

## Sex education in the eyes of primary school teachers in Novo Hamburgo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil

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**Abstract:** *Sex education has been included in the National Curriculum of the Brazilian Ministry of Education since 1996 as a cross-cutting theme that should be linked to the contents of each school subject in primary and high schools. This paper presents a study of the implementation of this policy in the primary schools of Novo Hamburgo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, based on interviews between January 2011 and April 2012 with 82 teachers working in those schools. We found that sex education was not being taught as a cross-cutting theme in any of the schools, and that any lessons were mostly dominated by a biomedical discourse focusing primarily on the reproductive organs, fertility, pregnancy, and contraception. Sexual health and relationships and non-heterosexual sex and relationships were being neglected. Sex education was also considered a possible means of correcting or controlling sexual identities and behaviours deemed abnormal or immoral. We recommend far more discussion of how to implement the National Curriculum recommendations. We call for education courses to provide theoretical and methodological training on sex education for teachers, and recommend that the boards of educational institutions take up sex education as a priority subject. Lastly, we suggest that each school studies local sexuality-related problems and based on the findings, each teacher presents a pedagogical proposal of how to integrate sex education into the subjects they teach. © 2013 Reproductive Health Matters*

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Teenage pregnancy is most decisively a worldwide preoccupation. The fifth of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals, which refers to the improvement of maternal health, emphasises the need to reduce teenage pregnancy due to its close relationship with infant mortality.<sup>1</sup>

Data analysed by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics showed that there has been only a small reduction in teenage pregnancy rates in Brazil in the last ten years in spite of campaigns for the use of condoms and better access to contraceptive methods.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, a significant trend of rising numbers of pregnancies among teenagers aged 10–14 has been recorded. From 1998 to 2008, the number of pregnancies in the 10–14 year-old age group rose from 16,000 to 22,000. This trend has been seen especially among girls living in poorer socioeconomic conditions, although the phenomenon is also present among girls in the middle and upper classes.<sup>3,4</sup>

Nationally, one in ten school students became pregnant before the age of 15 and approximately 75% of teenage mothers dropped out of school according to a national study conducted in 2008. Teenage pregnancies are even more worrying in the north or northeast regions of the country, where births to teenage girls between the ages of 10 and 19 years represented 22% of total births in 2009, while this proportion was 17% or less in the rest of the country.<sup>5</sup>

In Novo Hamburgo, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, where the study reported in this paper took place, the proportion of births to teenage mothers accounted for 17% of all births in 2010.<sup>6</sup> In 2007, interviews with teenage mothers in Novo Hamburgo found that topics related to sexuality, pregnancy and birth control were generally not talked about in the girls' families.<sup>7</sup>

Difficulties discussing sexuality among the young also appeared in another study carried out in the

region in 2010, in a public high school in Porto Alegre, South Brazil. Graffiti in the school bathrooms were photographed and analysed. It showed that the drawings and messages that pupils leave on high school bathroom walls portrayed their concerns and beliefs concerning sexuality, among them statements about homosexuality, heterosexuality and transsexuality. Astonishingly, all these forms of sexuality were not criticised but seemed to be accepted by the graffiti artists and those observing and commenting on the graffiti. This study concluded that the images and text on these bathroom walls tended to give space to topics that cannot be discussed elsewhere. That study argued that the needs and concerns of pupils concerning sexuality are not addressed, or at least not completely enough, by school officials and teachers. Furthermore the graffiti showed a huge potential for productive classroom discussions about different sexualities, which had previously gone unnoticed.<sup>8</sup>

We therefore decided to explore how and by whom sex education was being provided in Novo Hamburgo schools. Several questions emerged: What is happening in schools when it comes to sex education? Who plans, organises and delivers it? What are the purposes behind its implementation? Which topics are discussed, which aren't and why?

These questions laid the foundations for the project "Bodies, places and destinations: an analysis of sex education" sponsored by Feevale University which, since January 2011, has helped us carry out research on sex education in state primary schools in the city of Novo Hamburgo.\*

## Sex education in Brazil

In December 1996 the Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais (National Curriculum Parameters) were established by the National Congress in order to regulate the contents of the school curriculum by year and describe the compulsory cross-cutting themes for all schools in the country. In this curriculum, sex education was to become part of curricular as well as extracurricular activities in all Brazilian schools, both in primary schools and high schools. It was not supposed to become a specific school subject as such, but a compulsory subject that should be discussed by using two approaches: through scheduled

activities, including classroom activities and extra-curricular projects, conferences and workshops; and spontaneously, whenever a situation arose related to sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

The National Curriculum stressed the need to abandon models of sex education that (re)produce discrimination and exclusion, in order to create inclusive spaces in favour of sexual tolerance and diversity. For example, it says that the curriculum should be organized so that students are able to:

- respect the diversity of values, beliefs and behaviours related to sexuality, and recognising and respecting the different forms of sexual attraction;
- understand the search for pleasure as a right;
- identify and rethink taboos and prejudices related to sexuality, avoiding discriminatory behaviours;
- recognise the characteristics socially attributed to male and female gender as cultural constructions;
- act in solidarity with people living with HIV and with public health initiatives for prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and HIV;
- be familiar with and adopt safer sex practices for preventing the transmission of sexually transmitted infections and HIV;
- know how to prevent unwanted pregnancy, where to seek advice and use of contraceptive methods.<sup>8</sup>

The National Curriculum is significant not only because it formalised sex education in schools as a compulsory, cross-cutting subject but also because the intended content conforms with the demands of the Brazilian feminist and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) movements, which have denounced the hierarchies, regulations and exclusions that on many occasions had been established and reproduced in sex education classes.<sup>9</sup>

Unfortunately, it was not accompanied by a parallel process of preparing teachers, as has occurred with other compulsory cross-cutting themes such as environmental issues, and there were no significant changes made in the syllabus of university education courses to ensure that new teachers were prepared to teach sex education that covered a wide range of issues, including sexual diversity.<sup>10</sup>

Initiatives addressing theoretical and methodological issues have been developed to assist

\*Primary schools include first to ninth years, ages 6–14; high schools include tenth to twelfth years, ages 15–17.

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