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CONCEPTIONS ABOUT SEXUALITY AND SEX EDUCATION OF BOYS AND GIRLS AT SCHOOL-AGE

ANASTÁCIO, Zélia & MARINHO, Susana

CIEC, Institute of Education, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal
zeliarf@ie.uminho.pt

ABSTRACT

According to Portuguese Law, Sex Education (SE) in schools is compulsory from elementary to secondary school levels. However, many SE projects do not consider the needs of their target audience, or their gender differences, which limits the programme effectiveness. In this work we sought to identify conceptions and needs concerned with human sexuality and SE of school-aged boys and girls (10 to 18 years old). Thus, we developed a questionnaire for the second and the third cycle of basic education students attending an Oporto school. We chose to carry out our own questionnaire in order to fit it to our methodology and we validated it with a pilot study. Questionnaire was filled in online and results were processed with SPSS statistical program. The questionnaire was filled by 397 students (192 females and 205 males). The average age of the respondents was 12.79 years old. Regarding the distribution of students by different school years we obtained: 85 at the 5th, 84 at the 6th, 55 at the 7th, 95 at the 8th, and 78 at the 9th. Data revealed significant differences between boys and girls in terms of sources of information, with girls preferring mother while boys preferring internet. Considering the school role in SE differences were found for the perception about teachers' knowledge to respond to students' questions, about to talk about sexuality in any class and about to participate in more SE activities at school. Regarding the SE role on youth development boys' and girls' opinions also differ for several topics. About the responsible persons by SE of the adolescents girls preferred more than boys mother and scholar psychologist. Subjects they want to learn more for girls were family concept and planning, sexual harassment and abuse and pregnancy, while for boys were sexual desire and sexual response and pleasure.

Keywords: Sex education, conceptions, gender, questionnaire.

1. Introduction

For Tones and Tilford (1994, p.11) “effective health education may produce changes in knowledge and understanding or ways of thinking; it may influence or clarify values; it may bring about some shift in belief or attitude; it may facilitate the acquisition of skills; it may even effect changes in behaviour or lifestyle.”

In Portugal several health programs have been developed in schools, with special emphasis on Sex Education (SE), which has undergone recent legislation. According to Jones (2011), sexual policies are changing at global, national and even local levels. These movements affect the discourses of SE in educational policies.

According to the Portuguese Working Group on Sex Education (Progress Report, 2007), the option for the inclusion of sexuality in the health domain does not intend to reduce it to a mechanistic, biological and sanitarian view. Rather, it seeks to stress the phenomenological, holistic and cultural concept of comprehensive health, as proposed by the WHO. Thus, SE should seek not only to mitigate the risk behaviours such as unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, but also to promote the interpersonal relationships quality and intimacy experiences as well as their contextualization in cultural and socio-historical contexts.

Shtarkshall et al (2007) refer that sex education can contribute to psychosocial development and wellbeing throughout adolescence and adulthood by promoting sexual literacy. On the opposite, the absence of sexual literacy can be linked to many health and social hazards, including sexual transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancy. These authors emphasize that sex literacy is not the same as sexual socialization, which they believe begins at home, where parents have the opportunity to inculcate their values – since birth, children are exposed to messages about modesty, nudity and privacy, including gender-specific messages about proper conduct. Latter, sexual socialization also takes place outside the home where children and adolescents observe community norms, consume mass media, and participate in cultural and religious activities.

Weiss et al (2000) believe that early sexual initiation and unprotected sexual activity can lead to tragic social, economic, and health consequences. However, there are little information about the contexts in which risk behaviour takes place, including the factors that contribute to unprotected sex and how these factors differ between young males and females. These authors think that such information is critical for interventions that meet the gender-specific needs of young people. The power imbalance characteristic of gender relations among adults, with women having less access to critical resources than men, has many of its roots in childhood and adolescence (Weiss et al, 2000).

In this way, it is essential to consider the aspects related to gender differences as well as the needs of young people to successfully implement SE projects. However, for Allen (2008) there is often a gap between the perception of the school about the sexuality of their students and the reality they actually live in. So, frequently, the SE projects implemented in schools are based on the perception that adults have of the needs of young people, which may not always coincide with their real necessities.

