	431	2	None	Catholic	15.01 <0.001
Social auxiliary	432	2	None	Catholic	10.28 0.012
DREN	425	3	None	Catholic	11.87 0.018
				Other	0.024
CAE	425	3	None	Catholic	11.59 0.021
				Other	0.024
Religious practice					
Colleagues	449	2	Nothing	Moderately	8.12 0.036
School auxiliary	436	2	Nothing	Moderately	10.56 0.006
Scholar psychologist	431	2	Nothing	Moderately	16.46 <0.001
				Little	<0.001
Social auxiliary	432	2	Nothing	Moderately	12.52 0.006
				Little	0.024
DREN	424	3	Nothing	Moderately	11.69 0.006
				Little	0.018
CAE	424	3	Nothing	Moderately	11.15 0.006
				Little	0.018

7. Teachers' training needs

Concerning specific training needs, primary school teachers agreed that training should “give them scientific knowledge” (A), “prepare them to respond with naturalness to children’ unpredictable questions” (G), “prepare to develop values awareness” (J) and “help them to identify and solve sexual abuses” (L). On the other hand, teachers are not very interested in new learning about reproductive system (I) as shown in Figure 8.

The more influent factors in teachers’ perceptions of training needs are:

- gender, indicating that generally females had higher means of agreement than males;
- continuous training courses, suggesting that teachers who had already done this kind of training is more favourable than the other ones who never attended it;
- marital status, which results appoint for divorced teachers being more favourable to this specific formation than the married or the widower teachers;
- area of work, leading to de idea that those who work in rural areas are significantly more favourable to “training for all teachers” than those who work in urban areas, while teachers working in suburban area had higher agreement with “stimulation for self training” than the other groups;
- religious practice in which we only found significant differences between very much practitioners teachers and the moderately in the item “to prepare to develop values awareness”. All significant results are presented in the Table 3.

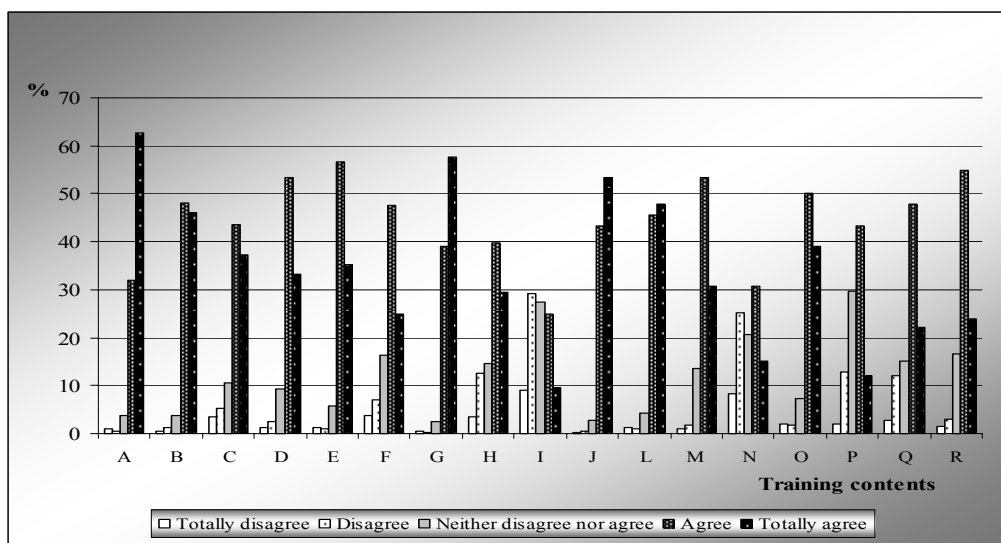


Figure 8: Teachers' training needs in sex education.

Legend: A=To give scientific knowledge; B=To be simultaneous to sex education projects at school; C=To be done by all teachers; D=To specify all contents to approach in each school level; E=To present the specific objectives for each school level; F=To include pedagogical methodologies testing; G=To prepare to respond with naturalness to children' unpredictable questions; H=To fall upon in affectionate topics; I=To fall upon in reproductive system; J=To prepare to develop values awareness; L=To help to identify and solve problems of sexual abuses; M=To aim projects elaboration in sex education; N=To be done only by who wants to participate in sex education at school; O=To teach to deal with parents about the theme; P=To anticipate to some sex education project at school; Q=To stimulate teachers for self training; R=To approach legislation concerning sex education.

