



The more you know, is it better? School and sexual and reproductive health

Cuánto más sepan ¿mejor? Escuela y salud sexual y reproductiva

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Abstract

The ratification of the Law 26.150 in Argentina, in the year 2006, established the National Program of Integral Sexual Education, by which all children at school “have the right to receive integral sexual education at public schools, in state or private institutions,

in national, province, Autonomous City of Buenos Aires and city' s territories". Sexual education appears as a "new" content in a scholar structure that has to suit its teaching practices to demands perceived as external and imposed. In the frame of a research about social representations of teaching practices, there appeared some difficulties and tensions at schools related to the teaching of the contents of sexual integral education. 21 depth interviews with teachers were accomplished in the City of Buenos Aires', Argentina, high schools. The main thematic axes were the teaching practices related to sexual integral education, the obstacles and opportunities of sexual integral education. Through emergent categories, the material was analyzed through the comparative constant method. The teaching practices are organized as a complex and heterogeneous interaction field, in which teachers' everyday life develops, which permits to define school as a place of meaning negotiation. It is important to think about teaching practice because it permits to clear up ideas and assumptions which work as an efficacy condition of the scholar device.

Keywords: Sexual health. Social representations. Teachers.

Resumen

En Argentina, la sanción de la Ley 26.150 en el año 2006 estableció el Programa Nacional de Educación Sexual Integral, por medio del cual todos los niños escolarizados "tienen derecho a recibir educación sexual integral en los establecimientos educativos públicos, de gestión estatal y privada de las jurisdicciones nacional, provincial, de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires y municipal". La educación sexual aparece como un contenido "nuevo" para una estructura escolar que debe acomodar sus prácticas de enseñanza a exigencias que son vividas como externas, como impuestas. En el marco de una investigación sobre representaciones sociales acerca de la práctica docente, se registraron algunas dificultades y tensiones en el ámbito escolar en lo que respecta a la enseñanza de los contenidos de educación sexual integral. Se realizaron 21 entrevistas en profundidad a docentes de escuelas medias de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina, siendo los ejes temáticos la práctica docente en relación a la ESI, obstáculos y oportunidades en la ESI. A partir de la construcción de categorías emergentes, se analizó el material con el método comparativo constante. Las prácticas docentes se configuran como un campo de interacción complejo y heterogéneo,

en el que se desarrolla la vida cotidiana de los maestros, lo cual permite definir a la escuela como un espacio de negociación de sentidos. Reflexionar sobre la práctica docente es importante porque permite elucidar concepciones y supuestos que operan como condición de eficacia del dispositivo escolar.

Palabras Clave: *Salud sexual. Representaciones sociales. Docentes.*

Integral sexual education as a right

In Argentina, the passing of Act 26.150 in 2006 led to the establishment of the National Program of Integral Sexual Education, by means of which all school children “have the right to receive integral sexual education in the public school system, in private and state-run schools under national, provincial, and municipal jurisdictions, and in the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires” (ARGENTINA, 2006).

The objectives of the National Program of Integral Sexual Education consist in achieving gender equality and harmonic training, conducive to a responsible attitude towards sexuality. The program aims at improving health in general, and sexual and reproductive health in particular, by fostering a healthy attitude among the school population, with the teachers as the key social actors and with the theme of sexuality as part of the curriculum.

Within the framework of the International Convention of Children’s Rights, this Act aims at strengthening the abilities of children and teenagers to lead a full life, by means of syllabus contents such as integral sexual education, prevention of HIV-AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, and reproductive health. It involves sexuality as a field of meanings and practices that are not limited to the genital dimension, but viewed rather from the perspective of a person’s rights - addressing it as one of the person’s constitutive dimensions for life-long

development and wellbeing, including biological, psychological, and social issues:

The term ‘sexuality’ refers to a fundamental dimension of the human being. [...] It is expressed by means of thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, activities, practices, roles, and relationships. Sexuality results from the interaction of biological, psychological, socioeconomic, cultural, ethical, and religious or spiritual factors. [...] In short, sexuality is practiced and expressed through everything that we are, feel, think, and do¹.