With reference to the aforementioned theoretical framework, our research question is: what are the conceptions and needs about sexuality and sex education of school-aged boys and girls attending 2nd and 3rd cycle of Portuguese basic education?

2. Methodology of research

Data we present here were obtained in the diagnostic phase of an action-research project, which began during the school year 2010/2011 and is now in its evaluation phase.

The objective of this step was to identify adolescents boys' and girls' conceptions and needs concerning human sexuality and sex education.

Instrument of data collection

We developed a questionnaire to be applied to students of second cycle (10/12 years old approximately) and third cycle (in general 12/15 years old) of Portuguese basic education in an Oporto school (urban milieu). We chose to carry out our own questionnaire in order to fit it to our methodology and we validated it doing before a pilot study with 50 students at the same level of education. They filled in the questionnaire online (in classroom) as well as the definitive sample.

Questionnaire had a total of twenty three questions being four of characterization (year of schooling, class, gender and age) corresponding to independent variables; four about students previous participation in sex education activities at school; three concerning with conceptions about sexuality, eight related to conceptions about sex education at school, one about students sources of sexuality information and three concerning with psychosocial competencies.

Sample

Our sample was a convenience sample including students from the same school, in which one of the researchers is teaching.

The questionnaire was answered by 397 students, being 192 females and 205 males. The average age of the respondents was 12.79 (standard deviation=1.82) and the median was 13

years old. The youngest were 10 and the oldest were 18. Regarding the distribution of students by these five years of schooling we had: 85 of them in the 5th year, 84 in the 6th, 55 in the 7th, 95 in the 8th, and 78 attending the 9th. Second cycle includes 5th and 6th school year (total of 169 students) and third cycle includes from 7th to 9th year (total of 228 students).

Data analysis

Obtained data was processed with the SPSS statistical software (version 20.0). After a descriptive analysis some associations between variables were established. When we intended to compare two groups, as in the case of the gender independent variable, we used the t-test for equality of means. If the number of groups originated by the factor were more than two (as in the case of the school year) we applied the Kruskal-Wallis test. In this work we only present results related to gender factor.

3. Results of research

In our sample of 397 students (48.4% females and 51.6% males) only 102 (25.7%) affirmed to had already participated in some sex education activities at school in opposite to 295 (74.3%) who said no. Of those who respond affirmatively 34.7% classified these activities as very interesting and 57.4% as interesting. In the same way 82.0% of these students consider sex education activities at school as enlightening.

Regarding the **sources of information** about sexuality obtained data suggest that peers are the preferred, followed by mother, television and internet (Figure 1).

