Breaking Cultural “Taboos” About the Body and Gender: Brazilian Students’ Emancipation From a Thematic Perspective of School Physical Education

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In order to understand the problems related to equity and diversity, we can first recognize that school physical education potentializes processes of a cultural context that has, directly and indirectly, interfered with the body and its relationships. We live in a still retrograde society, which has its foundations established in hierarchical relations of power and that women are often devalued in many sectors, especially in contexts of deep social exclusion. However, the body is the result of cultural construction and the concept of “natural” coexists within the culture. Then, it is necessary to problematize and (de)construct concepts that reinforce prejudiced/discriminatory attitudes. Our objective in this article is to interpret how high school students’ relationship to knowledge allows situated interventions on gender issues by undergraduate students from one physical education teacher education program. Methodologically, we used a qualitative approach to develop interventions in one high school in the city of Fortaleza, Ceará, Brazil, in two stages: (i) questionnaire to consider the students’ knowledge related to gender issues; (ii) intervention to work on issues of gender and social inequality. As a result, we have identified as essential to list such issues in the school environment, because it is in the school that we live the plurality of being and establish various social relations, locating them critically. We recognize that the challenge of intervention is beyond problematizing classes, but in educating students as autonomous and emancipated individuals as they can construct their own (self) critique. In conclusion from the analysis of those interventions, it was possible to strongly observe the existing hierarchical relations. In this sense, we emphasize the importance of the teacher to address thematics that generate learning with respect to the male and female bodies in the classes, so that there is a better understanding of the differences to foster the critical and emancipatory expansion of gender equality.

Keywords: relationship to knowledge, teacher education, curriculum, gender equality, high school, university education
INTRODUCTION

Gender-related prejudice and inequalities are remarkably expressed in the current right-wing Brazilian governmental discourses against teaching practices around gender (Knijnik and Luguetti, 2020). In this article, we aim to contribute to the eradication of gender inequalities through the voices of high school students and their relationships to knowledge. There are challenging questions about the pedagogical practice of school physical education, such as didactic and relational issues, which affect teachers and students in Brazilian basic education. Some theoretical and methodological propositions point to the criticality of the teaching and learning processes. However, during the initial teacher education, there are themes that are little addressed as relevant demands for teaching intervention. According to Jacó and Altmann (2017, p. 3), “physical education classes, which have their attention on the body and movement, have long been understood as a fundamental instrument in schools for the education as discipline of the body and its senses.”

This type of bodily education, according to Jacó and Altmann (2017), was based on the dichotomy between male and female. In this sense, the organization of spaces and classes was designed separately for the male and for the female students. However, there are new proposals for thinking about the body, corporeality and movement as dynamics that permeate school physical education (Penney, 2002). It is not appropriate, for example, for teachers to limit their actions to legal guidelines understood in a shallow manner to promote participation and involvement in learning situations, regardless of sexual orientation and gender and considering the health conditions of each student (Brazil, 1996). However, there are still differences in the ways of organizing classes (Corsino and Auad, 2012), as well as in the engagement of students (Jacó and Altmann, 2017). The subtlety of some of these differences during physical education classes indicates dispositions for maintaining historically predefined places for each gender, which we understand as “taboos.”

Thus, in order to understand the issues related to equity and diversity, it is necessary, firstly, to recognize that school physical education is a potentializer of processes of cultural contextualization that have directly and indirectly interfered with bodies and (inter)personal relationships. Machado and Pires (2016) emphasize that, since the approval of the National Law of Guidelines and Bases for Education (LDBEN) in 1996 (Brazil, 1996), physical education is considered as a mandatory curricular component, being responsible for the elaboration of the pedagogical political project (Venâncio and Darido, 2012). Therefore, physical education teachers are able to propose to the school collective that the focus of discussions about the body and sexuality could be effectively included and contextualized in the schooling process.

However, we live in a society that is still retrograde and conservative and whose foundations are based on hierarchical relations of power that devalue women, in various sectors, especially in contexts of profound social exclusion, such as school (Franco, 2018). In addition, the current Brazilian extreme right-wing government makes it difficult for women to fight against poverty and hunger; it reinforces and promotes violence; it worsens the conditions of access to housing, healthcare and education; it accentuates historical and structural injustices and generates more inequality and social exclusion (Lavínas and Gentil, 2020). This context affects the life of each human being, each individual, each body and their intersubjectivities.