The State’s responsibility in enforcing the rights of children and teenagers to receive integral sexual education (ISE) is associated with the commitments made in the field of human rights at national and international levels. The school, in collaboration with other social actors, provides the opportunity to strengthen the search for effective responses to rights violations — such as violence, abuse, and mistreatment of children and teenagers — and to implement protection and reparation measures to address these problems.

In 2008 this constitutive framework gave rise to the ISE Curricular Guidelines (ARGENTINA, 2008), approved by the Federal Council of Education², which make up the first level of curricular development associated with Integral Sexual Education, stating the formative purposes and basic contents for all levels and modes of the Argentinean educational system. Sexual education appears to be ‘new’

¹ Sexual Health Assembly convened by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), in collaboration with the World Association for Sexual Health, held from May 19th to 22nd, 2000 in Antigua Guatemala, Guatemala, as cited in *Educación Sexual Integral para la secundaria. Cuadernos de ESI*, p. 11.

² The Federal Council of Education is the agency in charge of ensuring consensus, agreement and coordination of the national educational policy, which guarantees the unity and articulation of the National Educational System. Its president is the National Minister of Education. Other members of this agency are the highest educational authorities of each jurisdiction and three representatives of the University Council.

content in a school structure that must adapt its teaching practices to demands perceived as external and imposed. However, this dimension has always been present through negativization: when improper behavior is pointed out to the children, when teenage pregnancy is penalized, when silence and failure to report abuse are preferred on the grounds that abuse occurs in private life, among other situations.

According to Tedesco (2010), social policies within the educational system are associated with measures in the “government of education”, that is, with the way in which this public-state dimension is materially expressed through institutions. This implies transformations in the school material structure, which take place in a two-way dialectical process affecting diverse levels of intervention and including multiple actors. The aim of this study was to analyze the repercussions among one of the actors: the teachers in charge of *teaching* integral sexual education.

What is meant by sexual education?

Within the framework of a study on social representations about the teaching practice³, some difficulties and tensions were perceived in regard to integral sexual education in the school environment. It is noteworthy that these obstacles are not linked to lack of information because diverse didactic materials (Ministry of Education) have been produced and these are available online and in print. These materials are

³ This study is associated with the Research Project “Representações Sociais de estudantes universitários (pedagogia e licenciatura) sobre o trabalho do professor”, Centro Internacional de Estudos em Representações Sociais e Subjetividade - Educação (CIERS-Ed) and Fundação Carlos Chagas, Sao Paulo, Brazil, directed by Dr Susana Seidmann. Also included in the study are the contributions of a work on the implementation of the Program of Sexual and Reproductive Health, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, conducted within a Master’s course of studies.

based on didactic sequences corresponding to the different educational levels, and even adapted to different fields of knowledge⁴.

The guidelines and directives about sexual and reproductive education have always been present in the school system, although their incorporation into the formal curriculum from the perspective of promotion and production of collective health as well as prevention and control may seem strange and new. In this sense, difference and newness trigger questions about the teaching practice: What does it mean to educate in integral sexuality? Is the school equipped with the capabilities and possibilities to teach contents that promote healthy practices? How may significant contents about sexuality be introduced and taught from the perspective of children's and teenagers' rights?

