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Sexual education from the perspective of psychologists: contributions and challenges in professional training

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Abstract: Sexual education is a broad topic that permeates discussions in various spheres of society. This occurs not only in schools, but also in varied contexts, ranging from the family to more informal spaces. In this sense, initiatives aimed at bringing scientific and appropriate information to the largest possible number of people are essential in the dissemination of scientific knowledge. Thus, this work aims to present the perceptions of psychologists regarding the importance of sexual education for the integral development of children, highlighting the formative and interdisciplinary need for this area of study. Regarding the theoretical-methodological framework, it should be noted that both the development of the instrument (semi-structured interview) and the data analysis (praxeological method) were based on the concepts developed by Pierre Bourdieu and his team, which allowed us to understand this phenomenon from a broader sociological perspective. The results of this investigation demonstrate how distorted and sometimes insufficient the view is that psychology professionals are prepared to work on issues related to sexuality and sex education. However, it is worth noting that the participants recognize this lack of preparedness and understand its importance in this process, feeling responsible for acquiring adequate and sufficient knowledge to address the topic. Therefore, the research presented here contributes to a broader discussion that includes professionals from different areas, but which constantly converge, namely Education and Psychology, which tends to bring positive and enriching results to the field.

Keywords: sex education; school; psychology; sexuality.

1 Introduction

When we talk about Sex Education, we can understand it as an aspect inherent to the individuality of each person, constituted throughout a process of formal (mainly institutional) and informal learning (within families, communities, and social relationships). As we consider it as a component of a comprehensive education, it is objectified as a set of knowledge and experiences that concern health, pleasure, well-being, identity, care and protection, and individual and social responsibility. In this context, Sex Education plays a fundamental role in the formation of all social agents, since it is inextricably linked to human experiences.



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In this context, it is undeniable that Psychology is intrinsically related to Sex Education, especially with regard to the relationships that can be established at the intersection of professionals who work or should work together in this field (teachers, psychologists, therapists, doctors, among others). With the consolidation of a multidisciplinary support network, based on scientific aspects and committed to the integral formation of the individual, the results can be positively identified through sensitive interventions appropriate to each age group, social context, educational reality, etc. Thus, Psychology and Sex Education are interrelated and confluent areas, capable of contributing to a healthier, more enjoyable, safer life that respects diversity and singularities in all its aspects.

However, to further corroborate this statement, we need to answer some questions that still contribute to doubts that highlight the convergence of these two sciences. Among them, we will highlight the following questions in this study: if Psychology contributes so much to the understanding of themes related to Sex Education, why is it not effectively training qualified professionals to work with this theme? And if this does not actually occur, why are these the professionals considered most suitable to work on the subject, according to common sense, as shown in the study by Oliveira (2021)? In an attempt to elucidate these and other questions, this study, which is an excerpt from a master's thesis defended in 2024¹, highlights the debate on the importance and possible contributions that can be established in the relationship between Psychology and Sex Education in the formation of the individual, based on the analysis of the perceptions and discourses of psychologists working in the clinical, school, and institutional areas.

As a theoretical contribution to understanding the themes related to sexuality and sex education, considering their dimension as human relations, we rely on the reference studies for the aforementioned themes, namely, Maia and Ribeiro (2011); Ribeiro (1990; 2002; 2004; 2006), Russo *et al.* (2009), and Russo and Rohden (2011). These works also helped us to understand the possible relationships established between Psychology and Sex Education.

For data collection, we used semi-structured interviews with ten Psychology professionals from different contexts. The interview script was developed based on the

¹ Master's thesis defended in 2024, whose objective was to understand the behavior of psychologists when assuming or being appointed to assume the role of sex educators (Oliveira, 2024).

studies of Muzzeti (1992, 1997), which, in turn, also relied on the assumptions of Bourdieu's theory. In this way, we sought to ensure that the research objectives were met, identifying not only the explicit perceptions of the participants, but also their implicit predispositions to their personal trajectories and professional practices.

Regarding the methodological approach, we highlight that for the analysis of data obtained through the semi-structured interviews, we used the praxeological method, developed by Pierre Bourdieu and his team. It is worth noting that this method allows us to analyze the complexity of the social relations established between the different realities found in the trajectories and actions of the participants, which allowed us to reveal how certain knowledge, behaviors, perceptions, and values are internalized and disseminated in the professional performance of the collaborators. It is also important to mention that, by using the praxeological method, we enable a more in-depth view of the practices and expressions of the collaborators constituted throughout their trajectories, thus allowing us to establish relationships between individual experiences and social structures, identifying the symbolic transmissions that occur in the family and social sphere of the agents and influencing the structuring and restructuring of their *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1994).

The analysis of the interviews allowed us to observe recurring aspects regarding the *habitus* of the professionals analyzed, thus corroborating the idea of regularity defended by Bourdieu (Ortiz, 1983). This is evident when we observe the class fractions to which the participants belong and how each agent perceives and acts in their professional field.

