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Educating for sexual and reproductive health in an information society

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Abstract

Sexual and reproductive rights are a substantial part of personal development, yet the presence of emotional and sexual education is insufficient, both in formal, non-formal and informal education. This paper presents some proposals to provide students with tools related to sexual education in three dimensions: competence on sexuality and reproductive health; communicative competence and civic competence of democratic action.

1. Introduction

The recognition of reproductive rights as a substantial part of personal development has pursued a policy of educational activity with mixed results. In 2010, Spain promulgated the “Organic Law of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Abortion”. With this law public authorities are obliged to guarantee information and emotional-sexual education in the formal education system contents. This training should have a comprehensive approach that promotes a vision of sexuality in terms of equality and responsibility, prevention of domestic violence, sexual assault and abuse, recognition and acceptance of sexual diversity, disease prevention and unwanted pregnancies. However, in practice, the balance of these proposals has not been very positive. According to the report of the Spanish coordinator of Feminist Organizations (2011), the commitment to promote educational programs and developing information campaigns on sexual-affective education in the media has been inexistent. Moreover, in schools it remains a subject taught thanks to teachers who are more aware, yet poorly supported.

While progress in this area has stalled, there is a growing concern among educators regarding gender violence, teenage pregnancy or the consequences of new reproductive technologies. Formal education must face the challenge of building concrete social practices that transform scenarios and enable a comprehensive and healthy growth of students. This involves establishing information, education and denouncement, while also providing training to students three-dimensionally: competence on sexuality and reproductive health; communicative competence and civic competence of democratic action.

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2. Competence on sexuality and reproductive health

The construction of sexual identity is a conflictive process. Additionally, the discourses of the media, the world of fashion, publishing and other industries intensify and reinforce the sexual and gender division, much more so than messages of equality. Thus, if we want young people to live gender relations in a conscious, free and transformative way, we must approach these themes carefully.

Numerous studies have shown that the affective-sexual interpretations of adolescents are conditioned by the myth of romantic love (Garcia, 2011). This is a distortion of García’s own plural and contradictory life experiences in favour of the normative model, which is androcentric and heterosexual. According to this model, man and woman are complementary and create a loving bond based on the ideal of fidelity, monogamy and lifelong relationship. Any other expression of sexual affection is considered marginal or dissident, and gender roles mark the limit of what men and women may desire (Francisco, 2012). Traditionally, the reproductive, parentage and nurture imaginary has interfered with this model. Thus, romantic love has included in its mythology parenthood as an embodiment of the ideal model. This affects human relationships in a very significant way and has been particularly problematic for the sexual and emotional autonomy of women. Victoria Sau (2005) states: "Women have bodies that do not feel like theirs, whose functions are alien and experts have them as they wish." This idea of having without feeling your body is a constant for women who have had to build their identity in a very problematic way.

Education for sexual and reproductive health should provide training in order to recognize this symbolic heritage that constructs asymmetrical relations. At the same time, it must enhance practices of listening to the experiences of students in relation to their body, their feelings and their beliefs about the reproductive function. This is essential if we want to address issues such as teen pregnancy due to the fact that quantitative data or statistics do not cover the complexity of human desire. As Kait (2007) notes, adolescent girls position themselves differently when confronting their pregnancies and always based on a very precarious knowledge. They believe they are well-informed because they possess information, but lack the necessary knowledge that leads them to know themselves and establish healthy affective bonds. For this reason, education must create spaces and practices of encounter, dialogue and recognition.

Another issue that demonstrates the need to strengthen skills in sexual and reproductive health is the impact of new reproductive technologies. Today, an increasing number of children have a non-conventional history of origin, which in many cases are quite complex. To the adolescent’s complex search for identity, we should now add the possibility of considering it as a product on the market that has been offered, designed and selected to meet the demand of their parents. We should begin to identify and analyze the consequences that these changes have in classrooms.