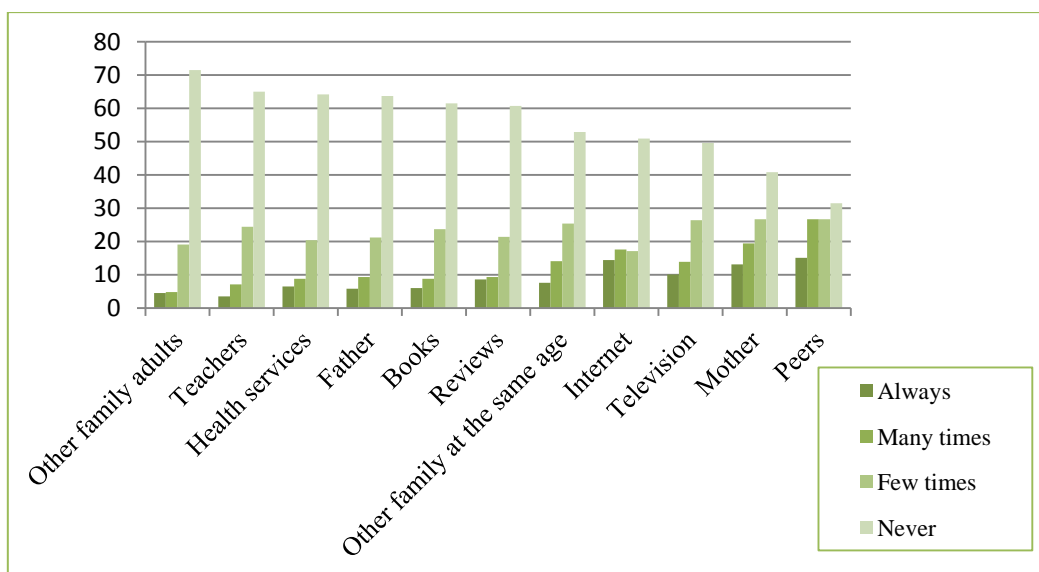


Figure 1. Sources of information (%).

When we associate the sources of information with the gender factor we find significant differences between boys and girls, showing that girls prefer more than boys the mother while boys inform themselves more than girls with father, internet and television (Table 1). Nevertheless, boys communicate more with media than father while girls do it more with mother than the media.

Table 1. Differences between boys and girls for sources of sexuality information.

Sources	Gender	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Mother	Female	2.77	1.09	-3.327	.001
	Male	3.12	1.01		
Father	Female	3.72	.61	6.919	.000
	Male	3.15	1.01		
Television	Female	3.29	.97	2.611	.009
	Male	3.03	1.03		
Internet	Female	3.34	.98	5.329	.000
	Male	2.77	1.18		

SD=Standard deviation; Lickert scale: 1=Always to 4=Never

Asking adolescents about the beginning of sex education in scholar milieu, 2nd cycle of education registered the highest percentage (40.3%) followed by 3rd cycle (35.5%). Only 6.0% indicated nursery school, 9.8% primary school (or 1st cycle) and 8.3% secondary school. Differences between sexes were not significant.

About the **school role in SE**, in general adolescents agree with the school context for SE, with teachers as educators, with their participation in SE activities at school and with the existence of an information office. The major discordance was registered for the item “it is possible to talk about sex education in all disciplines”, with girls disagreeing significantly more than boys. We also found significant differences between boys and girls on the degree of agreement with the phrases “teachers know how to respond to my questions about sexuality” and “I would like to participate in more SE activities in school”. Boys agreed more than girls with the last statement and girls agree more than boys with the idea “teachers know how to respond to my questions about sexuality”.

Table 2: Differences between boys and girls about perception of school role in SE.

	Gender	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
I consider the school a place where I can clarify my doubts concerning on sexuality with	Female	2.80	.77		ns
	Male	2.76	.90		

confidence					
Teachers know how to respond to my questions about sexuality	Female	2.95	.77	2.664	.008
	Male	2.74	.81		
It is possible to approach SE in all disciplines	Female	1.83	.81	-2.942	.003
	Male	2.09	.98		
I would like to participate in more SE activities in school	Female	2.51	.96	-3524	.000
	Male	2.85	.98		
Sex Education should be a teachers' responsibility	Female	2.61	.86		ns
	Male	2.63	.97		
I would like the existence of an information office in school where I could to go to put sexuality questions	Female	2.84	.93		ns
	Male	2.78	1.06		

M=Mean; Lickert scale: 1-Totally disagree; 2-Disagree; 3-Agree; 4_Totally agree; ns=no significant differences

Concerning **people that should be responsible for SE**, we found a preference for elements outside the school as health professionals or non-teaching staff such as school psychologist. As well, mother is also one of the preferred persons. Teacher of natural sciences was in fourth place but teacher of any discipline was the last option (Figure 2).