Regarding the selection of participants, it can be stated that the gender issue was extensively considered, thus allowing this aspect to also be understood as an influence on these professionals' perceptions regarding Sex Education. This diversity favors the enrichment of the understanding concerning the subjectivity present in the professional training of the aforementioned agents, demonstrating the various perspectives through which sexuality and the themes that permeate it are established. It is also worth highlighting that, to select the collaborators, we opted for selection based on the social relationships established by the responsible researcher², after an

² We used the purposive sampling technique, advocated by Sanders and Townsend (2019), which allowed us to identify professionals who demonstrated interest and availability to participate in the research, through an already established and consolidated network of relationships. Ten psychologists working in clinical, school, and institutional settings participated in the research. All opted for online

initial screening aimed at ensuring a multiplicity of areas of expertise, diversity of age range, academic background, and gender (as already mentioned). All these assumptions were taken into consideration in order to guarantee the breadth of experiences that could interfere in the interpretation of the theme to be analyzed.

It is also evident that the research, and consequently the present study, focuses on the importance of Sex Education for the child's development; however, it is important to highlight that the fact that the professional is not currently working specifically with children was not considered an exclusion criterion for participation in the study. This is because, as will be seen in the analysis of the results, the themes related to sexuality, gender, and Sex Education cross dimensions and perspectives that interfere in the formation of the individual as a whole, reflecting even in adult experiences. In short, what we intend to highlight is that this work should begin in childhood; however, the consequences of its adequacy or lack thereof transcend generations and directly interfere in the individual, social, and professional trajectories of social agents.

2 Sex education and the key concepts of Bourdieu's theory

As educator Mary Neide Figueiró (1996) points out in her work *Theoretical Production in Brazil on Sex Education*, published in 1996, the term "Sex Education" should be standardized, aiming to intensify its consolidation as a scientific field that recognizes the subject as a learner and an active agent in their own educational process. Therefore, it is extremely important not only to choose an appropriate terminology, but also to recognize its fundamental role in the training process, especially with regard to a precise and scientifically grounded Sex Education. This also contributes to the effective recognition and appreciation of its multiple dimensions, not only in its broad and social aspects, but also in its individual and particular aspects, since every process of knowledge appropriation requires a motor intentionality that favors the internalization of all and any learning.

In this context, it is also necessary to emphasize that, according to Ribeiro (1990; 2002; 2004; 2006), Sex Education has been consolidated in Brazil through

interviews, and the Informed Consent Forms (ICFs) were sent to the participants duly structured, following the determinations of Resolution CFP No. 010/05 of the Federal Council of Psychology and the Professional Code of Ethics for Psychologists, which establishes respect for the dignity and integrity of the research subjects.

various fields of knowledge, where each, with its specificity, contributed to the dissemination of the topic and, slowly, its recognition as necessary and inherent knowledge for human beings. We know that there are still numerous challenges to be faced; however, it is undeniable that we are facing considerable progress regarding the scope and appropriation of the theme in the most varied spheres of society.

It is important to remember that among the movements that favored the structuring of sexology in the country, the articulation of gynecology-obstetrics and Psychology stands out, which conferred a certain scientific legitimacy to this "new specificity." It is worth noting that medicine, already consolidated at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, played an essential role in this endeavor. Initially committed to the health and well-being of children and women (subjects considered vulnerable until then), science contributed to a new perspective being directed not only towards biological aspects, but also, gradually, towards the psychological understanding of these aspects (Russo; Rohden, 2011).

Therefore, it is emphasized that, during that period, Psychology was strongly influenced by psychoanalysis, while Behavioral Psychology (aligned with the sexology of Masters and Johnson) remained on the margins of professional practice, as highlighted by professionals such as Russo, Rohden, Torres and Faro (2009), in the article published in 2009, entitled *The field of sexology in Brazil: constitution and institutionalization*. The aforementioned trajectory shows us how important Psychology, the central theme of this study, was and continues to be in matters involving Sex Education, especially when considering it as a cross-cutting theme, involving a multiplicity of specificities and professionals.

It is also important to highlight that, positionally, we defend Sex Education as a pedagogical practice scientifically grounded in studies in the field of education. This means that we seek a comprehensive education provided in and by the school, in line with the various instances of the individual's formation and care, including the family, the community, medicine, psychology, and other related areas (Maia; Ribeiro, 2011). This is because we understand, among other things, that human sexuality is an inherent dimension of mental health, which, in turn, is essentially related to affective bonds, mental health, human development, and individual well-being and the establishment of interpersonal relationships. In this sense, it is essential to consider Sex Education in its integral dimension, articulating not only biological aspects, but

also psychological, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral principles. This will favor not only a deeper understanding of sexuality, but will also provide scientifically corroborated knowledge anchored by Educational and Psychological sciences, which recognize and give necessarily credible visibility to the subject (Santana; Soares; Basso, 2025).

