

# **Sex education in school and teacher training: contributions to an imperative agenda**

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## **Abstract**

*From this brief preamble, it is opportune to investigate how sexual education is taught in schools as well as the production of researchers engaged in studying this matter. Teachers are the main agents involved in the mediation of knowledge. After all, they mediate contents and discuss information on sex and sexuality that come from the family, society or media, with which children and adolescents interact. This study aims to investigate, from a selection of productions available on Capes Journal Portal, which are the theorists/theories most cited by researchers who discuss the teaching of sex and sexuality to children and adolescents. To identify the theoretical sources used by these authors to support their studies, the following research question was formulated: according to the authors that discuss sexuality education for adolescents and children, what are the characteristics of the teacher education program and which theorists are more cited in their studies? The study consists of a qualitative-convergent mixed systematic review. We used the descriptors 'sexuality' and 'teaching' in exact terms. The eligibility criteria consisted of articles (i) published from 2019 to 2020; (ii) with open access; (iii) reviewed by; and (iv) with a focus of interest on basic education (adolescents and children). The content analysis of the main results obtained allowed to organize the findings into four categories: school-based sexual education and teacher training: contributions to an inevitable discussion; teaching and sexuality; teacher training for sexuality education; theories cited. From the results, it can be seen that the mediation between the two theories – teaching and sexuality – takes place almost exclusively in Biology and Sciences classes. And in these subjects, the teachers' focus is on reproductive issues, something that does not allow an effective exploration of the sexuality topic by the main players of the teaching action.*

**Keywords:** Sexuality education; Basic education; Teacher education. Children. Adolescents.

## **1. Introduction**

School, as a privileged space for intellectual and learning activities, is also a place of social interactions and bonds between children and adolescents at similar stages of development. Some uncertainties, doubts, difficulties, taboos, prejudices, curiosities about many subjects politically and frequently posed by society, media, social networks, social relations, for each age, are common among children and adolescents. Sex and sexuality are issues that require full attention of educational leaders and teachers, considering that "school is a locus of promotion of actions for children and adolescents' health, in which sexuality is a subject that can be addressed in the most natural and propitious way" (MELO, 2017 p.1).

In the school context, teachers are the main agents involved in the mediation of knowledge. After all, they address contents and discuss information about sex and sexuality derived from family, society or communication means with which adolescents and children interact. School can also fill the gaps in the knowledge that they already have and, most importantly, allows access to reliable, responsible and preventive information about sex and sexuality. Based on recent studies on this topic, evidences point to the vulnerability of access to coherent information for this audience, as well as the risks to health and safety of youths (FARIAS; FERREIRA, 2021; FRANCO; SOUZA; BARBOSA, 2021; HOFFSTAEDTER, 2021; LIMA; MEGLHIORATTI; JUSTINA, 2019).

Based on the above, this study aims to investigate how sexual education takes place in school, as well as the production of researchers/scholars engaged in the study of this topic. This study thus aims to prospect a selection of information available on Capes Journal Portal, which are the most theorists/theories cited by researchers who discuss teaching and sex and sexuality education for adolescents and children. To identify the theoretical framework that support these authors' studies, we developed the following question: **among the researches on sexuality education for adolescents and children, which are the characteristics of teacher training and which theorists are most cited in the studies?**

### ***1.1 Methodological pathway***

Firstly, it is worth mentioning that Capes Journal Portal is considered the main database designed to provide access to scientific information to Brazilian researchers (CANTO; PINTO, 2018), which justifies our choice for this database.

The study consists of a qualitative-convergent mixed systematic review, because it "transforms the results of qualitative studies, quantitative studies and mixed methods studies into qualitative findings" (GALVÃO; RICARTE, 2019. p. 60). To achieve the objectives of the study, the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA, 2015) was used. The PRISMA checklist and PRISMA flow diagram were tools used to check the items present and the flow of criteria for inclusion and exclusion of articles.

In these terms, in order to answer to the research question, we proceeded to the (i) construction of the research protocol; (ii) formulation of the question (PICO acronym); (iii) search for studies with definition of descriptors; (iv) selection and analysis of the studies using the pre-determined eligibility criteria; (v) critical review of the articles; (vi) data collection; (vii) synthesis of results and arrangement of studies based on their similarities (ERCOLE; MELO; ALCOFORADO, 2014).