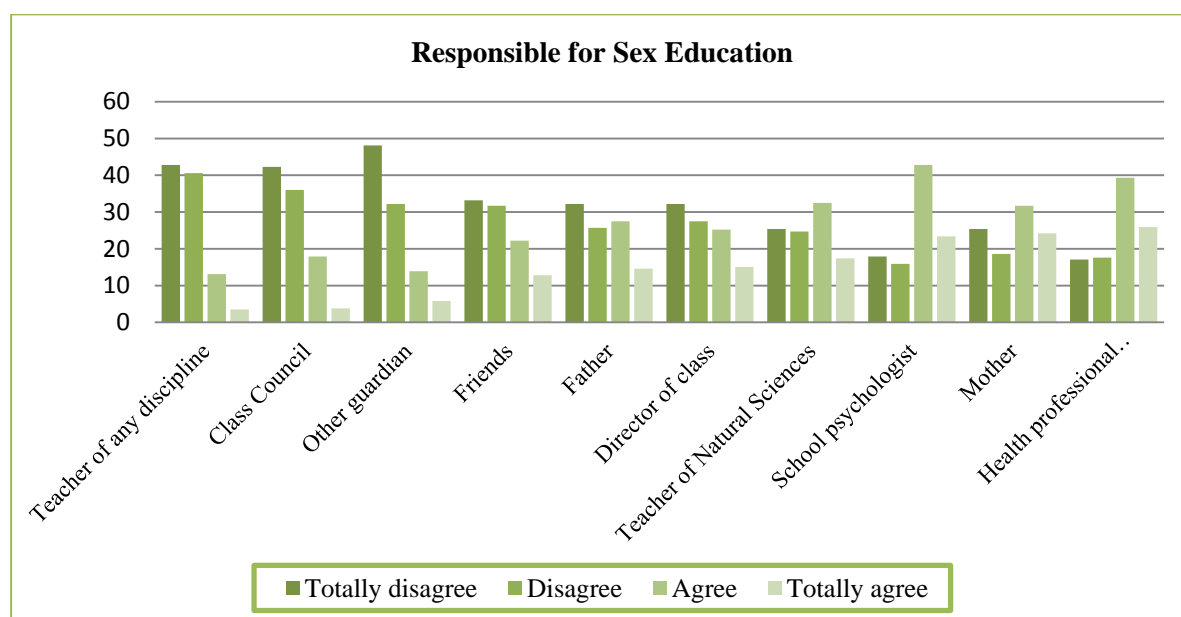


Figure 2: People responsible for sex education (%)

In terms of significant differences between sexes it was found for director of class, school psychologist and mother. In the three cases girls are more likely than boys to agree that they should be responsible for adolescents' sex education (Table 3).

Table 3. Differences between boys and girls for persons responsible by SE.

Responsible	Gender	Mean	SD	t	p
Director of class	Female	2.38	1.05	2.717	.007
	Male	2.09	1.06		
School psychologist	Female	2.92	.97	3.951	.000
	Male	2.53	1.02		
Mother	Female	2.72	1.12	3.100	.002
	Male	2.38	1.09		

Analysing adolescents' conceptions about the **role of sex education on youth development** (Table 4) we found that the ideas "sexuality is felt differently throughout life", "not always my friends know what is better for me" and "to talk about sexuality helps to decide" were the three with highest level of agreement. In opposite, the minor level of concordance was found for "sex education contributes to the reduction of violence in relationships between people" followed by "the sexual information prematurely arouses sexual behaviour" (as we expected for this last item).

Table 4: The role of sex education on youth development

	TD (%)	D (%)	A (%)	TA (%)
To talk about sexuality helps to decide	6.3	14.6	52.9	26.2
There are different sexual orientations we should respect	10.6	13.9	37.8	37.8
Not always my friends know what is better for me	6.3	13.1	53.4	27.2
The sexual information prematurely arouses sexual behaviour	14.1	23.2	46.6	16.1
Sexuality is felt differently throughout life	5.8	9.3	55.9	29.0
Masturbation (stimulation of the genitals) is a normal practice	13.1	21.4	40.8	24.7
Sex education can help define our personality	11.1	20.9	50.4	17.6
Sex education makes us more responsible	6.5	15.1	51.1	27.2
Sex education helps to improve communication between men and women	6.5	14.6	56.9	21.9
Sex education contributes to the promotion of equal rights and opportunities between men and women	5.5	17.1	54.9	22.4
Sex education contributes to the reduction of violence in relationships between people	14.1	27.5	36.3	22.2

TD=Totally disagree; D=Disagree; A= Agree; TA=Totally agree

Searching for differences between boys and girls we found that they are statistically significant in several items (Table 5). Girls agree more than boys with the ideas different sexual orientations should be respected and sex education makes adolescents more responsible, instead of the last being only near the significant level. On the other hand, boys agree significantly more than girls that sexual information awakens early sexual behaviour, masturbation is a normal practice and sex education contributes to improve communication between men and women.