Table 3: Significant influences on perceptions of training needs.

Gender	N		M		T-Test	
	Female	Male	Female	Male		
To fall upon in affectionate topics	410	57	3.83	3.51	2.08	0.038
Only for who wants to participate in sex education	411	56	3.24	2.82	2.43	0.015
To stimulate teachers for self training	407	57	3.78	3.49	1.97	0.049
Continuous training course	Yes		No			
To prepare to respond to children unpredictable questions	55	416	4.76	4.50	3.70	<0.001
To fall upon in reproductive apparatus	55	406	3.27	2.92	2.15	0.032
To aim projects elaboration in sex education	54	410	4.43	4.07	3.27	0.001
To stimulate teachers for self training	55	408	4.13	3.69	2.98	0.003
To approach legislation concerning sex education	55	408	4.18	3.94	2.04	0.042
Marital status	N	Me	R>	R<	U-Test	
Simultaneously with projects development	464	4	Divorced	Married	9.80	0.042
To prepare to respond to children unpredictable questions	470	5	Divorced	Widower	8.07	0.042
To fall upon in affectionate topics	465	4	Divorced	Widower Married	12.50	0.018 0.048
To prepare to develop values awareness	466	5	Divorced	Married Single	11.54	0.006 0.048
Area of work						
To be done by all teachers	445	4	Rural	Urban	7.14	0.018
To stimulate teachers for self training	444	4	Suburban “	Rural Urban	9.17	0.015 0.027
Religious practice						
To prepare to develop values	456	5	Very much	Moderately	8.81	0.018

DISCUSSION

Our data suggest that primary school teachers are little favourable to sex education (SE) in primary school and nursery. In their opinion SE must be reinforced in secondary school. It means that it is a task for the other ones, not for them. The expression of this opinion may be a subtle way to avoid doing sex education in their pedagogical practices. It seems to be easier to say that is a topic to be taught later than to begin to break barriers or to win myths and misconceptions that are obstacles to the process. Since teachers with specific training courses are more favourable to sex education in primary school, we suppose these teachers already began to deconstruct some obstacles. On other hand, since teachers with “license” are more favourable than

the other ones who have lower academic qualification, we think it can be another evidence for the importance of appropriate training for the conceptions change.

Concerning the four content areas of sexuality education (*Body Growing* – related to body changes, menarche, sexual response, genital organs–; *Expressions of the Sexuality* – concerned with sexual behaviour, petting, intercourse, common language comparing to scientific language –; *Interpersonal Relationships* – including familiar relationships, friendly relationships, help and respect values, sexual abuses–; *Sexual and Reproductive Health* – approaching body hygiene, fertilisation, pregnancy, contraception and sexual diseases prevention), teachers expressed more difficulties in the area of Expressions of the Sexuality, whereas they had lower difficulties in Interpersonal Relationships.

These findings tend to be confirmed in the “feeling to approach specific sexuality topics” where the intercourse is one of the most difficult topics followed by eroticism and pornography. In contrast, “affection relationship” is one of the easiest topics, which can be included in the easiest are of contents – interpersonal relationships. In addition, the individual factors like age, academic qualification and training courses, reveal that younger teachers, with better qualification and teachers who attend specific training expressed lower difficulties in these two variables. It may be associated to the previous opinion concerning agreement to sex education in primary school, and reinforces the idea of better training to construct positive conceptions for SE. But we must pay attention that previous conceptions can be obstacles to the mobilization of new scientific knowledge (Clément, 1998). So, it is necessary to consider other contextual factors, like area of work and religious groups’ integration. Teachers working in rural area had more difficulties than the other ones. It can be explained by the fact that rural areas are smaller, people know each other, and the primary school teacher is assumed as a very important person in this conservative milieu. In addition, in the northern region of Portugal where this research was developed, the Catholic religion is a strong factor, particularly in the rural milieu. In these circumstances, teachers are afraid to disappoint and to stain her or his social image. Even if it has never happened, they avoid the process maybe due to personality roots reasons that establish the lie between psychological and social obstacles.

