

# TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS OF, AND OBSTACLES TO, SEX EDUCATION IN PORTUGUESE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Zélia Anastácio<sup>1,2</sup>, Graça Carvalho<sup>1</sup> and Pierre Clément<sup>2</sup>

1 - University of Minho, Portugal

2 - University Claude Bernard Lyon-1, France

## ABSTRACT

Teachers' conceptions result from the interaction between their scientific knowledge, their systems of values, and their social and professional practice. Obstacles to teaching sex education may have several origins: epistemological, didactical, psychological and social. The aim of this research is to identify teachers' conceptions and obstacles, that prevent them from teaching sex education. We intend to apply several research instruments: questionnaires, debates, focus groups, individual interviews and specific cases registration. The research starting point was the questionnaire. Its preliminary results suggest that sexual intercourse, fertilisation and sexual pleasure are the most difficult content, that the environmental milieu, the community and the church are the main obstacles to teaching sex education, and that specific training for sex education teaching seems to be necessary.

## CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In Portugal, the implementation of sex education has been a difficult process. Although several laws have been enacted since 1984 to promote this educative domain, only sporadic efforts have been made to teach sex education, and only in a few schools (Vaz *et al.*, 1996).

More recently, legal documents reinforced the compulsory approach to “sexual health promotion and human sexuality” as early as primary school. In 2000 the Ministry of Education published the book “Sex Education in Schools – guidelines”. This document not only defines scientific contents, but also explicitly indicates the need to cover values in sex education as well as attitudes and competencies (CCPES *et al.*, 2000).

In primary school the basic goal is “*to enable children to build their «relational Self», through a better knowledge of their body, the understanding of their origin, the affective valorisation and the critical reflection about gender social roles*” (CCPES *et al.*, 2000: 66). Though all these legal and school orientations have been produced, in general, teachers continue to avoid dealing with sex education. This situation has been highlighted by students demonstrating in the street for the need for school sex education, by media debates (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines) as well as in our work

with primary school teachers in their complementary formation and during in-service training courses.

Being aware of this situation, our goal is to investigate the origins of primary school teachers' resistance to implementing sex education. A priori, we suppose that a possible difficulty in dealing with sex education is that teachers have low scientific and pedagogical knowledge of this topic. However the literature shows that other factors, such as social representations (for example, convictions, beliefs, ideologies, morality) and life history can interact with knowledge in the construction of conceptions (Clément, 1994; De Vecchi & Giordan, 2002; Kehily, 2002).

Conceptions are typically well-anchored and affect the learning or the acceptance of new knowledge. A *conception* is based on the set of mental images and models that are present in the student's mind before the learning experience and that actively participate throughout the process of knowledge construction (De Vecchi & Giordan, 2002). If they are not considered in the teaching process, conceptions tend to last and to become stronger with time.

Clément (1998) proposed the integration of systems of values and social practices at the same level as the scientific contents. This modified model of didactical transposition, when applied to sex education, shows that teachers' conceptions (C) result from the interaction between their scientific knowledge (K) in this area, their systems of values (V) and their social and professional practices (P).