Table 5: Gender differences concerning on the role of sex education on youth development

	Gender	Mean	SD	t	p
There are different sexual orientations we should respect	Female	3.26	.84	4.781	.000
	Male	2.81	1.03		
The sexual information prematurely arouses sexual behaviour	Female	2.45	.96	-4.162	.000
	Male	2.83	.83		
Masturbation (stimulation of the genitals) is a normal practice	Female	2.58	.98	-3.902	.000
	Male	2.95	.92		
Sex education makes us more responsible	Female	3.07	.81	1.938	.053
	Male	2.91	.84		
Sex education helps to improve communication between men and women	Female	2.84	.79	-2.412	.016
	Male	3.03	.78		

Since several authors (for example Allen, 2008, Kirby et al, 2006) consider essential to involve youth in SE projects that will target them, we decided to ask students about the **subjects on which they would like to know more**. It was presented a list of twenty-one subjects, selected according to the guidelines of UNESCO (2009).

Our results show that adolescents are really interested in to learn more about “adolescence”, “concept of sexuality”, “diversity, tolerance, sexual orientation and respect”. The issue they are fewer interested is “ill-treatment, sexual abuse and harassment”, followed by “family concept and planning” (Figure 3).

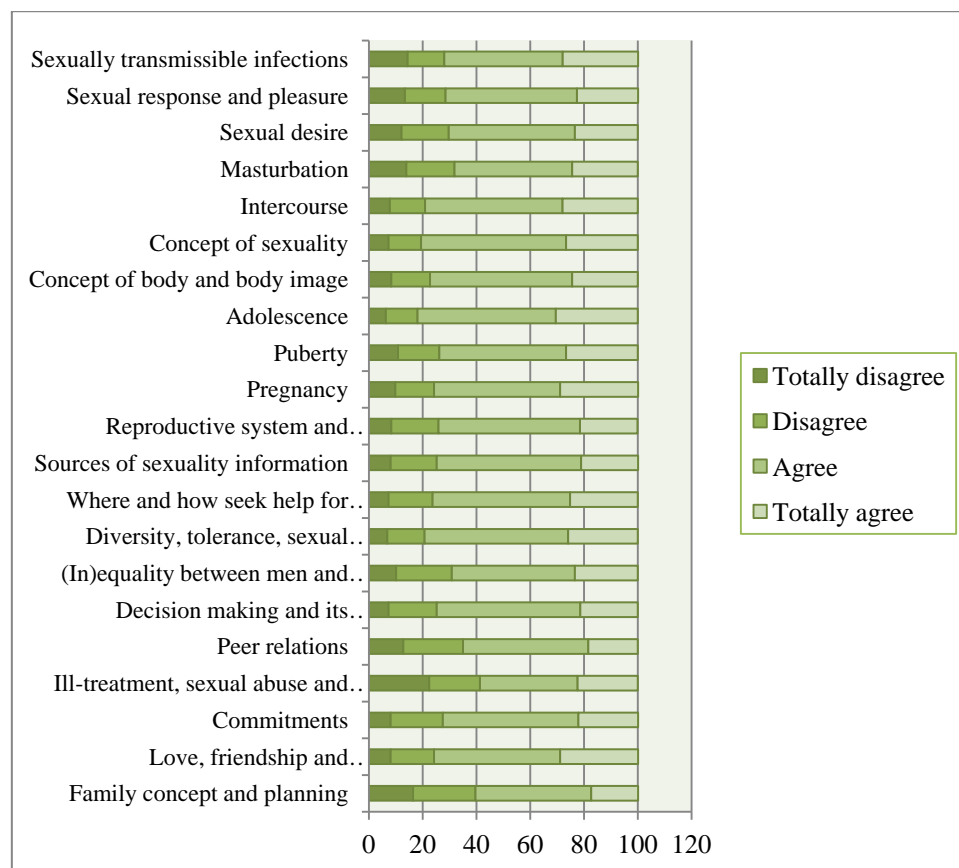


Figure 3: Subjects on which adolescents would like to know more (%).

