

Bringing together knowledge, practices and alliances: A case study of a teacher training program on gender and sexuality in Brazil

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Sexuality education constitutes a social, political and methodological challenge, entailing comprehensive solutions that encompass various sectors of society. The connection between education and health is extremely important to the debate about sexuality, particularly with relation to adolescents and youth. Government initiatives, the fruit of public policies, cannot dispense with the vast experience accumulated by civil society organizations in activism and methodological design of social interventions. The alliance between government and civil society organizations is extremely fruitful for both sectors, as it enhances their respective and cumulative impact. The objective of this article is to analyze the pilot course of a capacity development project for professional educators in gender and sexuality, grounded in the partnership between a civil society organization and the public school system in the city of Salvador, Brazil. Our analysis will address the limits, accomplishments and challenges faced by the project, which was implemented in order to promote gender equity among girls and boys in Brazilian schools.

Keywords: Gender, sexuality education, capacity building.

Articulando conocimientos, prácticas y alianzas: un estudio de caso en la formación del profesorado en género y sexualidad en Brasil. La educación sexual constituye un reto social, político y metodológico que implica soluciones integrales que abarcan diversos sectores de la sociedad. La conexión entre el sector educación y el sector salud es muy importante para el debate acerca de la sexualidad, en particular con relación a los adolescentes y jóvenes. Las iniciativas gubernamentales, resultado de las políticas públicas, no pueden prescindir de la vasta experiencia acumulada por las organizaciones de la sociedad civil en el activismo y el diseño metodológico de las intervenciones sociales. La alianza entre gobierno y organizaciones de la sociedad civil es muy fructífera para ambos sectores, ya que mejora el impacto de sus acciones. El objetivo de este artículo es analizar el curso piloto de desarrollo de capacidades para profesionales de la educación en género y sexualidad, basadas en la alianza entre una organización de la sociedad civil y el sistema de escuelas públicas en la ciudad de Salvador de Bahía, Brasil. Nuestro análisis abordará los límites, logros y desafíos que enfrenta el curso, que se implementó con el fin de promover la equidad de género entre niños y niñas en las escuelas brasileñas.

Palabras clave: Género, educación sexual, desarrollo de capacidades.

Despite advances in the field of sexual and reproductive rights and gender equality in Brazil, much work remains to be done. Public policies and programs that address these issues have emphasized that transformations in attitudes and behaviors that interfere with the promotion of equal rights must begin during adolescence. Schools have been a favored setting for the implementation of such programs, given their notable importance as a place where information is shared and subjectivities produced.

In this article we seek to contribute to the discussion about gender and sexuality in schools based on the case of a professional development project for public school teachers from the city of Salvador, Bahia. Specifically, we will focus on the project's limits, lessons learned and possibilities for action born throughout the process of planning, implementation and evaluation.

A brief history of the project

Since 2007, Promundo –a Brazilian a non-governmental organization that seeks to promote gender equality and end violence against women, children and youth– has worked to promote gender equity (Reeves & Baden, 2000) in schools by way of efforts grounded in two of the organization's principal programs: Program H (for *homem*, meaning man in Portuguese) and Program M (for *mulher*, meaning woman in Portuguese) (Ricardo, Nascimento, Fonseca & Segundo, 2010). The cornerstone of this work is a radio-based soap opera entitled “Between Us” (*Entre Nós*). The name of the soap opera encapsulates both the idea of a relationship between a boy and girl and the challenges integral to relationships (the “us”).

The concept and content of the radio-based soap opera “Between Us” were developed with a group of 30 youth (15 women and 15 men) from three communities in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The plot recounts the story of Beto and Jessica a couple that over the course of the program, grows increasingly aware of how their private and professional lives are influenced by social gender norms. The storyline is divided into three seasons, which follow the couple from their first sexual encounter to pregnancy, motherhood/fatherhood, and professional life and independence. The soap opera was aired at locations frequented by youth from the target communities, including college entrance exam course locations, beauty parlors and internet cafes. Other products, such as flyers, audio-commercials played by “publicity cars” that circulate target communities with loudspeakers, comic strips and a soundtrack to the soap opera, were also created (Ricardo, Nascimento, Fonseca & Segundo, 2010).

Nonetheless, the most successful setting for airing the soap opera, where the greatest number of youth was reached, proved to be schools. After each episode was aired, discussions were facilitated by young people from the target communities. This created a demand among teachers who, once impelled to carry out educational activities on gender and sexuality in schools, often found that neither the materials nor the support necessary to implement such activities were available.

