

Children Sexual Arousal and Primary School Teachers' Perceptions of Sex Education Training Needs

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research was to identify primary school teachers' conceptions about sex education in classroom. More precisely, in this paper we analyse teachers' perceptions of children's behaviour concerned with sexuality arousal, teachers' perceptions of their specific training needs to teach sexuality topics and the influential factors in these conceptions. The research was developed in three steps: a *questionnaire* was carried out and applied to a sample of 486 individuals; a *debate* was organized between four teachers, being two favourable to sex education and the other ones not favourable; five *focus groups* were realized with a total of 19 participants. The questionnaire data were statistically analysed. Content analysis of debate and focus groups transcripts was carried out by using the pivot terms method, in order to identify conceptions categories and argumentation.

The questionnaire results show that the most frequent children's behaviours noticed by teachers are: talking about boy/girlfriends; touching colleagues and drawing genital organs; observing colleagues in the toilets; manipulation of pornographic reviews and to have knowledge that children assist to pornographic movies. Teachers' training needs are essentially concerned with: scientific knowledge to teach what is necessary; to prepare them to answer to children's unpredictable questions; to prepare them to develop values awareness; to help them to identify and solve children's sexual abuse; training in articulation with sex education processes at school; and training to deal with these topics with parents. In the focus groups teachers reported several situations of children sexual behaviour at school and specified training needs, not only for them but also for parents. The most influential factors were shown to be the frequency of training courses, to have children, gender, age and time of career, academic qualifications, area of residence, area of work, marital status and religious practice.

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Introduction

Primary school teachers have reported us some situations and behaviours related to children sexual arousal at school, from the inoffensive ones, as drawing, moulding and showing genital organs, to the more problematic and threatening of the children healthy sexuality, as manipulating pornographic resources, compulsive masturbation, sexual intercourse imitation, petting and sexual abuse.

To manipulate genital organs, masturbation and sexual simulations demonstrates exploratory curiosity coming from sexuality aspects not solved (Ariza *et al.*, 1991). Children talking about boy/girlfriends can be originated by the observation of adults' behaviours (Iturra, 2000). A great of sexuality learning proceeds *media* and literature, having a moulding effect, which can be negative and powerful when real models are not considered to communicate affection, when reinforce messages of the sexuality dominant model and when child is in an early moral development stage (Vaz *et al.*, 1996).

On the other hand, some children sexual behaviour (as masturbation) can indicate sexual abuse (Fávero, 2003; Haffner, 2005). To help children in the prevention of sexual abuse teachers must know the nature and the importance of this problem, approaching it in a sex education context (López & Fuertes, 1999). Sexual abuse cycle can be interrupted when replaced by the cycle of the healthy sexuality, which implies

mutual consent for the exercise of the sexuality as well as of the citizenship (Gomes & Coelho, 2003).

If about sexual abuse teachers have an intermediate level of understanding (Anastácio, 2007; Goldman, 2005), there are several other domains in which teachers have difficulties to deal with. The specific training in sex education has shown positive effects. Kigman (2004) says that teachers will be more able to face the more difficult domains if they receive adequate training. Primary school teachers have expressed training needs to approach sexuality topics with little children in several studies (Mbananga, 2004; Veiga *et al.*, 2006). Researchers who evaluate the effects of teachers training in sex education suggest that training can contribute to improve teachers' confidence level and motivation (Wight & Buston, 2003); to give minor importance to the parents' reactions (Walker *et al.*, 2003); and to increase teachers confidence to team work and to develop communication skills (Thomas & Jones, 2005).

Research questions

Because in Portugal there are legal documents and guidelines, since 1984 (Lei nº3/84; Lei nº 120/99; Decreto-Lei nº 259/2000; CCPES *et al.*, 2000), promoting sex education at school, but its implementation has been very difficult, our main research question is “What are primary school teachers' conceptions and obstacles that prevent them from approaching sex education in classroom?” Research sub-questions are:

- What is the teachers' agreement level with specific training courses for sex education?
- What contextual factors can interact with teachers' practices of sex education?
- What is teachers' argumentation for doing or not doing sex education at school?

Methodology

The research design was developed in three different steps:

- Step I: a *questionnaire* was constructed based on the literature review related to sex education, health promotion and factors that can interact with teaching practice (CCPES *et al.*, 2000; Clément, 1998; Kehily, 2002; Teixeira, 1999; Vaz *et al.*, 1996; Walker *et al.*, 2003) and on our close contact with primary school teachers which provide us information about perceptions and feelings related to delicate situations and training needs. It was then validated with a group of 38 teachers and applied to a large sample of 486 primary school teachers of the northern region of Portugal. Statistical analysis of the data was carried out to observe the tendency of conceptions. To analyse differences between groups according the contextual factors, we used the t Student test to compare two groups and the Kruskal-Wallis test to compare more than two groups.