In the educational sense, we can rely on a more systematized understanding of how the individual learns and how this influences their cognitive and psychological spheres, while integrating with Psychology, which offers tools for understanding the cultural and social factors of the individual in shaping and understanding their behavior (Teixeira, 2023). In other words, we can say that Psychology can favor the understanding of the habitus of social agents, that is, the way in which sexuality can be lived and experienced in its multiple aspects.

As discussed in the introduction, the collaborators in this research have trajectories marked by distinct experiences in the field of Psychology. They work — or have worked — in different theoretical frameworks, were trained at different times, and have varied fields of professional activity ranging from the clinical sphere to the educational and institutional spheres. Thus, in order to equip the reader with the main concepts that will underpin the analysis to be presented in the following section, it became evident that it was necessary to present them in an introductory manner. These are: habitus, cultural capital, social capital, economic capital, gender, and cultural heritage.

Habitus can be understood, in a simplified way, as the set of dispositions that guides the subject's behavior as an active agent, capable of acting, transforming, and being transformed. These processes are dynamic, as different concepts and experiences influence and are influenced in the constant restructuring of each individual's *habitus* (Bourdieu, 2007). Thus, it can be understood that *habitus* makes it possible to analyze both the complexity and the coherence of the perceptions and choices of subjects, considering that they are inserted in material conditions of existence shared by the same social group (Oliveira, 2024).

For Bourdieu (2007), cultural capital is a factor of social differentiation linked to access to and appropriation of cultural goods and practices, involving the investment that each individual makes to maintain or improve their social position. In the author's words, cultural capital is presented in three states:

[...] in the embodied state, that is, in the form of durable dispositions of the organism; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods – paintings, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, which constitute evidence or the realization of theories or critiques of these theories, of problematics, etc.; and, finally, in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification that must be set aside because, as can be seen in its relation to the school certificate, it confers on cultural capital – of which it is supposedly the guarantee – entirely original properties (Bourdieu, 2007, p. 74).

The accumulation of cultural capital from early childhood—a condition that favors the agile and seemingly effortless appropriation of multiple valued skills—tends to occur more fluidly and continuously in families possessing consolidated cultural capital, in which the socialization process itself is already configured as an accumulation process (Bourdieu, 1997). In short, it is understood that cultural capital is associated with subtle mechanisms of transmission and internalization of knowledge that act as instruments in the construction of social reality (Oliveira, 2024).

Social capital, as formulated by Bourdieu (2007), refers to the set of effective or potential social relations that an individual mobilizes, constituted with the purpose of maintaining links capable of favoring the maintenance or economic and social ascension of a given group. In summary, it is understood that all these properties are linked to the reproduction of the individual's social capital, configuring a socially constructed, continuous and dynamic process, aimed at establishing, maintaining and renewing durable relationships, which materialize in gains and achievements, both material and symbolic (Oliveira, 2024).

According to Bourdieu (2007), economic capital refers to the set of material goods held by the agent, corresponding to the accumulation of financial resources obtained through investment strategies mobilized with a view to maintaining and/or ascending social status. Economic capital, as postulated by Bourdieu (1989), is constituted and perpetuated in articulation with other forms of capital, and is also shaped by the relationships of dispute and the conflicts that cross the different social fields.

For Bourdieu (1999, p. 9), gender stems from the social trajectory and cultural heritage transmitted within the family, being understood as the "socialization of the biological and the biologization of the social". Thus, gender is structured and restructured in and by the social, material, and individual relations experienced by each subject, configuring itself as a historical, social, and cultural construction linked to sex. For the sociologist, gender is essentially relational, and gender relations are

constituted and maintained within disputes and power dynamics. In other words, gender is configured as a system that tends to reproduce itself in a lasting way, imposing delimitations of spaces on the dominated and naturalizing submission as something structurally social. These impositions materialize through symbolic violence, exercised not only in the school environment but also in social and family contexts, the latter being a significant expression of the subject's cultural heritage (Oliveira, 2024; Oliveira; Muzzeti, 2021).

Cultural heritage, according to Bourdieu (Bourdieu *et al.*, 1978), refers to the set of knowledge, prohibitions, customs, and practices transmitted within the family, constituted through reproduction strategies and the values specific to each group. According to the sociologist, it is established especially through cultural capital, which distinguishes social groups through shared values, knowledge, information, and linguistic codes.

Thus, objectively, cultural heritage can be understood as the set of transmissions, initially carried out within the family, responsible for composing the dispositions of agents—that is, their *habitus*—firstly in its primary form and, subsequently, reworked from the experiences lived by the individual. This heritage, according to Bourdieu, manifests itself in the accumulation of cultural, social, and economic capital, influencing the "choices" and reproduction strategies that structure and restructure the subject's *habitus* throughout their trajectory (Oliveira, 2024).