We used the descriptors "sexualidade" (sexuality) and "ensino" (teaching) in exact terms. Eligible criteria for inclusion were: (i) articles published between 2019 and 2020; (ii) open access; (iii) reviewed by peers; and (iv) articles with a focus of interest on elementary/middle school education (teenagers and children).

Not included: (i) studies on sex and sexuality in higher education; (ii) gender as the focus of interest; (iii) literature reviews (narrative, integrative, bibliographic, etc.); and (iv) thesis or dissertation. A review table was built with the information obtained, including title, journal, method and theorists/theories cited.

The first search revealed 239 articles, none of them duplicated in the database. After an analysis by title, abstract and application of the eligibility criteria, 19 articles remained. After reading entirely, 16 articles were included in the review.

This process is illustrated in Figure 1, using a PRISMA flow diagram (MOHER, 2009).

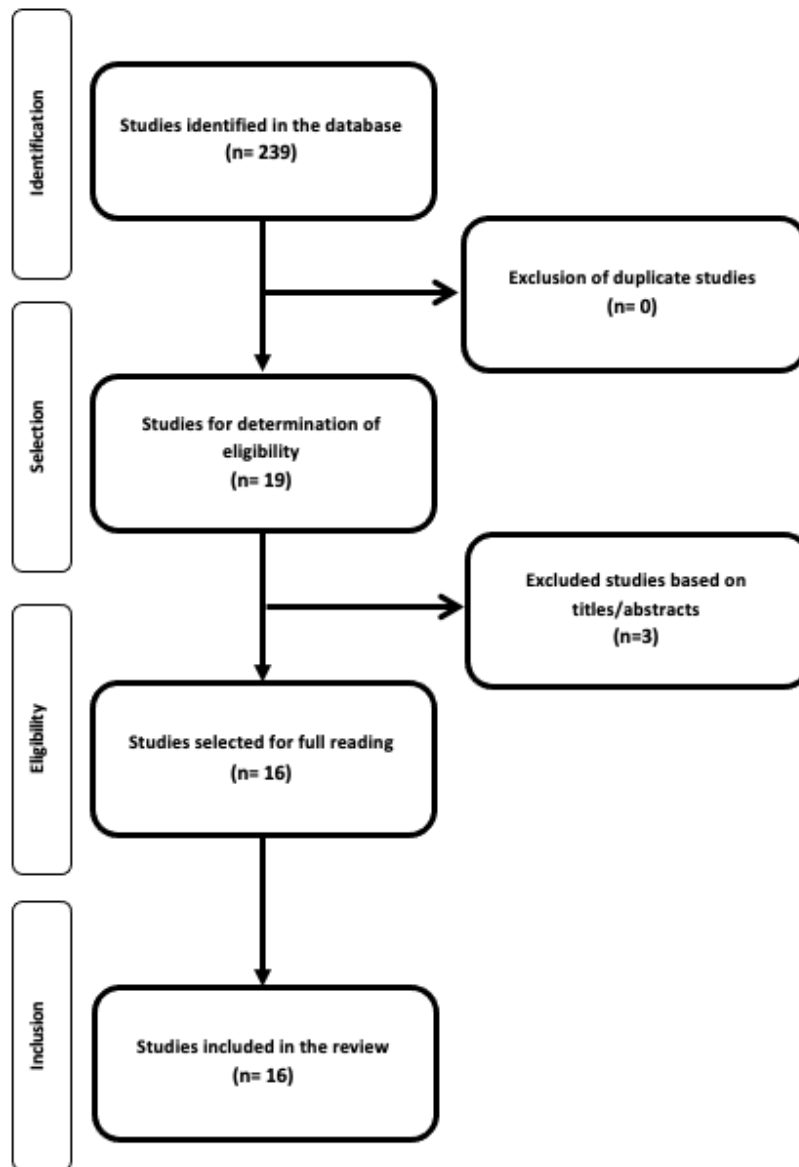


Figure 1- PRISMA flow diagram. Distribution of studies found in the database, included and excluded, and selected for final analysis.

Source: adapted from Moher (2009).

The reading of the entire articles and use of Moher’s Content Analysis method (2009) allowed the possibility of analyzing important information of the articles and group them into thematic categories: 1) Teaching and Sexuality; 2) Teacher Training for Teaching Sexuality Education.