The issues inherent to the teaching practice - selecting and sequencing contents, planning didactic strategies, among others - account for the diverse types of social knowledges, among which different types of relations and transformations take place. We are referring to the relations between the **reified knowledges** that are typical of ISE, the knowledges to be taught at school, resulting from the transformation of disciplinary or reified knowledges into bodies of contents to be taught according to each educational level⁷, and the **common sense knowledges**, that is, social explanations or theories that the subjects belonging to a specific social group construct about aspects of everyday life and that allow them to interact in it. In this study, we refer to sexuality and the way in which these knowledges hamper

⁴ They include reading material aimed at teachers, proposed by the ISE Curricular Guidelines, consisting of activities for reading and discussion; awareness-raising posters on ISE (one per educational level, produced in collaboration with the technical teams of the Administrations of Pre-school, Primary, and Secondary Levels of Education. The Special Education poster is being designed); awareness-raising leaflets with information on ISE (one for families, one for teachers, and one for secondary school students); ISE booklets with didactic material for the three levels of education (one for primary school has already been finished, while those for pre-school and secondary school are under construction); an EDUCAR multimedia CD; 12 interactive posters to work on ISE at the three educational levels. Available at: <<http://portal.educacion.gov.ar/secundaria/programas/educacion-sexual-integral/>>.

or facilitate practices in the classroom. Furthermore, we mean the social representations (JODELET, 2008; MOSCOVICI, 1979) that the teachers construct about sexuality and how these representations affect their teaching practice in particular, concerning the implementation of the National Program of Integral Sexual Education. The coexistence of diverse types of knowledges, even conflicting ones, was defined by Moscovici and Marková (2003) as *cognitive polyphasia*.

By social representations, we do not mean fixed attributes that individuals bring to each interaction, but the representations produced, recreated and modified in the course of social interactions and practices (CASTORINA, 2003). Social representations are always representations of something, and also of someone, or of a collective (MOSCOVICI, 1979, p. 40) Therefore, given the new demands imposed by Act 26.150 on the teachers, social representations emerge and condition the way in which the teachers relate not only to the contents to be taught, but also to their students. These representations include values, meanings, rules, attitudes, prejudices, and even ways of behaving as far as sexuality is concerned. There is a tension between what is formally expected from the teacher in terms of his/her performance of the public duty and what is privately possible. This tension is to be understood in terms of the relations between social representations about sexual education and the practices related to the teaching of contents. This relation between social representations and practices is complex; it presents significant levels of interaction, and each term of the relation influences and reflects the existing contradictions. Is it the practices or the cognitive elements of the social representation that weigh more heavily upon the social construction of reality?

Methodology

Twenty-one teachers from secondary schools in Buenos Aires City, Argentina, were interviewed in-depth. The main themes were the teaching practice related to ISE, obstacles and opportunities in ISE. A

categorial analysis was conducted on the basis of Fundamented Theory and the constant comparative method.

Between discourses and practices: The teachers and their social representations of sexuality

When the in-depth interview material was first systematized and coded, a strong relation was found between the subjects of the representation, in their role as trainers in sexuality, and their identity construction. The teachers attributed their difficulty or impossibility to perform their role to “the other’s gaze” and to the social pressure placed on them in terms of the ideal educator who is authorized to address the theme of sexuality.

I believe that in certain schools, qualified groups are needed, like nurses or social psychologists, to go and talk, teach... [...]. Certain groups are really involved, you feel empathy, but with others, there´s terrible apathy, which makes it difficult. The teaching role isn´t easy (GC, female, 27).

[On the possibility to address sexual themes in the classrooms] In general it is not addressed. If you want to address it, you have many problems and there are prejudices, I think, on the part of the students and the parents [...]. It´s difficult to know from what angle to address it, and it also depends on the theme. Addressing it and fighting against prejudice... (CA, male, 30).

I also believe that there´s another component that has to do with what one brings from one´s family...other strong cultural issues are at play too (CA, male, 30).

We all see things differently, and I think it has to do with one´s own experience... One fundamental thing I notice is fear; it´s as if they were afraid to focus on that theme (EG, male, 30).

