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The sexual child - Investigating teachers' experiences

School-based sex education programs can have a positive impact on pupils' health and well-being (Gerouki, 2009).

The concept of sexuality in childhood refers to children's instinctive need to explore themselves and their feelings and seek, through those explorations, sources of pleasure. Within that framework, the seeking of pleasure is connected to a sexuality that goes beyond the reproductive organs. It is not about sex but also about forming the emotional self (Thanasiu, 2004).

The study

Sex education is still a highly charged,

controversial and overtly ignored topic in Greece. A range of troubling sexual health indicators in the Greek population make the demand for comprehensive, systematic, school-based sex education more imperative (Gerouki, 2008).

One way to argue in favour of sex education, as well as to promote successful interventions, is to focus on educational settings and the teachers' experiences of sexuality in children.

This study aimed to explore how Greek primary teachers conceptualized and defined childhood sexuality. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with

twenty primary teachers to research their perceptions of “normal” and “problematic” sexualities - that is, the child angel, or the child villain. They were asked about the kind of pupil behaviours and pupil questions the teachers considered to be sexually-related. They were also asked about how they responded to their pupils' questions and behaviours.

Results

Thematic analysis has been used for analyzing the interview transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An overall data analysis pointed towards some general remarks.

These included; teachers' difficulties over theorizing the subject of sexuality in children and; a tendency to make age- and gender-oriented distinctions.

Preliminary coding of the data indicated that for respondents, sexuality in children is: normal, secretive, more about emotions and less about the body, heterosexual, innocent, potentially destructive, and it has a tendency to imitate adult behaviour.

When collating the above codes and help identify potential themes, two patterns of reference emerged, namely: the positive and negative talk over sexuality. Those patterns seemed to affect how teachers interpreted ‘sexually charged’ situations at school as well. Such situations were accordingly treated by respondents as either unproblematic or problematic.

Unproblematic situations were a source of entertainment in many cases. Responses also showed that it was easier for teachers to ‘ignore’ behaviours that they felt inadequate to manage. Occasionally, respondents mentioned having interrupted children’s problematic behaviours without explaining or challenging them.

Teachers' perceptions, of having limited capability and/or knowledge to intervene in particular occasions, or their choice to ignore particular behaviours, affected their teaching practices and self-esteem. This seemed to impact on their personal and

professional identity.

Conclusions

On the basis of this small study some preliminary suggestions can be made.

1. To incorporate more theoretical knowledge, during teacher training, about children’s sexuality and their sexual behaviour.
2. To challenge the notion of innocence as absence of sexuality, as well as heteronormative (people falling into only one of two distinct, male and female, sexes) assumptions.
3. To develop strategies for teachers that support positive interventions in the classroom.

Further research, on how Greek teachers' and pupils' views on sexuality and their relative school experiences influence their self-perceptions, would help develop this work.

References

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