## 2. Results and Discussion

The studies that comprised the final analysis, after reading them entirely, are:

**Table 01** – Distribution of the characteristics of the articles that made up the entire analysis

Authors/ Year	Title	Theorist (s) or Theories Cited	Journal	Objectives	Method
FERREIRA, EA; ALVES, VH; PEREIRA, AV; PEREIRA, PD; SANTOS, MV; GABRIELLONI, MC 2019	Sexuality in the perception of adolescent students of a public school: contribution for care	Not explicit	Revista de Pesquisa: Cuidado é Fundamental.	To discuss the adolescents' perception of sexuality in the school space	Qualitative, descriptive and explanatory study
HAMES, C; KEMP, AT 2019	Diversity of gender and sexuality in the teacher formative process	Not explicit	RIS- Revista Insigne Scientia	To reflect on sexuality and gender diversity issues in the teacher education process based on interactions in the initial training process of future Sciences/Biology teachers	Case Study
BARZANO, MAL; SANTOS, JES 2019	Writing letters: sexuality in life and training of Biology teachers	Michel Foucault	Ensino Em Re-Vista	To present not only the dissertation extract, or an excerpt from a chapter. No! In the present text we introduce what steered our thoughts during the development of the research	Narrative analysis (Letter article)
FURLANETTO, MF; MARIN AH; GONÇALVES, TR 2019	Access to quality information on sex and sexuality from the adolescents' perspective	Not mentioned	Estudos e Pesquisas em Psicologia	To characterize access to information and quality of information on sex and sexuality in the family and school contexts from an adolescents' perspective	Explanatory design study

SOUZA, ML; FERRARI, A 2019	Concerns about gender and sexuality in teachers' training spaces: the PIBID case in Science	Michel Foucault	Ensino Em Re-Vista	To focus on discomforts about gender and sexuality brought up by participants of a Science Pibid subproject of a federal university in Minas Gerais for first graders of middle school.	Case study
PARANAIBA, MV; ROSA, GFC; HASSE, M; RODRIGUES, ET 2019	Report of a workshop experience about sexuality with young students of a public school in Uberlândia, Minas Gerais	Paulo Freire	Revista em Extensão	To address the concept of damage reduction through popular education in health at a public school in the city. The project started after agreement with the selected school on the activities to be performed	Case study
FRANCO, RM; MARINHO, JCB; SILVA, FF 2020	Report of a supervised internship experience in Sciences developed from the perspective of education for sexuality	Paulo Freire	RIS- Revista Insignare Scientia	To report and reflect on experiences achieved in the process of development of the curricular component Supervised Internship II of the bachelor Nature Course of the Federal University of Pampa, campus Uruguaiana/RS.	Case study
GOULART, AS; COSTA, MT; BENITES. LB; <i>et al.</i> 2020	Brief perspective from undergraduates on Transversal Themes: Environment, Health and Sexuality	Not explicit	Research, Society and Development	To present the views of undergraduates in Natural Sciences and Biology about Transversal Themes (TT)	Qualitative case study

GOMES, AT; MARQUES, JS; SANTOS, EN; et al 2020	Health education at school: Discussing sexuality with adolescents	Paulo Freire	Research, Society and Development	To describe the experience of resident professionals in a health education action on sexuality linked to the physiological changes in puberty and the body perception of adolescents from a public school.	Descriptive study based on a report of experience
SILVA, JKO <i>et al.</i> 2019	Gender identity and orientation: sexuality in the school context	Michel Foucault	Research, Society and Development	To discuss the diversity of gender and sexual orientation in the school context from the teachers' perspective	Qualitative research
CAVALHEIRO, AS 2019	Discussing gender, sexuality and diversities in childhood through PNAIC	Jean-Jacques Rosseau;  Michel Foucault	RELACult – Revista Latino- Americana de Estudos em Cultura e Sociedade	To analyze if/how discussions on gender and sexuality were introduced according to the National Pact Program for Literacy at the Right Age <i>[Programa Pacto Nacional pela Alfabetização na Idade Certa –PNAIC]</i>	Case Study
BARROS, PS; QUEIROZ, GRPC 2020	Teaching knowledge in times of rising neo- conservatism: how teachers address gender and sexuality in Science' classes	Simone Beauvoir; Paulo Freire	Research, Society and Development	To answer how interviewed teachers of Sciences approach the theme of gender relations and sexuality in the classroom.	Qualitative research (more precisely, a case study)
NASCIMENTO, AMC; MONTE, LMI ; SOUSA RFV ; et al 2020	I speak, you speak and nobody listens: chats on sex and sexuality between adolescents and	Michel Foucault	Research, Society and Development	To describe the profile and positioning of public- school teachers with respect to health education with an emphasis on sexuality, seeking to investigate	Qualitative survey