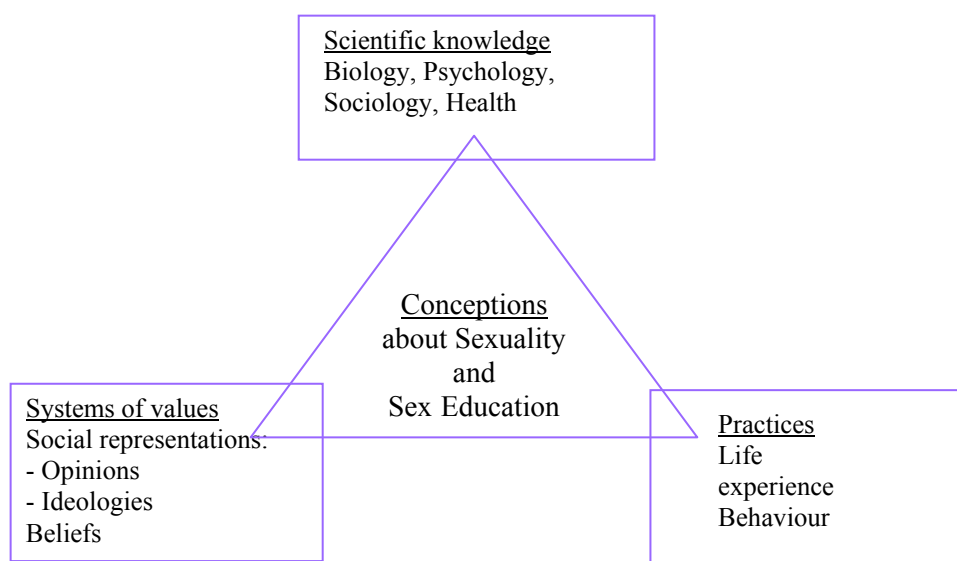


Figure 1: Conceptions as an interaction of scientific knowledge, systems of values and practices.

Obstacles can have several origins: epistemological, didactical, psychological and social (Clément, 2003):

- *Epistemological obstacles* correspond to everyday conceptions (familiar situations, opinions, beliefs) that are in opposition to scientific interpretations (Bachelard 1938, Clément, 1998; Clément, 2003). Religion, by attributing a sin notion to 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 the cerebral epigenesis which supports the individual personality development (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 such as textbooks or school posters (Carvalho, 2003; Clément, 2003, Clément, 2001). The majority of the Portuguese textbooks approach the sexual and reproductive functions in a minor way compared to the other human vital functions. These topics show up in the later position of chapters, occupy less page area and have less student activity than other topics, and topic content lacks relevant notions and even contains scientific errors. They generally show a traditional familial structure (Teixeira, 1999).

- *Psychological obstacles* are related to personal reasons that lead individuals in learning situations to reject new scientific conceptions (Carvalho, 2003). This kind of obstacle results from the individual's personality (Clément, 2001) and his or her sexual biography (Kehily, 2002). When talking with several primary school teachers, some of them have told us that one important obstacle is their own sexuality. A qualitative study analysing the relations between teachers' sexual biography and their sex education pedagogical practice (Kehily, 2002) indicates 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 related 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 openly discussed and even schools for boys and girls were 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, such as religion, as being an obstacle to sex education.

According to the changes of Portuguese sex education laws, new school programmes have been delineated. The most recent primary school programme (1990) includes sex education throughout the four school years: first year – “*sexual identity*”; second year – “*body, family, relationships and social roles*”; third year – “*reproductive and sexual function*”; fourth year – “*body safety*”.

Our research intends to analyse primary school teachers’ conceptions of, and obstacles to, sex education based on the didactical transposition model, which considers both external and internal didactical transpositions (Clément, 1998). The *external didactical transposition* has to do with the definition of school programmes in reference to new scientific knowledge, social practices and systems of values, as influenced by the decisions of policy-makers. The *internal didactical transposition* regards the way in which the school programmes are applied by textbooks and teachers’ pedagogical practices. Thus, this research concerns the second phase of didactical transposition: between “the knowledge to be taught” and “the knowledge that is taught”.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

Our main research question is:

- What are the teachers’ perceptions about obstacles that prevent them teaching Sex Education in primary school?

The sub questions are the following:

- Do teachers agree or not with sex education in primary school?
- What is the subject matter in which teachers have more difficulties?
- What are teachers’ opinions about other participants in children’s sex education?
- Are teachers’ conceptions and obstacles associated to community influence?
- Do teachers agree with specific training courses about sex education?

- What are teachers' contextual factors (individual and socio-cultural) that can interact with their professional practice of sex education?
- What are teachers' arguments for doing or not doing sex education in primary school?

We intend to answer these questions by analysing teachers' conceptions and obstacles related to sex education: their scientific knowledge, their systems of values, and their professional practice. The hypothesis of our study is:

H = There is an interaction between values system and scientific knowledge in the teaching practice of human sexuality and reproduction.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

To identify teachers' conceptions of, and obstacles to, sex education, we intend to apply several research instruments: questionnaires, debates, focus groups, individual interviews and specific cases registrations.