The project's success in schools motivated us to elaborate a second phase of the intervention. In general, we sought to (1) adapt and test participatory methodologies for group reflection, contributing to the proposition of public education policies related to promoting gender equity in schools; (2) promote reflection among professionals in the field of education on the adaptation and use of participatory methodologies in groups and the development of campaigns to promote gender equity; and (3) promote a change in youth's attitudes related to gender.

Online course, a medium that teachers are already familiar with, appeared to be the most strategic means to put these intentions into action with a vast body of educators. The course would focus not only on theories related to issues such as gender, sexuality and violence, but would also offer a range of already tested and evaluated tools for working with students in the public schools system.

Policies on the promotion of gender equity in schools: limits and possibilities

Schools have been identified as a key setting to empower youth to claim their rights as they socialize and formulate opinions, beliefs and judgments about issues related to sexuality and health.

In Brazil, the first records of sexuality education in schools date back to the onset of the 20th century. Influenced by the trends in health and hygiene at the time, these initiatives sought to combat masturbation and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). As early as the 1920s, Berta Lutz, founder of the Brazilian Federation for the Advancement of Women (FBPF), proposed the creation of a program that encouraged reflection over the importance of motherhood and childhood. Subsequently, in the 1960s, significant changes occurred with regards to sexuality education in schools. However, the legal foundations necessary for public policies to move in the direction of a sexuality education that did not discriminate on any grounds, such as race, sex, skin color or age, arose only upon the introduction of 1988 Constitution (Vianna & Unbehaum, 2006).

The opening created by the 1988 Constitution was consolidated during the 1990s. The International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the United Nations Conference on Women in 1995 brought to light new ideas and policies with regards to sexual and reproductive rights. The Brazilian government, pledging to honor the recommendations arising from each conference in the day-to-day operation of schools, facilitated the elaboration of the National Curricular Parameters (PCNs), from 1995 to 1997. These parameters represent one of the most important advances up to this date in terms of promoting gender equity through education policies. They also provoked the recognition of gender equity as an important dimension of children and youth's identity formation and the structure of social relations (Vianna & Unbehaum, 2006).

Notably, though, the PCNs do not constitute a compulsory directive. Rather, they serve as a proposal of content to guide and structure the curriculum of the country's education system, in addition to supporting its review and local contextualization. As such, the PNCs are considered a positive development and consistent with democratic principles. However, this has not guaranteed their incorporation into syllabi and little can be seen of their actual application in schools. According to Vianna and Unbehaum (2006), changes in teaching practices have not been noted either. Nevertheless, all these policies, an increasing openness to debate issues related to sexuality and the urgent need to discuss issues such as the prevention of STIs, AIDS, violence, pregnancy at ages considered "premature" (Heilborn, Aquino, Bozon & Knauth, 2006) and the environment has generated a great demand among teachers for professional development opportunities and the necessary tools to address these issues in the classroom.

However, a survey of curricula and syllabi for pedagogy courses offered in Brazil concluded that the courses on sexuality education for educators lack unity and are not compulsory, leaving students to search for additional information or courses to take in their own time, outside of the university (Unbehaum, Cavasin & Gava, 2011). As such, it appears that educators' academic preparation in this field still leaves much to be desired and that professional development opportunities may serve as a possible solution to fill this void.

Government initiatives and partnerships between municipalities and civil society organizations seek to offer alternatives to sexuality education in schools. The Secretariat of Women's Policies (SPM/PR) put forth innovative proposals for education policies with a gender perspective with the intention of transforming cultural precepts related to gender, sexuality and diversity. Among these efforts, which effectively guarantee that professionals in the field of education have capacity development opportunities, is the Diversity in School initiative (GDE in Portuguese). This program aims to guide public school teachers through the deconstruction of prejudiced behaviors and attitudes related to gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. It is offered as a distance learning course and the pilot project of which was administered by the Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights (CLAM) (Rohden, Araujo & Barreto, 2008).

Programs such as A Brazil Without Homophobia – which aims to promote the participation and rights of the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual and Transvestite) community and combat homophobia –and the Health and Prevention in Schools Program (SPE)– which has helped educational professionals to execute health promotion projects in schools –are examples of recent public policies that promote discussion of gender and sexuality in the school setting (Arruda, Ricardo, Nascimento & Fonseca, 2010).