In terms of gender significant differences they were found in ten items. As we can observe in table 6, girls have higher interest than boys in family, commitment, sexual ill-treatment, pregnancy, adolescence, body and sexually transmissible infections. Boys want to learn more than girls about sexual practices and sensations.

Table 6: Gender differences concerning subjects on which adolescents want to know more

	Gender	Mean	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Family concept and planning	Female	2.76	.95	2.969	.003
	Male	2.48	.95		
Commitments	Female	2.95	.79	1.981	.048
	Male	2.79	.90		
Ill-treatment, sexual abuse and harassment	Female	2.77	1.01	3.272	.001
	Male	2.42	1.09		
Pregnancy	Female	3.08	.81	2.880	.004
	Male	2.82	.97		
Adolescence	Female	3.16	.75	2.388	.017
	Male	2.97	.87		
Concept of body and body image	Female	3.02	.81	1.972	.049
	Male	2.85	.87		
Masturbation	Female	2.68	.97	-2.126	.034
	Male	2.89	.96		
Sexual desire	Female	2.63	.94	-4.037	.000
	Male	3.00	.89		
Sexual response and pleasure	Female	2.65	.94	-3.280	.001
	Male	2.96	.91		
Sexually transmissible infections	Female	2.98	.91	2.426	.016
	Male	2.74	1.04		

4. Discussion, Conclusions and Perspectives

Our results revealed significant differences between adolescents boys and girls concerning on sources of sexuality information, perception of school role in SE, responsible persons for adolescents' SE, the role of SE on youth development and concerning on subjects in which they want to learn more. Previous research we done (Anastácio, 2001; Anastácio 2010) had already indicate that girls prefer their mother to talk about sexuality. These researches also confirm that in general peers are those who youth elect to discuss sexual issues.

Comparing to Bleakley and colleagues' study on Philadelphia adolescents (2009) we found some differences on the way they seek information. These authors found that media was more common among girls, while in our study we had the opposite results – to use the media (tv and internet) as a source of sexuality information was more common among boys.

About the role of SE in youth development it seems interesting to verify the tendency for girls relating the contribute of SE with the values respect, tolerance and responsibility while boys tend to relate the benefits of SE with sexual practices and communication.

On matters that students would like to know more, we find that Allen (2008) also identified the themes sexual response and pleasure as well as pregnancy, particularly related to teenage pregnancy, between the five priorities for the young people she interviewed. This author found that many SE projects are oriented in a biological perspective trying to reduce the incidence of sexual risk behaviour. Young people need more information about what to do and where to seek help in case of teenage pregnancy, and not so much about how to prevent it, since the prevention of risk behaviours is widely known (Allen, 2008). In fact, as mentioned by Pinto and colleagues (2005), teenage mothers are at greater risk of medical complications, socio-economic difficulties and psychological problems. Teenage pregnancy also leads to school dropout, which tends to aggravate their future socio economic situation. The fact that girls in our study choose the theme "sexual harassment and sexual abuse" as one of which they would like to know more, may be due to the vulnerability of this group. According to Johnson (2004) this problem affects 6-36% of girls and only 1-15% of boys up to age 16.

For Rogow and Haberland (2005) SE programs do not reflect what is already known about the role gender plays in shaping attitudes and sexual behaviour and Stromquist (2007) stress that a critical curriculum area from a gender perspective is sex education. Thus, the understanding of different gender conceptions and needs should lead the design of effective SE projects, contributing to student personal and social education.

In our opinion the differences we found in this study were important to consider in SE projects in schools and in teachers training concerning on sex education. We think this is the way to adapt the sexuality education to adolescents' interests and needs and to guarantee better efficacy.

Acknowledgements

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