The *first questionnaire* was the starting point of this research. It is based on: *i*) a review of literature on sex education (CCPES *et al.*, 2000; Vaz *et al.*, 1996), some values such as religion, religious practice and political tendency (Teixeira, 1999) that can influence sexuality education, and some contextual factors which interact with the practice of sex education (Walker *et al.*, 2003); *ii*) a previous study (Anastácio & Carvalho, 2002), which revealed a set of questions that primary school children tend to ask, and, *iii*) contact with primary school teachers who have expressed some of their opinions, difficulties, feelings and fears about sex education, their training needs, their pedagogic practices and some incidents they perceived concerning children sexuality. To validate the questionnaire a pilot was carried out with 30 primary school teachers. Subsequently, minor changes were introduced in the questionnaire to be applied to the large sample.

Questionnaire results guided the definition of a list of questions to better clarify opinions and to stimulate a *debate*. The debate results are then analysed to define a list of questions to animate and organize discussion in *focus group*. This technique was selected because it has proven to be useful to discuss specific issues in natural or real groups, *i.e.* groups that cope with the issue in daily life (Flick, 1998). It seems to be particularly appropriate to the sensitive topic of sexuality (Geasler *et al.*, 1995). Similarly, from the focus group results, a list of questions will be prepared for

*individual interviews*. In addition, problematic situations in sexuality and sex education that have occurred or may be encountered in primary schools have been and will continue to be reported and analysed individually. Figure 2 shows a diagram concerning the schedule of research techniques used and to be used in this research programme.

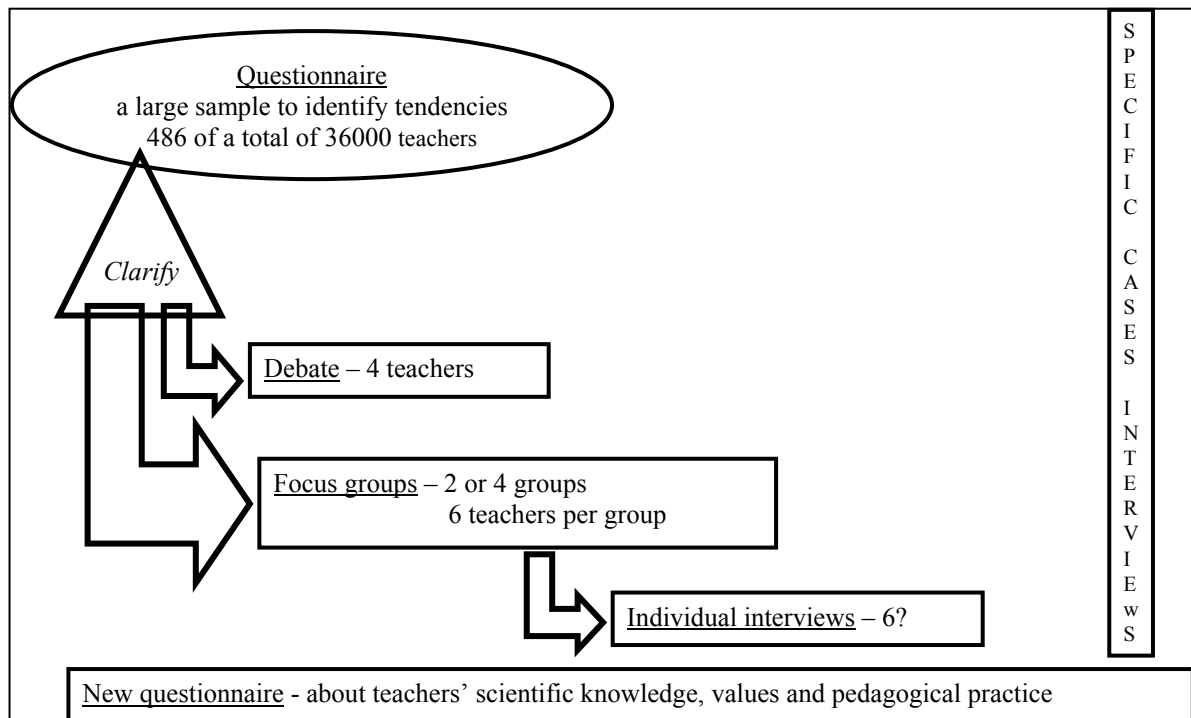


Figure 2: Research design.