We know that the understanding of the body is the result of a cultural construction, in which the concept of “natural” coexists due to the intervention within culture (Goellner, 2010). Then, it is necessary to problematize, deconstruct and reframe concepts that reinforce the naturalization of prejudiced attitudes and discriminatory behaviors. As we immerse ourselves in the school context, the contemporary debate on gender relations denotes a polarized political sense – typical of political parties – that masks the importance of these discussions and reflections in the fight against “taboos” that reproduce different forms of oppression.

In addition, Brazilian women are part of this problem more broadly, due to the convergence with other factors, such as the racial factor, which remains historically and socially segregationist, most of the time, at school, in the family, in housing, at work and affects the living conditions in society as a whole. According to Lovell (2000, p. 88), “race, gender and class shape the lives of all Brazilians inseparably.” This viciosity is imbricated in the country in such a way that it affects the educational processes, culminating in the discrimination of women, mainly in the devaluation of the relationships to knowledge of black women (Venâncio, 2019). Therefore, we assume intersectionality as a perspective for our analysis, under a complex logic of intersections between social relations in mixed dynamics of race, gender, and class (Corsino, 2019).

In the context of schooling, according to Marrero (2008), these relationships to knowledge are consistent with the need for the school to be transformative so that women are not subordinated to gender inequality. For awareness and criticality in educational processes – with the aim of promoting social justice (Schenker et al., 2019) – it is essential that the school does not reproduce the inferiorization of women and that it does not perpetuate the hierarchy based on historical and social inequalities. Schooling can reveal possibilities for new construction of relationships to knowledge (Charlot, 2000), without discrimination and seeking to break obstacles to the consolidation of a democratic society, such as a school that promotes (self) critique and human emancipation (Oliveira and Venâncio, 2017).

During the physical education degree course, two authors of this study had the opportunity to mobilize knowledge from disciplines and programs that enhanced democratic aspects and social justice. Some of those actions provided experiences based on knowledge from the schools’ realities and reflection on their own pedagogical practices. In addition, their experiences fostered the development of research projects in school physical education by both authors, within the scope of the academic master’s degree in the Physical Education Graduate Program at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte. This study covers a common problem to their research, with the mediation of their advisor and the critical participation of a professor-researcher, who collaborate as co-authors of this article. Our objective is to interpret how elements of the relationship to knowledge – of high school students – enable...
interventions on gender issues – by undergraduate physical education students.

METHODOLOGICAL PATH

The study is anchored in qualitative research characteristics, situated as an investigative process that did not have any generalization claims, as advised by Alves-Mazzotti and Gewandsznajder (1999) and Sandin-Esteban (2010). As an itinerary, we highlight that the theoretical and methodological starting point is a discipline – Physical Education in Elementary and High School – offered in the second semester of 2018 and attended by the two main authors during their initial teacher education as undergraduate students at the Institute of Physical Education and Sports of the Federal University of Ceará. On the one hand, the theoretical catalyst from the course was the discussion, critical analysis and thematization of official documents guiding Brazilian basic education, such as the National Curriculum Parameters (PCN) (Secretaria de Educação Fundamental, 1997), the National Common Curricular Basis (BNCC) (Secretaria de Educação Básica, 2020), the Regional Curriculum Matrices (Secretaria da Educação, 2019) and the National Curricular Guidelines (Secretaria da Educação Básica, 2006, 2013). On the other hand, the methodological catalyst was the students’ experiences and ways of accessing the knowledge about certain content in high school physical education classes. In this sense, there is emphasis on the qualitative and descriptive field approach to reveal the “taboos” in one class of high school students from a school located in Fortaleza, the capital city of Ceará State in the northeast region of Brazil.

Context

The school has been chosen due to the availability of the physical education teacher responsible for the class and the agreement of the school management. The school – as a public institution of regular education – has a total of 246 students, according to the basic education development index (Instituto Nacional de Estudos e Pesquisas Educacionais Anísio Teixeira [INEP], 2019), located in a central neighborhood of the municipality, whose human development index (HDI) is 0.574, being in the 19th place in the regional districts table II, as based on census data from 2010 (Secretaria de Desenvolvimento Econômico, 2015). The school has students who live in different regions of the capital and has been suffering a reduction in the number of enrollments annually.