It is worth reiterating that all these concepts served as the basis both for the construction of the data collection instrument and for the analysis that will be presented. Therefore, understanding these assumptions is necessary to identify how they are incorporated into the statements and perceptions of the research participants.

3 Psychologists and their relationship with Sex Education: initial notes

The participants' trajectories, as well as their transformed experiences throughout their social lives, manifested and continue to manifest themselves in forms of cultural appropriation, thus structuring and restructuring the *habitus* of the collaborating agents. It is further reinforced that *habitus*, as developed by the French sociologist and his team, constitutes a "[...] set of behaviors, postures, prohibitions, customs, among others, that make up an agent, that is, it is the subject's patrimony, which can be restructured" (Oliveira, 2024, p. 28).

In due course, it is worth highlighting that, for Bourdieu (1996, p. 31), the trajectory can be understood as a "[...] series of positions successively occupied by the same agent (or the same group) in a space that is itself a becoming, being subject to incessant transformations". This leads us to understand that there are dynamic structures existing between the social relations established by the agents and the society in which they are inserted, which directly interferes with their conceptions, including with regard to Sex Education.

In order to illustrate the different generations, academic backgrounds, time and place of activity and target audience served by the collaborators, we present below an adaptation of the table used in the original research (Oliveira, 2024, p. 38):

Table 1 – General presentation of the collaborators

NAME	AGE	PERFORMANCE	Primary Target Audience (current)	Performance time	Academic Background
Orlando	42 years	Clinical practice and LGBTQIA+ Reference Center	Adults	15 years	UNIP (Particular)
Ruth	57 years	Manager/Coordinator of the Technical Reference Group for work within prison units (Pro-jects) Cooperation with Instituto Liberta (Pre-vention of sexual violence in childhood)	Adults	31 years	UNESP (Public)
Marcelo	45 years	Clinic/School (High School/University Entrance Exam Preparation)	Adolescents / Adults	18 years	UFSCAR (Public)
Verônica	32 years	Clinic	Adolescents / Adults	6 years	UNIARA/UNIP (Particular)
Roberta	35 years	Sports Psychologist (Clinic/Institute for Paralympic Athletes)	All ages (including very young chil-dren ³) both at the clinic and at the Institute	8 years	UNIP (Particular)
Jacinto	45 years	Clinic and UBS	Clinic and Private Health Plan	16 years	UNIP (Particular)
Mathias	47 years	Clinic and Private Health Plan	Adolescents	7 years	UNIARA (Particular)

³ Term used to designate children aged 1 year 7 months to 3 years 11 months, as described in the BNCC (Brazil, 2018, p. 25).

Teresa	33 years	Clinic and (own) /School Performance	Children	11 years	UNIMAR (Particular)
Carlos	44 years	Clinic / Municipal Health Department	Children and Adolescents	20 years	UNIP (Particular)
Otávio	43 years	Home (orphanage exclusively for boys)	Children and Adolescents	19 years	UNIP (Particular)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Based on the results obtained from the semi-structured interviews, it was possible to understand that the themes related to Sex Education are considered fundamental in the conception of the collaborators (representatives of Psychology). However, their definitions vary significantly, and there is no consensus on several aspects, especially regarding the most appropriate age for addressing the topic with children, particularly when discussing the family context. It should also be considered that there is considerable overlap regarding Formal and Informal Sex Education, where the limits, established through symbolic boundaries, become confused to the same extent that they are not clarified to the subjects, thus requiring further in-depth analysis for their clarification.

Although they consider it extremely important to be prepared to work with issues related to Sex Education, the participants recognize their training deficiencies and difficulties reflected in their professional practices, while at the same time recognizing the need and desire to be able to effectively develop them. As an example, we can rely on the statement of participant Verônica, who exposes the shortcomings that occurred during her academic training, describing what was addressed in the context of psychoanalysis:

Within psychoanalysis, yes. We addressed the issue of sexuality, and to this day, it's one of the lines of psychodynamics that I study... Regarding sex education. But I believe it's not from the same perspective you're telling me, right? Sex education itself, regarding family dynamics within that context, whether it's discussed or not, I didn't have that. But, sexuality education, you know, how that construction happens, the university did cover that, but very, very superficially, and then, after I left, I took [...] about 25 courses, not only in that area, but just in the area of sexuality, let's say about 10, or something like that (Verônica, middle class).

We also identified that the participants expressed divergent understandings and definitions regarding the concept of Sex Education, revealing the multiplicity of interpretations surrounding the topic. Among some explanations, we can highlight Jacinto's statement when commenting on the right to adequate education:

[...] I think it's everyone's right. I think it's a matter of awareness, a matter of knowing a little more. Knowing everyone's rights. I think it also works as a way to prevent abuse of any kind, right? And for clarification. I think this issue is extremely important, whether for a child, for a teenager, for the family... (Jacinto, working class).