- Step II: a *debate* about sex education in infancy was carried out with 4 primary school teachers that had opposite opinions. We did the transcription of recorded data and a content analysis of the transcripts was done using the pivot term method (Harris, 1952; Jacobi, 1987; 1988; Clément, 2002) in order to organize the categories of conceptions and to typify arguments.

- Step III: realization of 5 *focus groups* including a total of 19 primary school teachers.

The same method of analysis used for the debate was applied to the focus groups.

Findings

The questionnaire results show that the most frequent children's behaviours that teachers meet are children talking about boy/girlfriends; touching colleagues and drawing genital organs; observing colleagues in the toilets; children manipulating pornographic reviews and to have knowledge that children assist to pornographic

movies. The less frequent children's behaviours are the ones related to sexual abuse and harassment, followed by genital organs manipulation. Talking about boy/girlfriends, touching colleagues in genital organs, manipulating pornographic reviews and visualize pornographic movies are the four behaviours which showed a high increase from second to third primary school year (7 to 8 years old). Teachers' perceptions of children sexual behaviours tend to be influenced by her/his:

- *Gender*, female teachers with higher perception for more common behaviours and male teachers expressing more perception of the more constraining behaviours;
- *Training course*, those who did training revealed higher perception;
- *To have children*, those who have children with higher perception of several situations, with significant differences for "children drawing genital organs" ($p < 0,01$) and "children visualization of pornographic movies" ($p \leq 0,050$);
- *Age and time of career*, older teachers with more time of service expressing significant higher perceptions of "children manipulating pornographic reviews" than the younger ones ($p < 0,050$);
- *Marital status*, divorced teachers with higher perceptions of several behaviours;
- *Area of residence*, those living in suburban areas with higher perception of several situations, specially of "children visualization of pornographic movies" ($p < 0,050$);
- *Area of work*, teachers working in rural areas expressing fewer perception of several situations, with significant differences for "children drawing genital organs" ($p < 0,050$) and "children kissing on mouth" ($p < 0,050$).

Debate and focus groups participants reported several delicate situations of children sexual behaviour at school, namely, genitals compulsive manipulation and imitation of sexual intercourse by children perhaps exposed to adult sexual behaviours or pornographic movies. Teachers expressed to be unable to deal with these problematic situations, specifying to have fear of parents reactions and no acceptance.

Teachers' perception of sex education training needs are essentially related to scientific knowledge to teach what is necessary; to prepare them to answer to children's unpredictable questions; to prepare them to develop values awareness; to help them to identify and solve children's sexual abuse; training them in articulation with sex education processes at school; and training them to deal these topics with parents. More influent factors in teachers' perception of training needs seem to be:

- *Gender*, with female teachers having higher means of agreement than male teachers;
- *Training courses*, those who had already done this kind of training are more favourable than the other ones who never attended training courses;
- *Academic qualifications*, teachers with higher qualifications revealed greater agreement with training;
- *Marital status*, divorced teachers more favourable to training;
- *Area of work*, those working in rural areas are more favourable to "training for all teachers" than those who work in urban areas, while teachers working in suburban areas are more in agreement with "stimulation for self training" than the other groups;
- *Religious practice*, differences were found between the very much practitioners teachers and the moderately in the item "to prepare to develop values awareness".

Furthermore, debate and focus groups participants specified training needs, not only for them (teachers) but also for parents.

Conclusions/Implications

That children talk about boy/girlfriend has already been referred by Iturra (2000) who explains this based on the observation of behaviours and on the listening of comments of adults. Curiosity concerned with genital organs in primary school age is related to the discovery of differences between male and female body, which should be approach before six (Vaz *et al*, 1996; López & Fuertes, 1999; Hayes, 2004; Haffner, 2005). The

increase of children viewing pornographic images from second to third year of primary school may be worrying, given the characteristics of violence, detail, repetition and without affective context of these images (Vaz *et al*, 1996). Halstead & Waite (2001) have found boys of 9 to 10 years old watching movies for above 18 years, suggesting that sex education should consider boys humour related to sexual questions and to hold them responsible for their role in family and society, as well as to help them to develop critical thinking about videos and to reflect about the relation between sex and violence. When we try to quantify situations of children sexual arousal at school, in general, it seems to be of minor importance as it appears to happen rarely. On the other hand, when we try to discuss sex education at school with primary school teachers they need to report what happens at school and in their classroom concerned with children sexuality. We find that teachers experiment embarrassment and feel difficulties to deal with these situations. In contrast, teachers who had done specific sex education training courses revealed higher perceptions of these delicate situations, better understanding and were more able to deal with children and parents. In short, these findings suggest that specific training in sex education is a matter of major importance for promoting sexual health in schools.

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