Public policies that foster respect for diversity and equity of rights are instrumental to effecting significant change, but they have been insufficient in terms of

responding to the number of teachers willing to take action to promote such change (Fonseca & Ricardo, 2010). To support such action by teachers and the work of sexuality education in schools, Promundo initiated in 2007 an effort to adapt and apply its above-mentioned methodologies to the creation of a distance learning course: the Gender Equity in Schools Portal (PEGE).

Bringing together knowledge, practices and alliances

Building on our and others' experiences with social intervention projects for youth and capacity development projects for health and education professionals, we sought to forge partnerships with different educational institutions. Our intention was to problematize and deconstruct conventional notions about gender relations, providing tools specifically designed for this purpose that effect positive transformations in attitudes and behaviors among youth enrolled in school and living in low-income communities (Barker, Nascimento, Segundo & Pulerwitz, 2004).

Through various pathways, we reached the education departments of the cities of Rio de Janeiro and Salvador and teachers involved in HIV-prevention activities, associated with a national initiative called Health and Prevention Program in Schools (SPE in Portuguese). There was a demand among these educators for tools to undertake work on sexuality, particularly issues considered sensitive in the school setting, such as sexual diversity and teenage pregnancy.

In 2009 Promundo became a member of SPE's State Manager Group in Rio de Janeiro. Our participation in this group enabled us to conceive of PEGE's core activity: capacity development workshops to raise educators' and managers' awareness of the linkage between critical thinking and the impact that social gender norms have on youths' affective and sexual choices, their exercising of their rights and their access to sexual and reproductive health care methods.

We found that most educators were open to proposals that would help them respond to the difficulties they encounter in their daily work. Notably, one of the key lessons learned in this process was that involving teachers in the formulation of the educational activities was essential to ensuring the sustainability of the school-based interventions. When the educational activities are performed by professionals from external organizations (as was seen in our case), they come to an end when the 'outsiders' leave the school. However, involving teachers in this endeavor also means that they must think critically about their own attitudes and difficulties in dealing with issues considered sensitive and taboo. In general, their academic training had not prepared them to deal with the diverse range of issues that they face in their field (Fonseca & Ricardo, 2010).

Assessments of continuing education for educators has stressed the importance of teachers' ability to think critically about gender issues in order to organize

activities that in turn promote critical reflection about the inequalities between men and women. It is also essential that professional development opportunities relate to school praxis and offer teachers tools that they can adapt and use in their pedagogical work (Pereira *et al.*, 2007).

Based on these experiences, we developed an online course that presents the Program H and M activities in an interactive manner that allows participants to engage in activities in the classroom and exchange thoughts, impressions and experiences. In addition to theoretical knowledge about gender and sexuality, we sought to offer activities that could be adapted for classroom use as well as opportunities for the educators to experiment with the proposed methods in an interactive way.

In this way, the portal seeks to make accessible to educators Program H and M tools and the results of these initiatives' application in schools through a discussion forum, a library with reference literature and dynamic classes based on discussions with videos and other activities adapted from the two programs. The course is divided into six modules: Gender, Sexuality and Sexual and Reproductive Rights, Health and Care, Pregnancy, Parenthood and Violence. It is available on the *Moodle* system.

The construction of the portal was informed by an analysis of work done in schools with faculty and students, studies of other virtual learning environments, interviews with key actors from the board of professional development and training of the Department of Education of the State of Bahia, and focus groups with teachers in Salvador and Rio de Janeiro.

We decided to implement a pilot session in Salvador in order to test the Portal. The Instituto Anísio Teixeira's (IAT) experience with distance learning courses led us to choose Salvador as the site of the training. IAT took on the responsibility of recruitment and certification of the participants in the 120-hour course. In order to systematically evaluate the students' performance, lessons were monitored and the students participated in fora, took exams in the form of essay questions at the conclusion of each module and developed individual projects that would allow them to apply lessons learned from the course in their own classrooms.

Debates during the 9th Fazendo Gênero Seminar indicated a high degree of public distrust of distance learning courses' potential to transform participants' beliefs and attitudes with regards to gender. Drawing on previous experience with impact assessment studies, we decided to use a psychometric scale to measure the participants' degree of adherence to egalitarian and traditional social gender norms (Pulerwitz & Barker, 2008) before and after having participated in the pilot course. As part of the evaluation of this pilot project, we also held a closing seminar with the teachers who completed the training, during which they received their certification and participated in a discussion about the principal results of the course, as outlined below.