	young people in the school environment			associations in this context	
BRONDANI, AS; SILVA, AO; HAUSEN, CF; ZANCAN, A; BIAGGIO, EPV; TRINDADE, AV 2020	Profile and positioning of public-school teachers in relation to health education with an emphasis on sexuality	Not explicit	Research, Society and Development	To describe the profile and positioning of public school teachers with respect to health education with an emphasis on sexuality, seeking to investigate associations in this context	Experimental cross-sectional descriptive study
FIGUEIREDO, RS; SOUZA, ML; BARBOSA, AAL 2019	Gender and sexuality in a school with experience in the Institutional Scholarship Program for Teaching [Programa Institucional de Bolsa de Iniciação à Docência (PIBID)]	Michel Foucault	Revista de Ensino de Biologia -SBEn Bio	To reflect on initial ideas of the doctoral research Gender Identity in School Environment	Case study
VIEIRA, VC; GONZALEZ, CG, 2019	Lexical selection and semantic relationships of co-occurrences of gender and sexuality in “national curriculum parameters”	Paulo Freire Michel Foucault	Alfa: Revista de Linguística	To discuss an educational experience on gender and sexuality issues conducted with a group of students of second grade of a middle school in a state school in the interior of Bahia.	Discourse analysis

Source: Primary data

Out of the 16 articles selected, six were published in Research, Society and Development, three in RIS – Revista Insignare Scientia, two in Ensino Em Re-Vista and the others in *Revista de Pesquisa: Cuidado é*

*Fundamental, Estudos e Pesquisas em Psicologia, Revista em Extensão, Revista de Ensino de Biologia-SBEn Bio and Alfa: Revista de Linguística* (one paper in each publication).

‘Case studies’ and ‘descriptive and exploratory studies’ were the methods most found in the selected articles. Of these, nine are case studies, three are defined as descriptive exploratory studies. The others defined their articles as cross-sectional descriptive studies, discourse analysis and qualitative research in terms of the methods employed.

It could be seen that some articles (six) discuss teacher training for the teaching of sexuality education. Because the descriptors used in the search were ‘teaching and sexuality’, the occurrence of teaching-related studies can be considered significant.

In the search for answers to the research question of this systematic review, when reading the articles, it became evident that the most cited theorists/theories were Michel Foucault (six), Paulo Freire (five), Jean Jacques Rosseau (one) and Simone Beauvoir (one). But in five articles, the authors did not indicate in their studies the theorists or theories used to substantiate the discussion of their productions with regard to sex, sexuality teaching and youths.

There is also an important aspect that was found when reading the articles entirely: the cognitive domain intended by the researchers in the formulation of the main objectives of their studies. In these terms, through the Bloom’s Revised and Updated Taxonomy, as outlined in Figure 2, it is possible to analyze this aspect.