The participant further emphasizes that there are differences between Formal and Informal Sex Education, highlighting that the latter constantly suffers from biases based on prejudices, prohibitions, stigmas, and decontextualized information. In this context, the participant argues in favor of Formal Sex Education, which is characterized as a safe and scientifically supported possibility.

[...] science, based on concrete reality data and without that bias, whether from religion, which unfortunately is something that permeates a lot, right? Or from prejudice of morality itself, right? Which religion is also a part of, right? [...] (Jacinto, working class).

The existence of Informal Sex Education is recognized in the discourses of most of the interviewees, who legitimize the negative impacts resulting from non-scientific approaches, based only on common sense, commonly permeated by prejudiced and stigmatizing paradigms and assumptions. This position not only reveals an urgent problem, but also directs attention to the risks that children and adolescents suffer every day with the unbridled rise of exposure and unlimited access to information, currently facilitated by the use of digital technologies.

In this context, Marcelo, the only representative of the privileged class, conceptualizes Sex Education as,

[...] a process of culture and knowledge of one's own conditions, it is self-knowledge... Fundamentally through self-knowledge, Sex Education, for a full life, in every sense, therefore full and satisfying. So these are conditions, it is a process that guarantees conditions for this. (Marcelo, privileged class).

As the collaborator points out, Formal and Informal Sex Education are complementary. However, the former, transmitted by the school, truly reflects our formative approach, and seeks to bring scientifically grounded knowledge in a pedagogically structured and accessible way to the school environment, involving the community as a whole, both inside and outside the school. As highlighted earlier, although the collaborators come from diverse areas of expertise, all reported addressing demands related to Sex Education, a fact that is not surprising, since it is something inherent to human life. Nevertheless, this is one of the main reasons that lead professionals to advocate for academic training also in the field of Psychology that

includes daily practices with patients and their family context, thus providing support to all involved.

Regarding this context, Roberta states that there is a constant demand regarding this topic, both in her clinical practice and at the institute where she attends to approximately 150 athletes "of all classes and levels," in her own words. She also emphasizes that the Institute is characterized, for many para-athletes (a public also served by the psychologist), as a unique place of coexistence:

[...] when it comes to disabled people, there are many who are abandoned by their families and all that, you know... I've been through many complicated situations there, and it's largely because of that, you know. Because we learn this kind of thing socially, and when it's worked on in a group, it has more power than anything else, you know. So I see it from that perspective, you know, because, for example, you go to a school, you know... If this is addressed, will there be prejudiced parents there? Okay, there will be! But then, that parent will sit next to another parent they even like, for example, who isn't prejudiced, and then they'll talk and start to see things differently, because it's no use electing someone, you know. Like, you're going to elect the teacher... They won't have the power alone... A psychologist won't, you know, because, well, I've had problems there... I've heard absurd things, like that... (Roberta, middle class).

Regarding the concept of sexuality, we identified in the participants' statements that there are individual understandings of its meaning and that, in some cases, their discourse reveals a considerable superficiality in the depth of the topic, as we can see below:

It would be easier to say what I don't understand by sexuality (laughs). All affective expression, in some way, I understand to be involved with sexuality. This possibility of having or accessing satisfaction, pleasure, of somehow being able to vitalize the experience of living (Orlando, middle class).

I think it's the way of understanding one's own body, in relation to desire, to the development of desire, to the various possibilities of desire. (Ruth, middle class).

I would say it like this: identification. With what the person identifies, how they see themselves. That's what I understand by sexuality. (Marcelo, privileged class).

I think sexuality has to do with... You discover what you have more affinity with, with whom you feel most comfortable, what is most familiar... [...] Sexuality has to do with affinity, with trust [...] (Roberta, middle class).

Regarding the lack of depth in the concept of sexuality:

A lot [referring to the difference between sexuality and childhood sexuality]. Childhood sexuality doesn't go through the same level of understanding that adult sexuality does. It's a much more playful and much less rational

relationship; it's experimentation, but it doesn't have to do with the complexities of adult life. It's just an experimentation of how one experiences affection, sensations, but it doesn't concern... the symbols that we've developed to talk about sexuality. For a child, in childhood, this makes no sense at all. So it's much more about the expressions that the child experiences, of good or bad sensations, fulfilling their own curiosities, but there's no chance of communication with that adult side that has already transformed these experiments into very closed data. For a child, this is experimentation, something playful, and it doesn't have a rational complexity (Ruth, middle class).

Regarding the differences between the concepts of sexuality and childhood sexuality, we highlight Marcelo's position, who argues that there is probably a divergence between the terms, especially when considering childhood as a process of discovery. Roberta, in turn, understands that childhood sexuality involves the following aspects:

The child is innocent, they are devoid of anything that could embarrass them or anything like that. So, I see the difference in families where the child wants to be naked at home, and they are. A boy, when he starts discovering his penis and starts touching it and sees that it gets hard and thinks it's cool and funny and it's fine, because it is, you know?! It's the adult who introduces malice, who introduces other things [...] And in childhood, the child has the purity of things and in a way, if adults weren't raising them in such a wrong and prejudiced way, we wouldn't have half of the problems we have [...]. (Roberta, middle class).