“Nobody is leaving [this course] as they entered [it]”: an evaluation of the first graduating class of PEGE

The pilot class concluded its activities in the first half of June 2012, with the development of projects to be implemented in schools. Of the 33 participants that completed the course (a total of 111 were initially enrolled), 29 (24 women and five men) responded to the evaluation questionnaire on the content and tools made available by the course. The evaluation sought to find out about what content participants considered most important and most innovative, what tools were most useful to the implementation of activities in the classroom, participants’ opinions about the activities undertaken (fora, content evaluation instruments) and each participant’s level of participation. We are still seeking to understand how educators managed their participation in the course in order to improve the tools and flow of the classes.

Of the six modules that constituted the course, those that addressed gender, sexuality, health and care, and violence were defined by participants as the “most important content”. The majority of the respondents indicated that it was not possible to identify which theme was least important, given that they are all interconnected.

When asked about the “most innovative content”, the participants identified the modules on sexuality and violence. The theme considered least innovative was abortion. Nonetheless, as one participant emphasized: *“the modules’ varying importance to individual teachers may be a reflection of our distinct relationships with these issues or of the realities that we meet in our respective school environments, which may also vary”*. Hence, it appears that participants assessed the relevance of the course contents not only in light of their daily work in the classroom, but also taking into account the notions and values they associate with each topic in their personal lives.

At the same time, the manner in which the course approached the different topics –including the language and terminology and the gender equity and sexual and reproductive rights perspective used– was considered one of the most innovative aspects of the course, in addition to the format and presentation of the content on slides. Propelled by texts, videos and animations, the classes brought together different tools to facilitate participants’ comprehension of the topics and completion of the related activities. All these tools and their applicability to the classroom setting, in addition to the opportunities for interaction between participants, were mentioned in response to the question, “what aspects of the course stood out the most”.

Furthermore, the possibility to continue studying using the bibliographies provided was considered fundamental to maintaining participants’ “*engagement*” in the course. Classes and discussion fora –the core activity of the course– were highlighted as “very useful/useful” by almost all the participants.

These and other tools were considered advantageous in as much as they contributed to the study of the course content, but, even more so, they were appreciated

for creating opportunities for interaction between participants. One participant's feedback clearly illustrates these considerations: *"Never before have had I completed a course in this format. With moving images, videos that address the themes in a creative manner, clicks on objects such as books, arrows and numbers that offer suggestions or answers grounded in our contemporary reality. This approach avoided exhausting and tiresome lectures and enabled a more enjoyable learning process."*

The results of the evaluation with this first graduating class also indicate that there are points for improvement. The duration of the course –currently designed to be 29 weeks (roughly seven months)– and the classes and fora, held weekly and every other week, respectively, is an important issue. According to the evaluation conducted with the pilot class, 60% of participants considered the length of the course "good" while 40% felt it was "very good". However, in some comments participants indicated that they felt that the course had been "long".

During the final seminar, one participant also commented on the flexibility of deadlines and the duration of fora, which was praised by many: in the case of the fora, the extension of deadlines to end the online debates did not always favor the discussion, since many participants only responded to the questions at the last moment.

As noted earlier, the evaluation seminar addressed the educators' experiences of the virtual classes, participation in the fora and completion of the assignments related to each of the modules. The educators were urged to reflect not only about the content of the course, but also schools' demands with regards to topics such as the promotion of gender equity, violence prevention, health promotion, teenage pregnancy and sexual diversity, among others. Drawing this connection stimulated one of the participants to reflect about her educational practices and learning process: *"The evaluations were very good because we got the opportunity to reflect about and analyze our situation as educators and our experiences and to expand the breadth of our knowledge"*. Another participant affirmed: *"I enjoyed the course. Although it was a distance learning course, I remained stimulated and engaged. I learned, and my opinions and ideas matured; I took on new values, transformed others and, above all, exchanged experiences with the group. It was well worth it."*

Participation during the group debates, the availability of materials for classroom use and the content and construction of a final project were among the items most cited by the participants as "contributing to their professional development" during the course. The opportunity to independently develop a final project, with the guidance of specialized tutors, proved to be an important activity in terms training and developing the educators' skills.

Moreover, the educators called for a greater number of in-person meetings; an increased use of the *Moodle* tools; a presence on social networks; a revision of the

classes considered long and the addition of more texts and suggested readings to complement the classes.

All these results will be taken into account in future reproductions and adaptations of the project.