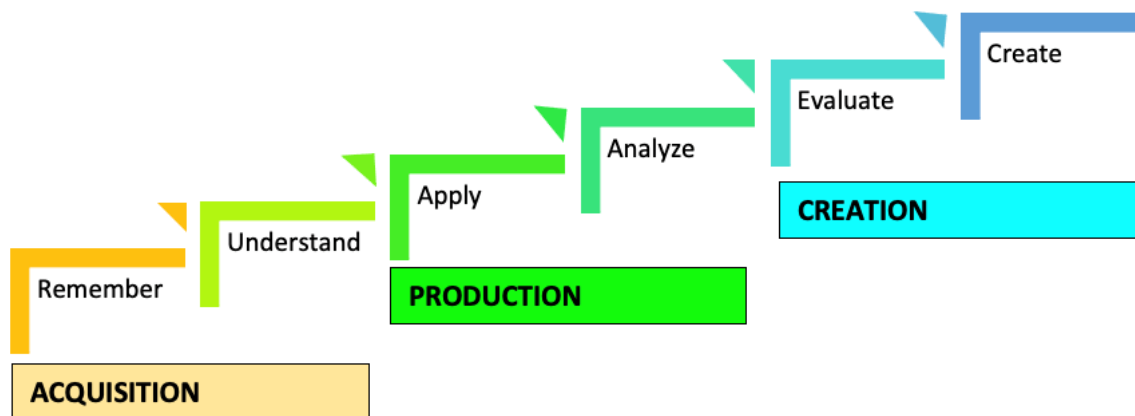


Figure 2- Schematic presentation of Bloom’s Revised and Updated Taxonomy  
 Source: adapted from Rodrigues Júnior (2016)

When the researchers’ interest was focused on establishing connections between something new and something already known, the cognitive domain (or cognitive learning) that represents such interest is ‘Understand’. This was represented in the selected articles by the verbs reflect (used in four articles), discuss (three articles), describe (two articles), focus, address, present and answer (one in each article).

When the intention was to carry out or use a procedure in a specific situation, the cognitive domain is ‘Apply’. This learning is consolidated by the verbs report (one article) and develop (one article).

The authors’ intention is to understand the interrelation between parts of a phenomenon, context, subject, etc., which was represented by the cognitive learning ‘Analyze’, present in the use of the verb analyze (in



one article).

So, it can be seen that the cognitive domain that prevailed in the objectives defined by the authors is 'Understand'. It is worth noting that this cognitive domain is the second lowest in the scale of complexity of the objectives proposed by Bloom.

The Content Analysis carried out on the results of the articles that were read entirely allowed the establishment of two categories of analysis, as described below.

### **3. Education and Sexuality**

Access to knowledge on sex and sexuality in public schools, mainly due to social inequality, is a challenge posed to teachers and students as well. This is why the subject is not limited to discussing how babies are made or sexual reproduction education (FERREIRA, *et al.*, 2018). Thus, mediation of knowledge is limited and insufficient to meet the subjective demands about sexuality. According to Souza and Ferrari (2019), there is a lack of debates about sexuality in the school, and when there are, they are limited to Sciences classes and the topic of human reproduction. The authors argue that Sciences textbooks reproduce the 'sexuality = reproduction' model. Souza and Ferrari (2018, p.58) also argue that sexuality "is a matter that frightens or causes fear to many parents, because some of them believe that when working on such discussions there will be an encouragement for their child or children to start their sexual life."

Childhood and adolescence are vital cycles of human development, when physical, biological, psychosocial and emotional changes occur continuously. As age increases, relationships with peers, the beginning of sexual life and possible infectious diseases and unwanted pregnancy are recurrent issues in the school environment. At this phase, it is important for adults to pay attention to the emotional risks that may arise from the relationships that children and adolescents establish with others, taking into account that physical and psychological violence, abuses and sexual harassment may be present in their social and daily contexts. It is also necessary to consider the behaviors that promote inequality practices such as gender sexual rights (FURLANETO; GONÇALVES; MARIM, 2019).

To Gomes *et al.* (2020), Paranaíba (2019) and Silva *et al.* (2019), when deciding to introduce projects in schools, together with health, the most common subjects recommended by teachers are prevention of pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, with no much opportunity for students to discuss themes cross-cut by myths, beliefs and moral values. The authors also highlight that youth sexual health is dealt as a problem.

Historically, when the topic is sexual education, Louro (1997) pointed out that old textbooks were already concerned with the care of the students' body and soul. The manner in which students were expected to sit and walk, how they handle notebooks and pens, their posture, feet and hands would end up in a 'schooled' and standardized body, differentiating the boy or girl who passed through the school benches.

Over time, such practices gradually disappeared, education on sexuality has surely evolved, but the need to introduce methodologies related to the particularities and specificities that this topic encompasses is still noticeable. Furthermore, it is vital to provide knowledge and promote self-knowledge of adolescents in development, to ensure more safety and health to them.