Having to empathize, knowing from what angle to address it, dreading the topic appear in the teachers´ narratives as ways to express difficulties in delivering integral sexual education. There is also the

narrative of a new demand in the professional practice that positions them against a normative inconsistency between their own social representations, their private practices, and the 'new' knowledges to be taught, which refers them to their own socialization processes, thus creating different levels of conflict. Contradictions emerge between what they know and what they must teach (guidelines) as well as how they position themselves with respect to the object of knowledge (sexuality). In many cases, the solution to the conflict involves delegating sexual education to someone else. The reason for this avoidance does not lie in shortage of specific information, but in normative and value considerations, which are common social representations, taken as naturalized knowledges born out of ideology. Delegating involves leaving the classroom when other persons linked to the *implementation of the educational program*, such as psychologists, go to the school to deliver workshops on sexual education.

This means that social representations are inseparable from values; they are knowledges accounting for a social space, anchored in a certain social and cultural order, a matrix from which the world is interpreted and which is charged with values and affectivity:

Sexual education is still a taboo topic, and so it creates a great deal of conflict when one must face the criterion to teach sexuality. When one speaks about sexual education, one is dealing with what one does with one's own sexuality, so...uhm...exposing it creates so much conflict (LA, female, 28). The secret, I believe, is precisely that one tries...first one has to live sexuality freely [...], that is, it is not that because we're teachers we're asexual, or have no sexuality, or have no...have no sexual orientation (EG, male, 30).

Regarding sexual behavior, taboo represents a spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive universal categories, by protecting the local consensus on how the world is organized, reinforcing wavering certainty, and reducing intellectual and social disorder (DOUGLAS, 2007, p. 10). Taboos represent the whole community's commitment to constructing *truths*, and therefore, perform a protective function. They

imply a coding practice that protects individuals from the fear of being vulnerable in the social contact.

When it comes to sexuality, images of *secret* and *taboo* are sustained on certain moral values and social rules. In other words, they refer to the object of the social representation, and therefore to the objectification process. Objectification, the process by means of which concepts and ideas are transformed into concrete images, creates three types of effects in terms of contents: distortion, supplementation, and reduction (JODELET, 2001).

Despite the new conceptualizations about integral sexuality, the *distortion* appears in the teachers' narratives of a sexuality equated with genitalia. Thus some comments refer to health care:

My approach is to let the children know a part of their body and how they must take care of it [...] fundamentally by teaching them about contraceptive methods, the use of the preservative, by finding out what they know and showing them the methods and which ones they may use. I do this without passing judgment, but rather informing and preventing. This is aimed at prevention...as they must protect themselves and it wouldn't be alright to become pregnant or catch a disease (NG, female, 30).

It is often addressed by the biology teacher, in a biologist, biased way [...] thought he had to teach the reproductive system (GR, male, 30).

Supplementation, an attribution of characteristics that do not belong to the object, is manifested in ideas about specialized talk about sexuality as well as the way each teacher *lives or experiences* sexuality. Although sexual education is formally included as a curricular content, among many others, specific knowledge or personal experience is not required as preconditions for teaching other subjects. This is associated with the third type of transformation at the level of contents, *reduction*, which involves the controlling effect of social norms found in dominant discourses of sexuality.

This rooting (anchoring) is what makes it possible to explain the links between social representations and a given culture or society because these representations always occur over something already

conceived. Examining the role of social factors in the shaping and operation of common knowledge and freeing collective systems of interpretation and thought, in subjects that are always social because of their intercommunication and insertion in a socio-cultural context and historical framework (JODELET, 2000) entails accounting for persistent moralizing discourses in teaching practices. In this sense, this aspect of teaching creates remarkable contradictions. These are evident in the teachers' own personal difficulties and practices, in which they position themselves symmetrically with respect to their students, thus failing to address the topic by omission or lack of planning. These situations demonstrate that a taboo exists in the teachers' culture of origin and that it is associated with the construction of their identity.