Participants

The choice of students was made randomly with the class that was available at the time we selected to conduct the research. There are 26 students who participated voluntarily with the necessary agreement. The participants justified that they would not include their gender identities in the responses to the questionnaires and that they understood that the absence of this information would not interfere in the evaluative process of their reflections. They understood that each person’s verbal report would contribute to the research.

Research Procedures and Data Analysis

As a critical collaborator (Luttrell, 2005), the professor-researcher responsible for the course – who has followed the academic trajectory of the two master’s students since their degree course – is a co-author in this study. The work was organized in two phases. We initially performed a documentary analysis in four sources, considering how themes related to gender and sexuality were cited. We highlight, in Table 1, the number of times that the terms “gender” and “sexuality” were mentioned in the documents, specifically regarding physical education, and an excerpt referring to breaking paradigms. We emphasize that the word count was based on approximations from a search for terms in an isolated or literal way, including correlated terms (such as “man” and/or “woman”).

After the documentary analysis, we carried out a second phase, based on a questionnaire with illustrations by Brazilian designers and cartoonists (Ziraldo, Laerte, Alaúde, Carol Rossetti, and Rafael Babueno) and interventions that were grouped in two stages: (i) analysis of the responses to the questionnaire about the students’ knowledge related to gender issues and sexuality; the questions form was used – through writing and orally – in a 9th grade class at elementary school, with 30 students, and in a 2nd grade class at high school, with 26 students; (ii) analysis of the intervention carried out in the high school class context, to address issues of gender and social inequality. We opted for the emphasis on the high school class due to the absence of specific terms on the subject in the curriculum document. The participants and their legal representatives agreed with the school’s consent to conduct the study, which is part of a broader research project, duly approved by the institutional research committee to which it was submitted. We compared the data generated in both phases to present and discuss the results.

A careful analysis of the questionnaire responses was performed. The data survey emerged, primarily, in a quantitative way – the themes in Table 2 – that formulate the “taboos” addressed in this study, but we have highlighted only the qualitative data, as we realized that from this type of approach several meanings inherent to culture emerge (Minayo, 2008). We identified the need for advancing this research beyond punctuality in data written from the questionnaire. Then, we used in a collaborative way the production of a lesson plan – based on Sanches Neto (2017) – consisting of a systematization of school physical education content.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The intervention praxis was based on five learning moments highlighted in Table 2 below.

Understanding the embedded logic in the classes’ dynamization, we believe that declarative knowledge (Sanches Neto, 2017) – which is unexplored several times – undergoes without due attention but it emerges when exploring both the “taboos” theme and the possibility of students have their speech respected, their own language listened, confirming their active voice. In an attempt to foster steps that are built for a fairer education – reducing the problem of
sensed bodies (Corsino, 2019) that the school and other institutions promote daily – we meet the need to open paths that teachers and school principals make themselves present with sensitive and welcoming listening to recognize the students’ knowledge and experiences, and to encourage their participation and involvement to learn critically. The following questions point to specific gender issues in the participants’ perspectives.

Why Do I Have to Say Whether I Am a Male or a Female Student? What Does It Matter?

To present the results with consistency, we need to explain that several elementary and high school students did not want to identify in the form whether they were female, male or other. As it was a work based on documentary, exploratory and descriptive analysis, we understand that this fact did not compromise the findings and made us present excerpts that would meet the proposed objectives.

To understand gender as a constituent of the individuals’ identities, Louro (1997) points out that we need to understand that everyone is constantly (re)building and transforming her- or himself in their social relations. It is important to demonstrate to students that they have situated places of speech and listening, so that they feel free to understand aspects of their identities and their sexualities, considering both as constructs. In Ribeiro’s (2017) critical perspective on the place of speech, language serves as a device for conserving power from a colonization process based on oppressive thoughts.

The questionnaire used with the classes consisted of cartoons and problematic situations that encouraged students to think critically about the problems mentioned. Table 3 shows three questions extracted from the form, in which we can see how the themes are present in the students’ daily lives, as well as their relevance.