### Data Collection

The goal of the *first questionnaire* was to survey primary school teachers' conceptions (mainly associated to their practices) by collecting their opinions, difficulties, feelings, fears and training needs regarding sex education to identify general tendencies. The questionnaire was applied with the written permission of the Local Authorities (8 CAE or Educative Area Centre) of the northern region of Portugal and after having contacted each school director by telephone. Questionnaires were delivered either by going personally to the nearby schools, delivering them to the school director and coming back later to collect them, or by posting them to the more distant schools in an envelope containing another stamped and addressed envelope to be sent back. The 486 correctly completed questionnaires we collected were entered in SPSS (version 12.0) and analysed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods.

### PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Preliminary analysis of the questionnaire gave the following results. Of the 486 primary school teachers, 426 were females and 58 were males. Most of them were married (72.1% of females and 70.7% of males) and had children (80.6% and 75.4%). The great majority of them were Catholic (97.3% and 88.9%) however only about half of them actively practised religion (51.6% and 44.2%). In general they had had no specific training in sex education (88.8% and 82.5%).

### Teacher agreement to sex education in school

Data suggested (Table 1) that primary school teachers were more *favourable* to sex education in secondary and elementary school than in primary and nursery school.

**Table 1:** Primary school teachers' agreement to teaching sex education (n=486)

	Nursery school (<6 years)	Primary school (6 to 10 years)	Elementary school (11 to 12 years)	Secondary school (13 to 15 years)	Secondary school (16 to 18 years)	University (>18 years)
Totally disagree	43	10	1	1	1	8
Disagree	51	18	5	1	2	10
Not disagree nor agree	94	64	11	7	10	37
Agree	214	281	234	168	130	114
Totally agree	50	94	201	272	303	271

The more influential factors were: *i) academic classification* – teachers with lower qualifications were less favourable to sex education at all school levels; *ii) continuous training course* – those who had had specific training were more favourable to sex education in primary school; and *iii) political tendency* – groups with left-wing opinions were more favourable to sex education in nursery and primary school than the groups with right-wing opinions.

Teachers' difficulties in the four domains of sex education: "Expressions of Sexuality", "Body growth", "Reproductive and sexual health", "Interpersonal Relationships"

Teachers' most difficult domain to deal with was "Expressions of Sexuality" and the easiest one was "Interpersonal Relationships" (Figure 3).

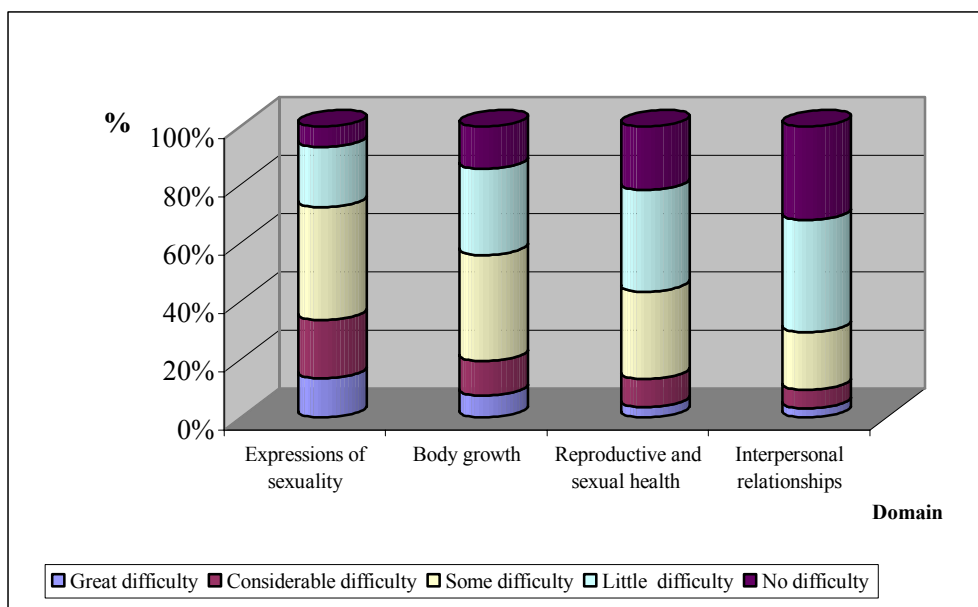


Figure 3: Teachers' difficulties in the 4 sex education domains (n=486)