Something to highlight in the articles selected is that they address sexual education of adolescents only,

they do not mention sexual education of children in schools. Taking into account that in Brazil a child is victim of sexual violence every 15 minutes, that most of the cases happen at home and the aggressor is someone they know or a member of the family, according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child - UNICEF, 2020, it is vital that teachers discuss this topic with children. Such finding becomes even more significant as family and teachers, in the sexual education of adolescents and children, must also consider the emotional and relational aspects, such as the prevention of sexual abuse and harassment, which are frequent in childhood, as shown by statistics of the Ministry of Woman, Family and Human Rights (MMFDH).

It is also important to emphasize that among the keywords mentioned, there was no mention to sexual abuse when the victims are boys. Some authors mention violence and abuses against girls and women. This fact shows the need for more discussions and debates oriented to the understanding (for prevention) of sexual violence against boys.

It should also be noted that the selected studies reinforce the importance of teacher education in this process, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### **4. Teacher training for sexual education**

With respect to teacher education as well as continuing education for teachers on sexual education, in the National Curriculum Parameters [*Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais – PCNS*] (1996), the topics about sexuality must be addressed through transversality of contents, that is, in all school disciplines. The subjects on this topic may be further addressed, whenever the students express interest. To discuss transversality in teacher training for sexual education makes one think about the one who will mediate it and if he/she will accomplish this task coherently and effectively. If not properly fulfilled, it may become a problem. After all, if teachers are the agents for the achievement of the proposed goals, their actual work condition and the quality of professional training must be put under perspective, considering that such training is directed to all disciplines (BUENO; MOISÉS, 2010; OLIVEIRA; MIRANDA; SILVA, 2018; YOSHIMOTO, 2020).

According to Hames and Kemp (2019), teachers of Sciences and Biology are the ones usually assigned to address broad and in-depth discussions on sex and sexuality in the school context. However, according to these authors, only the biological and reproductive aspects are commonly discussed in the classes. Such reductionism creates conflicts of key aspects associated with sexuality and exclusion, such as, for example, stigmas and taboos that not rarely accompany them. On this regard, we should consider that Brazil is one of the countries with the greatest number of reports of aggressions against LGBTQIA+<sup>i</sup> (UN, 2019). According to data from the Bahia Gay Group, in 2018 there were 520 crimes against LGBTQIA+ people (MICHELS; MOTT; PAULINHO, 2018). Therefore, it is clear that sexual education to children and adolescents must also address gender issues.

The scientific community warns about the lack of effectively clarifying elements about sex and sexuality in the education of children and adolescents. In literature, there are sound arguments demonstrating the incipient training of teachers on gender and sexuality, something that undoubtedly hinders the learning of these topics. In addition, outlining a scenario that requires urgent intervention, there are aspects relating to teachers' moral values and beliefs, which determine how and what will be taught about the contents of sex

and sexuality (BARROS; QUEIROZ, 2020; BRONDANI *et al.*, 2020).

Up to now, as mentioned before, the disciplines that deal with sexuality at school are Sciences and Biology. The papers examined in this study point out that this reality requires intervention from the school board or leaders, including educational policy-makers. The transversality of this topic must be emphasized, which involves other subjects. Associated with this is the possibility of integrating specialists and other professionals to contribute to the mediation of this knowledge. If the mission of schools is to educate conscientious and socially responsible individuals, concerned with building a fairer and more egalitarian society, a free-of-prejudice sexuality education must be supported by educational actions (FRANCO; MARINHO; SILVA, 2021).

Teacher training brings to the focus of discussions the contents of certified/licensed teacher courses. Benites *et al.* (2020) state that, although undergraduates, as future teachers, are aware that there is a need to address themes related to sex and sexuality in their classes, they show insecurity in addressing these topics.

Another dimension involved in teacher education, according to Silveira, Miesse and Carvalho (2021), topics such as gender and sexuality are influenced by political, economic and moral contexts, advocated by supporters or not of movements in disputes that aim to interfere with teaching and education. To Barros and Queiroz (2020), there is also the influence of the “conservative movement that supports the preservation of hegemonic privileges in schools aiming to ensure maintenance of the *status quo*” (p.35). The authors also state that the subjects of gender and sexuality in the classroom many times come from the “curiosity of the students themselves and not from an indoctrinating process imposed by teachers (p.36)”.

## **5. The most cited theories in studies on sex education**

When knowledge on a certain topic is produced, it is important to examine its historical context as well as if the authors who studied it and can be considered creators of theories, methods and important insights for the history they reveal. So, “the relationship between language and ideology can be examined, as well as how the effects of meanings are produced through the statements” (SILVA; ARAUJO, 2017. p.17).