From the critical analysis of each answer, highlighted as their responses, we have realized that there are stereotypes linked to the individuals’ roles and their representativeness. For example, in question 2, when dealing with the association of words with the role of men and women in society, there was an emphasis on physical characteristics, accessories and stereotypes about women. However, when words were asked about the role of men, the focus was on characteristics that highlight male virility and professional aspects. This evidence reaffirms the observations by Cruz and Palmeira (2009) that, historically, the secondary role is mainly attributed to women.
Another point that caught our attention was the moment when we left it open for written or spoken comments on the subject. We have heard sensibly comments such as: “I still think it is ridiculous for people to say that there is a game just for girls and other for boys;” or a feeling of revolt expressed by a student when she says: “I feel disgust and revolt when these inequalities happen, people who occupy the same positions with different salaries for being a man or a woman. Society is sexist.”

According to the notion of relationship to knowledge (Charlot, 2000), these comments – which resonate openly in the dialogue with the class – may represent components that disadvantage the mobilization of individuals to learning and participation in physical education classes. However, paradoxically, they can also emphasize the place of speech of invisible students. Thus, according to Cameron and Humbert (2020), it is an attitude like these that constitutes the “strong girls” as capable of transforming the classroom environment to reduce student behaviors that reproduce inequalities as practices. Teachers can foster learning, contributing to the understanding of differences and the careful conceptualization of gender equality (Adichie, 2017).

We highlight some responses from elementary school students, which address the relevance of this theme in their lives. One student mentioned that he would like to assume his homosexuality and that working on such issues at school would help him. We were surprised by this data, as well as we were faced with several comments from students criticizing the election of the extreme right-wing candidate for the presidency of Brazil, arguing about their racist, sexist and homophobic attitudes. The responses of high school students focused on gender relations in society, with some comments and doubts about the use of the social name. Mention was made of the federal decree, approved in 2016, which guarantees the recognition of gender identity (Presidência da República Secretaria-Geral, 2016). In addition, there was a brief discussion about same-sex and/or gender marriage.

We analyzed the students’ responses with the intention of elaborating two interventions to address, as main objective, the questions raised by the students themselves. Through these interventions, especially the intervention carried out within the high school class, we were able to identify that it is absolutely essential to address such topics in the school context. It is at school that we identify and live the pluralities of the human being and affirm our intersubjectivity in social relations, placing ourselves critically (Ribeiro, 2017). Based on the studies by Corsino and Auad (2012) and Betti et al. (2015), we recognize that the challenge of the intervention is not only in proposing classes that problematize, but that there is also a need to educate students as autonomous and emancipated individuals, who fully exercise their (self) critique. In this sense, we understand that it is possible to approach the theme even in lessons that are not exclusively planned to address this subject, because it is present at different moments in everyday life.

### The Bodily Experience as Complex Relationships to Knowledge

The body has variations in meaning as it is influenced by time and culture, it itself is historical and evaluative. On the one hand, the rise of modernity brings to light the body’s perspective as a center for discussions about its productive, sanitary, moral and control functions in society (Bracht, 1999; Costa et al., 2018). On the other hand, the term corporeality appears as a product of philosophical reflections in the search for human emancipation in agreement with the dialectics of the complexity of the body.

Still from the perspective of a reflexive analysis about the bodily experiences, it is important to highlight the countless social demands that surround them. Based on such requirements, we can perceive the complexity of the relationships we create with our own body and with the body of the other. Such complexity can influence the acceptance of the changes that occur as well as generating a search for reaching certain standards often propagated by the media (Franco et al., 2018).

School physical education, historically, has contributed both in the corporeal dimensions and their functions before society, as well as in the scope of polysemic discussions of bodies. With the Brazilian re-democratization, progressive and critical theoretical-methodological proposals promoted changes in the teaching and learning process. Currently, taking into account the criticisms of the curricular documents that guide the work within school physical education, we perceive gaps when relating them to the students’ knowledge and the relevance in each school reality. We understand that a coherent lesson needs to be integrated into life and that it is impossible to achieve it without knowing the students’ reality, valuing their needs, as well as considering their knowledge and their relationship to knowledge.

School physical education holds movement as a primordial element for learning, but also interdependent on cultural elements, interpersonal aspects, and environmental demands, as suggested by Sanches-Neto and Betti (2008). While meeting this necessary convergence for the complexity of the classes, we consider that the teacher learns – about how to improve pedagogical practices – from essential debates on the body in the school’s time and space (Costa et al., 2018).
According to Betti et al. (2015), there is a dialogical relationship between world and movement. In this relationship, it is not possible that they exist under some isolated configuration, as one is immersed in the other. Thus, assuming dialogics as a premise, we realize that the relationships that were previously considered external to the school, in fact never were. These relationships to knowledge are part of the construction of each human being.