3. Communicative competence

Education processes involve training to communicate and intervene in the world. Sexuality, affectivity and reproduction are relational variables in the development of identities and thus are communicative processes. Education should provide students with the conceptual tools and spaces to express themselves. However, it also requires developing aesthetic and critical skills for analysing the media discourses and messages, considering that these condition world views. Young people will only fully access citizenship in the moment when educators facilitate and foster their autonomous capacities to make informed decisions about their bodies. This is not only a personal liberation in the context of everyday life, but also a cultural policy to democratize the production of discourses about embodiment and health. For example, medical and technological discourse, amplified by the media, hinders the development of sexual and reproductive health of women when they are not recognized as subjects. Analysing these representations with boys and girls can help them not only learn about the perversions of this type of reproduction and motherhood stories, but also to understand the limitations and constraints of media discourse.

Another example involves a case in Spain in 2009 when the parent’s association COFAPA denounced the miniseries “The Covenant” (Telecinco, 2009). This program portrayed the pact of six 16 year old girls to become pregnant at the same time and based on a real event that happened at a high school in Gloucester in 2008. COFAPA requested the withdrawal of the series because it "trivialized something as important as motherhood". Also, the
Viewers and Listeners Association considered it an unacceptable story line and urged the media to treat "with sufficient realism such a noble goal as a woman who was going to have a child". The controversy led to conservative newspapers like ABC to affirm that this amounted to the most controversial series of Telecinco.

An analysis of these complaints as well as the reception practices of this series with adolescents and adults could explore to what extent these representations of girls making decisions capriciously about their bodies and their lives have produced such outrage. There are those who consider what happens in real life, that which must be kept in strict privacy, to be very distinct from creating a fictional display of these issues with the consequent danger of mimicry. There are many factors that interfere with individuals and media messages. It can not be guaranteed that the representation of a certain action on the media will necessarily lead to its reproduction in real life. What happens between the thought and its final decision far exceeds the powers of television. This particular television series is a good medium to use in the classroom because what is clear is that no one listens to these girls neither in the fictional nor real story. One of the teens of Gloucester recounted that she wanted to have a baby in order to love someone and so that someone would love her unconditionally. Was it a game for her? Yes, but she was playing a game about motherhood that was understood as absolute and devoid of the complexity of the many positions that women can take as autonomous subjects. Therefore, it is paradoxical to argue against trivializing the subject because the very complaint is fixed as caricature of motherhood outside of the real world. It condemns the capricious young woman, but not a society that plays with your wishes by creating illusions about the "noble goal of being a mother". In order to be truly realistic, Telecinco must demonstrate plurality in the representations of motherhood options, while raising the contradictions and gaps in training on reproductive health and rights. In fact, there are many more speeches on media about teenagers suffering unwanted pregnancies and on the decision of whether or not to have the baby than on pregnant women who wish to keep it. We should know about them too.

Teenage girls deserve to give birth to their own lives as conscious and free subjects, for which they must deal with the expectations that society builds around their bodies and their reproductive capacity. None of the young protagonists of the series “The Covenant” has overcome the childish illusion of "I want it all but without consequences". Adults can see the trap and must share this knowledge with the girls who follow the series. That said, in the protagonists there is a rebellion against a family, a school and a society that are deaf to their dreams and demands. Any young person can see and feel that and should be able to share with adults, at least, in the classroom.

4. Civic competence of democratic action

Resistance to promote affective sexual education that guarantees health and reproductive rights are held at the intersection of two ideologies: capitalism and patriarchy (Lozano, 2006). From these ideologies, the consideration of the body arises as an element for consumption and the idea of intensive motherhood, which multiplies the divisions and inequalities based on gender, ethnicity, social class, cultural resources, etc. Sexuality and reproduction are still split by a cultural imaginary that is violent and reduced and that the media promotes. In this context, people have to negotiate their identities and choices throughout life. The school is a privileged place to diagnose and explore the scope of these expressions, and not only in the curriculum. It is more than likely that the contradictory images of what sexuality, affectivity and reproductive health mean today awaken in students a curiosity in their own origin and human relationships. The body is living matter and not a mere mental construct. Human beings do not fit solely into the physical being and yet, at the same time, are not just the utterance of the spoken word. Also, students should know that they are active subjects who feel, interpret and act on that structure without forgetting the intimate experience of their body. This may lead to a broader reflection on the meaning of their individual and collective identities, which will affect their way of being in the world. Formal education should not remain defenceless against the new questions that may arise. Formal education should enable young people to find ways of personal and civic empowerment from their experience of sexuality and reproduction. Moreover, this educational task requires the involvement of all stakeholders.
References