Regarding the concept of gender, the psychologists interviewed presented different meanings, most of which lack a consistent and well-defined definition. Explanations such as those of Roberta and Marcelo show us that the topic still needs further theoretical exploration, presenting substantial gaps and misinformation that can lead to cases of prejudice and the perpetuation of inequalities.

I think I understand it very similarly to what I understand by sexuality, how a person sees themselves (Marcelo, privileged class).

I understand that it started with feminine and masculine, but that's not a determining factor for anything, like... [...]. (Roberta, middle class).

In this sense, the lack of knowledge, misconceptions, and discrepancies presented by the participants demonstrate the urgency of a broad and adequate training that encompasses the various spheres of society. Therefore, starting from this premise to propose discussions and possibilities can be an effective way to promote quality sex education at all levels and in all spaces, whether educational, familial, or social.

4 Sexual education from the perspective of psychologists: discussions on the urgent need for training

Regarding the role of sex educators and the possible or necessary incorporation of this role by psychologists, it was not a subject that caused strangeness or discomfort to the professionals analyzed. On the contrary, all of them demonstrated an interest in seeking knowledge, since, also unanimously, they do not feel theoretically prepared for it. This is evident in the disagreements about conceptual definitions and also in the fact that they reported not having a formative base from their undergraduate studies, as previously mentioned.

According to the testimonies, this concern is directly related to the basic assumptions of Psychology, since it is in its essence to provide human well-being, just as we also intend with adequate and substantial work, touching on the themes related to Sex Education, sexuality and gender. However, as Siqueira and Padovam (2008) point out, this concern is not as recent as it seems. According to the authors, several scholars have dedicated themselves to investigating and formulating the concept of well-being, intrinsically associated with the scientific field of Psychology, which has made this construct one of the most widely applied in research seeking to understand how psychological factors contribute to promoting a healthier life. Following this line of thought, participant Teresa states that she does not feel discomfort with the treatment of the topic and elaborates:

I have more doubts about how to delve deeper into these topics when there are demands. [...]. Since I work more with children, the demands they bring regarding these issues are simpler. [...]. My work, regardless of what they bring, is to provide support and space for them to express what is important to them (Teresa, working class).

The psychologist also emphasizes that, when involved in more complex cases, she relentlessly seeks to understand the phenomena related to the case, aiming to guarantee the most appropriate support for her patients (children) and their families. She also makes a point of mentioning the importance of Sex Education in the reality of the parents, because, according to her view, this would avoid numerous conflicts. In her words, "It would help if their parents had received it (laughs). Because the problem is there" (Teresa, working class).

The same occurs with Roberta, who claims to feel "calm" when having to act as a sex educator. A similar position is found in the statements of Marcelo, Verônica, Jacinto, and Otávio, who again highlight that, despite everything, they do not feel prepared due to their outdated academic training, an understanding shared by all interviewees when the topics are sexuality, gender, and Sex Education. Some collaborators also mention that, in an effort to fill these gaps, they independently sought out supplementary courses to deepen their knowledge on the topics, as is the case with Teresa, Orlando, and Verônica. Mathias and Otávio, on the other hand, claim to resort to diverse sources of information to address doubts when they arise from consultations.

The university doesn't prepare you to work in anything. [...] Sexuality? Imagine, it wasn't even discussed [...] it's not talked about, people aren't welcoming, and I'm talking about a Psychology degree [...] I don't feel prepared... (Roberta, middle class).

The degree directly addresses that, no. I think there's training in caring for human beings, so it's about having a minimum of common sense and applying that care to human beings, whatever the topic. But directly, objectively, I didn't have that [...]. (Mathias, working class).

Marcelo also brings up an event from the past, where it is possible to identify the position of Psychology regarding issues related to sexuality, gender, and sex education.

I don't know if you remember, but a few years ago, in the field of Psychology, we had an unfortunate situation where a certain colleague sold something called a "gay cure" [...]. At the time, the Federal Council of Psychology acted quickly, thankfully, and simply released the following statement to us: nobody needs to worry about the origin of homosexuality, because it's not an illness. [...] And then the Council made its decision by saying the following: the concern of all of us psychologists, regardless of gender, is always the same: quality of life. (Marcelo, privileged class).

During the interviews, it was noticeable that not all collaborators mentioned the fact; however, based on the perceptions gleaned, it can be seen that there is a consensus regarding the professional class's concern for promoting the healthy and integral development of all their patients. In this sense, the understanding of Sex Education as inherent to the formation of the individual is indisputable, considering their needs and peculiarities.