When analysing the opinions about participants in children sex education, data suggest a greater agreement with the participation of parents followed by health professionals (physicians and nurses) and psychologists. This is another way to transfer

the SE responsibility to others (as above for the secondary school). They assume parents are the first responsible by children education, generally live in the teachers' area of work and the latter are afraid of the former ones. Moreover, teachers stay there all the week. If some problem occurs, they cannot run away. But if health professional or psychologists participate they only go to school sporadically: they have no problems with parents and community. Surprisingly, teachers working in rural area are most favourable to their own participation. It seems a paradox, which needs to be clarified in future research, but in our reflection it may due to a higher qualification of teachers comparing to parents in rural milieu and a teachers confidence in them. On the other hand, we found that teachers who had children had more difficulties than teachers with no children in all content areas and all sexuality specific topics. A question emerged from three dependent variables: why pupils' parents are the preferred participants to do sex education if also teachers who are parents are also the ones having more difficulties? Another point to deepen, but a brief explanation may be anchored on the affective relations at home and the difficulties to approach sexuality in this context (Moore & Rosenthal, 1995). Or, an explanation more is that sex education is like a "hot potato" to pass to the other and to avoid the teacher her/himself doing it.

Fears analysis reinforced the phantom image of parents, as parents' reactions and mentalities are the strongest fears, in opposite to the school persons like colleagues, director and president. The area of work indicated again teachers in rural areas with more fears as well as difficulties. And again who had done training courses had less fears as well as less difficulties. Another important factor seems to be gender: females had more fears of parents and pupils reactions and mentalities and other persons' mentalities than males, and they had also more difficulties. We should remember that females are the great majority of our sample (and of the teachers population as well) and for females the society is more restrictive in terms of sexuality. It may be stronger than the idea of females are mothers, so they have a richer experience and privileged positions to teach human reproduction (Teixeira, 1999).

Comparing supports to fears perceptions is interesting to confirm that teachers felt supported essentially by colleagues, school director and school group president, but not by the priest. The major supports are coincident with the lower fears. It seems clear and validates our instrument. Supports was the dependent variable where the factors religion and religious practice affected the majority of items. The catholic teachers count with several supports, including the priest, significantly more than the teachers

without religion. The non practitioners consider significantly less than moderately practitioners the supports of several entities. Perhaps they do not need this; they are more confident in their pedagogical practice and freer of social rules or obstacles.

Teachers agreed that training must give them scientific knowledge essentially, help them to respond with naturalness to children's unpredictable questions, to prepare to develop values awareness and still to identify and solve sexual abuses. The training topic in which teachers are less interested is the reproductive system or the biological component. They want new scientific knowledge because they say they do not feel prepared, but we think this lack of training is not only concerned with scientific knowledge. The contents are expressed in school programmes and if they feel prepared in scientific knowledge in another topic, they also should be prepared in sexuality. In comparison, they are not very interested in the reproductive system, a part that requires precise scientific knowledge. On the other hand, they want to be prepared to respond to children's questions because it often occurs in classroom and teachers feel embarrassed. So they want to avoid these emotions.

The only item that was affected by the religious practice was the preparation for developing values awareness, where the very practitioners had the highest mean which was significantly different as compared to moderately ones. In our view teachers preferred training courses on affection and values so that when implementing this approach they can say they do sex education however they can keep avoiding the biological contents. If we accept this to elaborate SE training programmes, we suppose it will continue in the same way as before. Oshi and Nakalema (2005), reporting a similar research in Nigeria, suggest that training should replace misbeliefs by correct knowledge and “*serves to motivate teachers to and to train them on how to handle social and cultural issues while carrying out sex education curriculum*” (pp.102). One interesting data of our sample is that teachers who did training courses had significantly higher mean than the other ones in several topics including reproductive system. Maybe, it was an effective training able to change conceptions.

CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the most influential factors on primary school teachers' conceptions and obstacles to deal with sex education in classroom were: *gender*, males reported fewer difficulties than females; *age*, younger teachers generally expressed less difficulties to approach than the older ones; *training courses*, teachers who frequented

these courses revealed to be more comfortable than teachers who did not; *working area*, teachers working in rural areas expressed more difficulties than those working in urban areas in all topics; *having children*, teachers with children revealed more difficulties than the other ones; and *religious practice*, non practitioners had less difficulties and fears and need less supports. Finally, we believe that an efficient way to change the conceptions and obstacles to sex education is the specific training, but considering the need to motivate teachers first.

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