The factors that revealed the most influence on this variable were: *i) gender* – females had more difficulties than males, especially in relation to “body growth” ( $p < 0,01$ ) and “expressions of sexuality” ( $p < 0,05$ ); *ii) age* – younger teachers (<30 years old) had fewer difficulties than the older ones, especially in relation to both domains above; *iii) academic qualification* – teachers with higher-level degrees (*licenciatura*) had fewer difficulties in the same two domains ( $p < 0,05$ ); *iv) training courses* – those who took training courses had fewer difficulties in all domains than the others who did not (Expressions of sexuality,  $p < 0,001$ ; Body growth,  $p < 0,01$ ; Reproductive and sexual health,  $p < 0,05$ ; Interpersonal relationships,  $p < 0,001$ ); *v) working area* - teachers working in rural areas registered more difficulties than teachers working in urban areas as far as “body growth” is concerned ( $p < 0,05$ ); *vi) having children* – teachers with children revealed more difficulties in all domains than those with no children (body growth and interpersonal relationships,  $p < 0,05$ ; reproductive and sexual health,  $p < 0,01$ ).

#### Teachers' feelings about approaching specific topics of sexuality

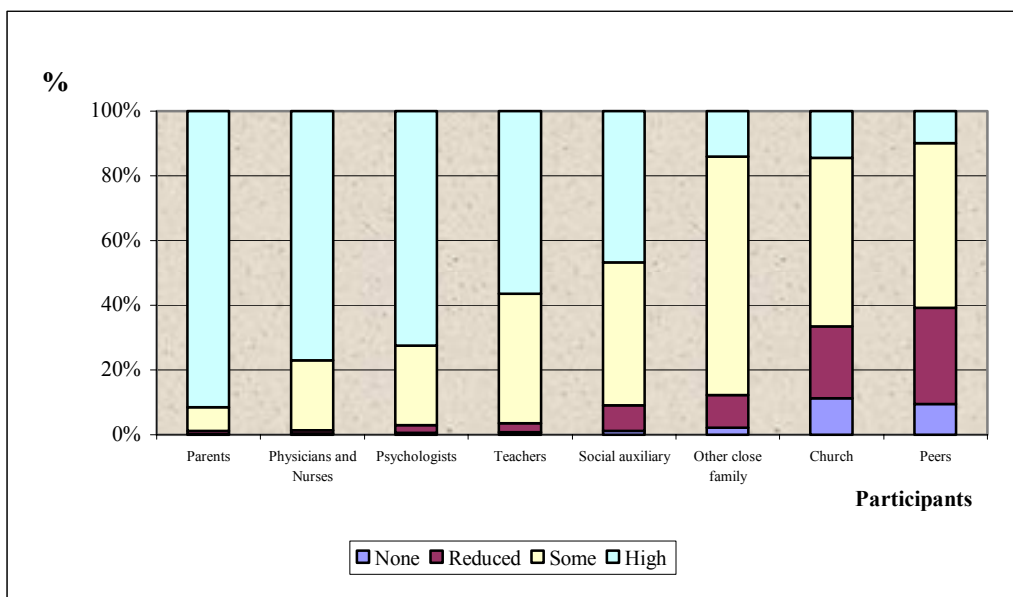


The most difficult topics to deal with were “eroticism and pornography” and “sexual intercourse”. In contrast, the easiest topics were “body differences”, “gender roles” and “affective relationships”.

The most influential factors were: *i) gender* – males reported fewer difficulties than females in most topics; *ii) age* – younger teachers generally found these topics less difficult to approach than the older ones, especially in “eroticism”, “homosexuality”, “sexual identity” and “body differences”; *iii) training courses* – teachers who frequented these courses revealed to be more comfortable than teachers who did not; *iv) working area* – teachers working in rural areas expressed more difficulties than those working in urban areas in all topics; *v) having children* – teachers with children revealed more difficulties than the others, especially in “sexual pleasure”, “affective relationships”, “homosexuality”, “exhibitionism”, “sexual intercourse”, “eroticism” and “sex abuse”.