Confronting challenges

The course evaluation indicated the necessity of discussing the topics addressed with the whole educational community, not just faculty. Course participants explicitly noted that staff responsible for the management and coordination of the pedagogical work done in schools must also participate in gender equity training.

Integrating this issue of professional development as a cross-cutting one in the daily operation of schools thus emerges as an important challenge. It also raises several questions: Who are the professionals that participate in professional development and training courses? Are they always the same individuals? How is newly acquired knowledge and experience “returned” to the school setting? Who is responsible for developing activities and/or creating opportunities for reflection and critical thinking about gender, sexuality, health and rights? What real possibilities exist to effect the creation of such opportunities? Although these questions remain to be answered definitively, they highlight issues that are relevant to the transformation of the school setting into a place where diversity and persistent, critical reflection are truly valued.

Another challenge brought to light by the evaluation concerns distance learning in its own right. One of the principal suggestions with regards to engaging and increasing the interaction between participants was to hold in-person seminars at different stages of the course. Two such meetings were held during the pilot course: an introductory event and a closing seminar. The demand for in-person seminars was related to various aspects of the course, including the difficulty to engage with topics considered “sensitive” or “controversial” through texts and readings only. Given that written assignments constituted one of the main course activities, some participants found it challenging to engage in both an individual and collective learning process. Nonetheless, the written assignments allowed participants to exchange experiences, engage freely in the debate fora and reflect about experiences, beliefs and opinions –opportunities that were all highlighted as positive in the evaluation.

Other issues relate to doubts about participants’ use of the online tools and time management with regards to studying and completing the course assignments. While distance learning offers a great degree of flexibility and enables students to optimize their use of time, it also requires of students a certain organizational capacity. Notably, participation in some activities served only as a compliment to a mandatory assignment and not as a real possibility of exchange, learning and reflection between a participant and the tutors or the class. It remains to be seen whether this was related to

the educators' heavy work load or conflicts with scheduled school activities, as one participant suggested. The majority of participants completed assignments at night and on weekends, even though they had access to the virtual learning environment at all times.

Indeed, participants' access to the internet proved to be a fundamental challenge. Discussions during the final seminar revealed that many participants accessed the course in the school setting. We therefore assume that some of the educators did not have internet access during the holidays and the teachers' strike that lasted more than three months, and that this contributed to absences from the course. Moreover, the negotiations that took place during the strike eroded educators' motivation in a way that, we believe, also affected their degree of involvement and the duration of their participation in the course.

Despite these challenges, the discussions fostered during the closing seminar of the course, which gave participants the opportunity to reflect actively and make recommendations about the course, indicate very positive results. As one educator said: "Nobody leaves [this course] as they entered [it]".

While the acquisition of knowledge and pedagogical tools is a central pillar of PEGE, we must also note that transformations in participants' opinions, beliefs and values are indispensable to engendering a more open stance among educators towards work with adolescents on sexuality, gender relations and violence. To this extent, a preliminary evaluation of the data collected before and after the course indicate that the percentage of educators that agreed with gender equitable statements and rejected gender inequitable statements had increased by the end of the training (it may also be noted that the educators already demonstrated a relatively high acceptance of gender equitable principles prior to beginning the course). For example, at the beginning of the course, 68% of respondents did not agree with the statement, "If a man pays for domestic expenditures, he has the right to the final say in household matters". At the end of the course, 100% disagreed with this statement.

However, it remains to be seen how the educators responded to statements related to topics considered "controversial", such as sexual diversity, abortion and violence.

CONCLUSION

Sexuality education constitutes a social, political and methodological challenge, entailing comprehensive solutions that encompass various sectors of society. The connection between education and health is extremely important to the debate about sexuality, particularly with relation to adolescents and youth. Government initiatives, the fruit of public policies, cannot dispense with the vast experience accumulated by civil

society organizations in activism and methodological design of social interventions. Indeed, we believe that the alliance between government and civil society organizations is extremely fruitful for both sectors, as it enhances their respective and cumulative impact.

Meanwhile, training educators in the field of gender and sexuality does not simply boil down to conveying knowledge and pedagogical tools. It is also necessary to take into consideration how educators' personal beliefs may sustain gender hierarchies and discrimination against "the other" and normalize beliefs that are, in fact, socially and culturally constructed and therefore susceptible to change. Indeed, working to change beliefs, values, attitudes and behaviors is a key challenge for the creation of a more just and egalitarian society.

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