This treatment of the contents — object of the social representation — is sustained by the recurring *inside/outside* themata: themata, while operating as antinomian pairs, express the relationship with the groups, leading to various forms of classification (DI IORIO; SEIDMANN et al., 2010, p. 179), based on belief systems rooted in the collective history, which renews socially constructed contents. When sexuality is addressed within the school system, the pairs *inside/outside* and *near/far* are materialized far from or near the relationship teacher-student-content to be taught. These pairs operate under the opposition between *the difficulty in teaching the content* — established in the curricular guidelines — and *the ease with which the content is debased*:

I'm not a righteous teacher, so I shouldn't feel intimidated or shocked by the questions I might be asked [...]. Then I wouldn't find it outrageous if they used words considered ...obscene language by many...like fuck, dick, pussy, ass... (EG, male, 30).

At one point I felt conditioned to teach the reproductive system, but this year I relaxed and decided to address what I think is my strong suit [...] teaching the issues that the students are interested in, gender issues, for example to distinguish between transvestite and transsexual (GR, male, 30).

For it to flow naturally, they must highly identify with the teacher ...or they must be very good students (NG, female, 30).

The question is precisely how one replies the questions, and I believe this is the fundamental thing, how one answers the students' probing questions, aimed at testing you (GR, male, 30).

While the *inside/near* refers to what is included in the school context and the way in which it is conducted, the *outside/far* represents what is excluded; *inside/near* represents that which is familiar, known, safe; *outside/far* stands for that which is novel, strange, frightening. This process of **thematization** (VIGNAUX, 1991 apud MOSCOVICI, 2003) accounts for the origin of social representations. It is experience that acts as a mediator in the construction of these knowledges, linked closely with common sense and born out of everyday life (SEIDMANN et al., 2010).

This leads us to problematize the relationship between representations and practices as a reciprocal construction, where the teachers' discourse and its affective load are tied to the classroom.

Final considerations: Contribution of the Theory of Social Representations

Teaching practices are a complex and heterogeneous field of interactions, where teachers' everyday life develops. Thus, the school may be defined as a space for meaning negotiation. Reflecting about the teaching practice is important because it helps to elucidate conceptions and suppositions operating as conditions of efficacy in the school system. Such a reflection paves the way for interpreting and analyzing the teachers' practices, with a view to rethinking educational institutions, their practices and discourses, and deciphering the complex fabric that legitimates certain ways of acting, feeling, and thinking (SEIDMANN et al., 2008).

As mentioned above, taboos entail a whole community's commitment to the construction of truths, and the teachers,

accustomed to being the disseminators of such commitments, find it difficult because the new mandate to teach sexual education is interpreted as contrary to certain moral values and social rules associated with sexuality. Thus, the solution that the teachers have found seems to lie in distorting the contents, supplementing them in terms of the teachers' own sexual experiences (vulgarization), and reducing information so as to continue sustaining dominant discourses of sexuality. As a result, this brings to the fore the unrelenting nature of moralizing discourses in the teaching practice.

For these reasons, we aimed at showing how the Theory of Social Representations is a controversial but effective epistemological framework for addressing the relationship between teaching and the implementation of educational policies in the school scenario. In this study, considerations about the recurrent social representation of sexuality in teachers' narratives facilitate an understanding of some difficulties in the way the Program of Integral Sexual Education of Buenos Aires City (Argentina) is implemented.

In the processes of elaboration and re-elaboration of social representations, changes may occur within the **subjective** sphere — where individuals' experience is resignified; within the **intersubjective** sphere — where actors become aware and new shared meanings are constructed; and within the **transsubjective** sphere — where institutional frameworks, ideological pressures, and the structuring of social and power relations may be questioned (JODELET, 2008).

As a result, to ensure an effective implementation based on teachers' appropriation of the proposal, it is essential to consider their opinions, attitudes, judgments, expectations, images, and meanings about substantive aspects of their labor and the context in which it takes place, as well as about integral sexual education. In this sense, and following Jodelet (2000), inquiring into social representations is the key to understanding the role of the insertion of subjects-teachers in a social and cultural order, and in a historicity.

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