Teachers’ opinions about other participants in children’s sex education

Parents, health professionals and psychologists are seen by teachers as the most qualified professions to collaborate in children’s sex education.



**Figure 4:** Teachers’ views on possible participants in children’ sex education (n=486)

Factors that influenced these conceptions were: *i) gender* – males were more favourable to the participation of other persons to teach sex education; *ii) age* and *iii) career time*, younger teachers (<30 years old) as well as less experienced teachers were less favourable to the participation of “parents”, “physicians and nurses”, “psychologists” and “social auxiliaries”; *iv) civil status* – divorced teachers appeared more favourable than others to the participation of other professions in sex education, especially; *v) academic qualification*, teachers with higher-level degrees were more favourable to sex education by teachers than other people; *vi) training courses* – those having taken sex education courses were, in general, more favourable than the other teachers to other people participating in sex education; *vii) working area* – teachers working in rural areas were more favourable to other people participating in sex education than those working in urban areas; *viii) religion* and *ix) religious practice* – Catholic teachers, in particular those actively practicing religion, were not favourable to the participation of “teachers”, “peers”, “physicians and nurses” and “psychologists”.

#### Teachers’ fears in dealing with sex education

“Parents” and “pupils” reactions, “Other persons’ mentalities” and the “Conservative milieu” were the main explanations teachers gave in relation to their fears of teaching sex education.

Factors influencing these fears were: *i) gender* – females had lower fears than males of “parents”, “pupils” and “other persons’ mentalities”; *ii) working area* – teachers working in rural areas seemed to be more afraid than the others, especially in relation to “parents”, “priest”, “other persons’ mentalities” and the “conservative milieu”; *iii) training courses* – teachers who had specific training courses were more at ease with sex education; *iv) religious practice* – non-practising teachers were more at ease and less afraid to deal with sex education, especially in relation to “parents” and “other persons’ mentalities”.

#### Support to teachers teaching sex education

Teachers felt supported essentially by “colleagues”, the “school director” and the “school group president”, but not by the “priest”.

The most influential factors were: *i) training courses* – those having taken these courses felt they had more support from “parents”, “school psychologist” and “social

auxiliaries”; *ii) religion* and *iii) religious practice* – Catholic and practising teachers gave even more importance to the above-mentioned support groups than the others.

### Teachers’ training needs in sex education

Teachers agreed that training must give them “scientific knowledge”, help them to respond more easily to “children's unpredictable questions” and also to help children to “develop values awareness”. The training topic in which teachers are less interested is the “reproductive system”.

The influencing factors were: *i) gender* – females gave more importance to sex education training than males; *ii) training courses* – those having this type of training were also more keen on training; *ii) religious practice* –strongly practising teachers were more in favour of training in several topics, especially “preparation to teach values” and “approach to legal aspects of sex education” (we suppose strong practitioners consider training must be done, but according to religious values).

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In short, the preliminary *questionnaire* results suggest that the independent variables which reflect the strongest influences on teachers’ conceptions are: academic qualifications, gender, training courses, religious practice, time of career, area of work, and having children. The less influential factors seem to be the area of residence, political tendency and religion.

These preliminary results also indicate that: *i)* teachers who avoid implementing sex education give political and family arguments; *ii)* teachers in favour of sex education mostly consider the obstacles linked to individual factors such as lack of confidence, lack of knowledge and prejudices; *iii)* the most difficult contents are related to sexual intercourse, fertilisation and sexual pleasure; *iv)* contextual factors (milieu, community, church) can be obstacles for teachers in teaching sex education; *v)* specific training in sex education seems to be necessary.

Keeping in mind these preliminary results of our questionnaire, the selection of questions presented at the *debate* were the following:

- Why is it so difficult to implement sex education in our schools?
- What is the main obstacle to sex education?
- What is the most important content of sex education: values, affection, reproduction, body growth, sexual health?

- What is the most difficult content?

Transcription of the debate has been carried out and a content analysis is in progress.

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