It is also noteworthy that, even though the participants understand its relevance in the Sex Education process, it is also unanimous that, in their conception,

there is no single professional considered most suitable for working with the subject. Most collaborators emphasize the indispensability of educators, pediatricians, social workers, among others who can bring invaluable contributions to the area. According to their testimonies, it is clear that they believe in the effectiveness of a multidisciplinary network that not only supports the child, but also offers a solid foundation for families and the community, considering all areas of society, that is, inside and outside the school environment.

Maia and Ribeiro (2011) emphasize that sexualizing spaces related to the health field, such as hospitals and health centers, should have the collaboration of professionals who are specialized not only in the area, but also in education, thus promoting Sexual Education that considers the individual in their entirety, not only recognizing differences, but mainly valuing the diversity of sexuality and gender. Corroborating the authors' statement, the words of Jacinto, who works in a health center, illustrate this position, stating that he is concerned about being prepared for this role.

However, the psychologist is not alone in identifying this important intersection that can and should occur between education and health. Teresa also believes in the benefits of this articulation, and her position is scientifically anchored again in the ideas of Maia and Ribeiro (2011, p. 80) when they state that “[...] critically equipping teachers and health professionals so that they can deal with the natural difficulties resulting from taboos and prejudices inherent in sex, gender, and sexual orientation”.

The authors further emphasize that the school should be understood as an indispensable space for social and mental connection, precisely because it plays an inherent role in the integral formation of individuals and contributes significantly to the relationships established by them in the school and social environment. Furthermore, this implies that the unsuccessful establishment of this intersectional space can lead to negative results for the teaching-learning process, since the child's development must be considered in its entirety. This aspect is also defended by the participants Teresa, Jacinto, Mathias, and Marcelo, who comment on experiences of bullying lived throughout their school trajectories.

Thus, it is unthinkable not to understand the role of the school in the formation of the individual, aiming at guaranteeing effective and inclusive pedagogical practices, guided and planned effectively based on scientific knowledge, favoring the full

development of children and adolescents, as well as promoting adequate training for professionals who work with this public. In this sense, our defense of Institutionalized Sex Education is anchored in evident assumptions, namely, it is necessary that the approaches be structured and disseminated by professionals prepared to deal with issues of gender, sexuality, and Sex Education, recognizing it in its highest instance, as it should be, as an indispensable component for the integral formation of the individual.

This same idea is shared by all the collaborators in this research, who, in one way or another, demonstrated in their discourses the concern to enable adequate (in)formation for their patients. It is worth emphasizing again that, in the perception of the psychologists analyzed, this task should be provided mainly in schools, by a network of qualified professionals, with a view to promoting integral development, that is, one that encompasses all aspects, whether physical, psychological, cognitive, or social. In this context, the participants also argue that this "responsibility" should not only fall on teachers, but should also be associated with psychologists, school staff, and families, as an inseparable part of Formal Education: "[...] the appropriate professional is one who studies to be... someone trained in pedagogy [...] a psychologist if they also study in depth about this... [...]" (Verônica, middle class).

In short, as defended by the participants, Formal Sex Education should take place in the school environment through a multi-professional network of relationships that effectively establishes positive and healthy bonds that raise awareness in society about the commitment to providing children and adolescents with an approach that values and respects diversity, effectively promoting the integral development of these individuals. According to the collaborators' statements, Sex Education should be considered an inseparable need for a full and healthy life. However, there is no consensus on the ideal age range for working with Sex Education, which again highlights the discrepancy in information among the professionals analyzed.

Essential! But sex education for children starts with the parents. It's not uncommon for this topic to come up in the first interview with the parents. It's very common, and I already provide initial guidance focused on this, both for them, so they know what sex education for children involves and how they can also address these issues at home. So in most cases, I do this [...]. (Teresa, working class).

As already highlighted, the collaborators do not shirk their responsibility to have adequate training to work with the subject matter, nor do they disclaim their role in the education of children and adolescents. On the contrary, they advocate for an adequate Formal Sex Education based on scientific principles that provide them with the necessary resources to address the demands. They also emphasize that the subject matter is inseparable from human nature and, therefore, they advocate for an approach that aims, above all, to promote the protection and well-being necessary for mental health, central objectives of Psychology.

In this sense, they rely on the assumptions of Leôncio (2013, p. 6) to highlight that,

[...] sexuality emerges in all age groups; ignoring, concealing, or repressing it are the most common responses given by school professionals, and such practices are based on the concept that the topic should be dealt with exclusively by the family. In fact, it is the family's responsibility to provide sex education to their children through appropriate information, permeated by dialogue; however, this is not what happens in most families; the subject is not addressed at home or at school, and children and adolescents learn about sexuality in a distorted and irresponsible way. Therefore, sex education in schools should inform and discuss the different taboos, prejudices, beliefs, and attitudes that exist in society. In this process, the education professional must be ethical and free from prejudice.