Based on this understanding and considering that one of the objectives of this study was to identify the most cited theorists in the articles found, in the studies on sexuality and teaching included in the systematic review, Michel Foucault and Paulo Freire are the theorists with the greatest number of citations. We understand that this is due to the fact that both these authors are widely recognized in the national and international scientific community and for their significant contribution to the subject.

In a brief summary of the legacy of both authors to the theme in discussion, it is possible that the discourse on sexuality is permeated by discourses that introduce bodies to senses and meanings. Foucault (1988) in their texts problematizes sexuality-related issues when acting in this process. To this author, schools are engaged in disciplining individual bodies, in formatting posture and in the arrangement of desks in the classroom, actions designed to build docile bodies using a series of constant surveillance and control strategies. Such author’s perceptions are found in school walls where silence and discipline are attitudes that express the non-exercise of transversality regarding sexuality.

Foucault (2014, p. 135) mentions the “domination over the others’ bodies not simply to make them do what you want but rather operate as you want”. In these terms, we can infer that children and adolescent in their

respective genders (male/female) are controlled in their sexual manifestations always in relation to heterosexuality.

In contexts where sexuality is perceived as something to be worked on by discourses that establish what is normal/permitted or not in relation to bodies and forms of pleasure, individuals who do not have the sexual and affective characteristics expected by society are victims of discriminations by this society (FOUCAULT, 1988).

There are many discourses that relate sexuality and education issues with strategies of power forces (FOUCAULT, 2011), which can be seen in the school environment.

With regard to the contributions of Paulo Freire to this subject, we point out that encouraging the participation of students in any activity that involves the process of knowledge, to which we add the theme sex and sexuality, is considered an essential resource as it favors teaching and learning significantly and effectively. Adherence to these methodologies provides an autonomous motivation insofar as they include the strengthening of the student's perception as a factor of their own action. For this reason, they have the potential to arouse curiosity as students are introduced to the theories and learn new elements, without any kind of oppression on the idea that the teacher is the holder of all knowledge (FREIRE, 2015). As a result, there is an opening to sociocultural complexity, to the recognition of differences and education as a practice of freedom (FREIRE, 2005).

In this context, we can see in Paulo Freire's opinion, that what really counts is an educational and democratic work in issues relating to social differences that express limiting worldviews (FREIRE, 1987), thus presenting a more humanist view.

The brief summary about the contribution of the theorists most cited in the studies analyzed in this systematic review allows us to see that between both of them it is not possible to draw comparisons about their productions. We understand that, due to the complexity of Freire's and Foucault's thoughts it is possible to find many and deep divergences between them. Both views, however, point to vital questions about which one must consider for the sexual education of children and adolescents.

## **6. Conclusions**

Based on the systematic review about the teaching of sexuality education in school, we can see that the mediation between both constructs – teaching and sexuality – takes place almost exclusively in Biology and Sciences classes. And in these disciplines, the teachers' focus usually fall on issues related to human reproduction, which does not allow that the main actors of the teaching action effectively explore the theme. In addition, this situation hinders the access by students to the knowledge of social relations, of their health and safety.

Through the findings of this study, we can see that several articles do not cite the theorists and theories that substantiated their studies. Such information is relevant to enhance the quality of the research presented to the target audience.

It is still worth mentioning that we found in the majority of the articles selected contents addressing teacher education. On the other hand, in a few articles, we found contents relating to school practices.

It was possible, in this study, to reflect on the importance of continuing education of teachers for the work

of teaching sexuality. In addition, it is relevant a discussion between educational managers and teachers about their understanding of this theme and their views about it, so as to minimize the occurrence of personal interferences in the mediation of such knowledge so necessary to children and adolescents in school learning.

Finally, it is important to consider that the inexhaustibility of reflections and insights on this topic is clear and the importance of further studies and researches to increase knowledge is recognized.

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### **Acknowledgments:**

We thank the Government of the State of Santa Catarina, University Scholarship Program of Santa Catarina - UNIEDU (Public Call No. 471/SED/2021) for financial support.

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<sup>i</sup> Lésbicas, gays, bissexuais, transexuais, travestis, transgêneros, queer, intersexuais, assexuais e mais.