Based on the analyzed statements, it was possible to identify that the *habitus* surrounding issues related to Sex Education has been restructuring itself, keeping pace with social transformations. Based on the explanations of the collaborators, it is observed that, although numerous doubts still exist regarding the topics addressed, there is an intense movement and attempt at understanding that supports overcoming the difficulties still encountered. Thus, the commitment demonstrated by these professionals is irrefutable, not only in recognizing their training gaps, but also in emphasizing the attempt to overcome their own established conceptions through the structuring and restructuring of their *habitus* throughout their professional and social trajectories.

It is also considered that the idea that they are the most suitable professionals for work related to issues concerning Sex Education is part of an ideology that, in a way, is rooted in their *habitus*, which reinforces the concern of these professionals, who at no time distance themselves from the possible responsibility they hold regarding the topic. Therefore, even if the concern of some employees in offering adequate Sex Education from childhood is not evident, it is of utmost importance to emphasize its

indispensability in the formation of children, from the earliest age. In this context, inconsistent or absent information can constitute a worrying and misguided Informal Sex Education, which may even disseminate inappropriate knowledge, prejudices, and distorted values about human experiences.

The participants' statements show that their perceptions about sex education and professional practice are deeply intertwined with the dispositions incorporated throughout their trajectories, revealing the operation of *habitus* as a structured and structuring structure. It is observed that the expressed conceptions do not emerge in isolation, but are socially constituted from the cultural heritage received in the family context and subsequently reworked in school, academic, and professional experiences (Bourdieu, 2007). In this process, cultural capital—manifested in legitimized knowledge, completed training, and mobilized discursive repertoires—acts as a principle of differentiation between subjects, influencing their understandings, limits, and possibilities for intervention (Bourdieu, 1997). Similarly, social capital is expressed in support networks, institutional exchanges, and the aforementioned professional references, demonstrating that the construction of practices and positions does not occur in an individualized manner, but relationally.

Furthermore, the narratives allow us to identify how different forms of capital are articulated within social fields, especially when participants point to structural constraints that permeate their practices, such as available institutional resources (economic capital) and professional legitimacy. Gender issues emerge as a structuring axis of these experiences, demonstrating that historically constructed power relations influence both the perceptions and the strategies adopted by individuals. Thus, the accounts reveal that dispositions related to gender, sexuality, and professional performance are traversed by socialization processes that naturalize certain hierarchies (Bourdieu, 1999), highlighting the action of symbolic violence and the force of cultural heritage in the reproduction—and, in some cases, the possibility of restructuring—*habitus*.

5 Final considerations

The analysis of the trajectories of the psychologists studied leads us to multidimensional reflections that highlight not only a unanimity regarding the importance of Sex Education in the integral formation of the individual, but also favor

the understanding that, although they belong to different generations, professional activities, academic backgrounds, and genders, they share the same professional habitus. In other words, we were able to identify that there are aspects common to all collaborators that lead them to reflections and concerns regarding adequate training to meet the demands that arise in clinical, school, and institutional settings. Among these aspects, the gaps in initial training in Psychology are elucidated, in addition to the sets of values, predispositions, and prohibitions experienced throughout their trajectories, which inherently interfere in the performance of these agents in their professional practices.

This is reflected in the structuring and restructuring of the collaborators' habits, who, although recognizing their limitations, demonstrate their need for further study of the subject, aiming to contribute significantly to the comprehensive development of their patients, based on a scientifically corroborated Sexual Education that promotes the well-being essential to mental health, the primary objective of Psychology. Although we identified in the statements of some participants that a lack of knowledge leads to prejudice and a mismatch of information, what is most evident is the pursuit of becoming capable of working with the subject, seeking to contribute to the full development of children in all their aspects, whether physical, psychological, cognitive, or social.

Regarding the class fractions identified through the social trajectory of each agent, it can be said that there is a regularity evidenced between the perceptions and actions of the collaborators, revealing how habitus has been structured and restructured within these realities, in terms of positioning and acting on issues related to Sex Education. What is identified is that there is, on the part of the collaborators, an awareness of the importance of the topic for the formation of the individual, which transcends generations, genders, and professional practice.

In short, what this study revealed is that Psychology professionals recognize the indispensability of scientifically corroborated work related to Sex Education, highlighting the indispensable role of the school, without placing exclusive responsibility on teachers in this process. It was understood that the aforementioned collaborators not only emphasize the importance of deepening the subject matter for the integral formation of each and every individual, but also recognize the need for

adequate and multidisciplinary training that provides support and functions as a consolidated network for the formation of Formal Sex Education.

With this, it is hoped that this study will bring stimulating reflections involving education as a science inseparable from Sex Education, but also relate and highlight the role of Psychology as an important collaborator in the training process, in the incessant search for adequate knowledge that makes it possible to experience a full and healthy life in all its aspects. It is also concluded that the research presented does not intend to exhaust the discussions, especially considering both the sample and the aspect investigated. On the contrary, it aims to stimulate new investigations that can bring multidisciplinary contributions to training in Sex Education.

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