Merleau-Ponty (1999), when reflecting on the emerging distance from himself with his own body, understands that there is no dissociation, as there is a dynamics of rediscoverings of the meaning of the world, such as “being in the world.” In educational circumstances, we recall the meanings that relate physical education to students as powerful bodies in a progressive demand for emancipation.

According to Charlot (2000); So and Betti (2018), and Venâncio (2019), learning is a mandatory condition for human beings because, in order to live in the world, it is necessary to learn to establish dynamic relationships with the world and with other humans. This dynamic is intersubjective and, therefore, to understand the relationship between school physical education and gender issues, we need to get rid of some socially (pre)established concepts. It is necessary to refute from anatomical or biological justifications for the separation of male and female students in their experiences of sports to the analysis of the behavior of the bodies, biasing the female as a characteristic exclusively of girls and the male a characteristic of boys, which is a representation that persists culturally in the classes.

The aspects of masculinity and femininity are socially constructed concepts so that, as teachers, we do not cast our students on erroneous expectations. Therefore, when mentioning the relational aspect of gender, it is important to emphasize that femininity cannot be understood without accounting masculinity and vice versa. According to Santos (2010), the stereotypes linked to the construction of the meanings of femininity and masculinity are directly related, that is, changes in one generate changes in another. Which leads us to consider that genders are continually made throughout existence and these changes – according to Altmann’s (2006) perspective – show that gender and sexuality polarities are socially constructed, therefore being subject to problematization, deconstruction and reframing.

According to Auad and Corsino (2018), there is also a discourse anchored in religious fundamentalism that criminalizes the idea of elaborating gender and sexuality issues in the school environment. This discourse is frequent, although it is visible that in the realities of schools such issues are eminently present, not only in physical education classes, but also in the daily life of human relationships. Jacó and Altmann (2017, p. 20) says: “But, if the segmentation of boys and girls has been overcome, gender inequalities in classes are still a challenge.” Therefore, it is important to consider the students’ experience as a starting point for thinking about learning pathways and processes in physical education.

It is crucial to realize that the students’ experience and knowledge is what should move the classes forward. Giving voice – and ears – to students is not only about “correcting” their actions; sometimes, we want to give students a voice as a way to “compensate” for our own reality (McLaren, 1997). Understanding the context of physical education classes first involves letting go of the binary analyzes that constitute a biased femininity and masculinity, so that we can overcome the prejudices (as limitations) that we impose – sometimes involuntarily – on the students’ bodies.

Another point that we need to address is that it is not coherent to treat these themes in isolation, as if they were present only at school, as they are constructed in a non-linear way in each culture. It is up to the school and physical education as a curricular component, respectively, to assume their political and social functions and their pedagogical intentionality, and in fact, to give voice and listen to the students’ voices.

Criticism in school physical education has theoretical and methodological assumptions that refute the simplistic dualisms established historically. In this sense, the strengthening of the specificity of the area can provide didactic-pedagogical actions in the classes so that each teacher, in agreement with his/her students, contribute to the elaboration of knowledge in a collaborative way. In turn, there would be ways to build and promote social justice, so that teachers and students can discuss and problematize conditioning aspects of socialization, social stratification, and inequalities of power in their lives and in other individuals.

According to Jacó and Altmann (2017), students have different modes of participation and engagement in physical education classes, and it is common for girls to have more limited participation and less involvement due, among other factors, to the meanings attributed to body content and practices. School curricula select knowledge, through power relationships, which reinforce sectarian views in the construction of the identities of specific individuals (Jacó and Altmann, 2017). Therefore, the curricular knowledge that officially circulates within the school is neither neutral nor disinterested and was selected among several other culturally produced knowledge. Therefore, like Hooks (2013), we advocate for the sense of transgression in relation to this kind of biased knowledge because the school is a place of confrontation between places of speech.

**CONSIDERATIONS**

We consider that there are observable hierarchical relationships and that students consider gender and sexuality issues relevant in physical education classes. We also identified that teachers could problematize and teach thematic content for learning with respect to male and female bodies, contributing to the understanding of differences and the (re)construction of concepts with critical and emancipatory expansion of gender equality. The school is one of the places of confrontation of interests between the status quo and the individuals, who create their own relationships and meanings. In the Brazilian context, the
public school is a space of resistance and schooling engenders a transgressive temporality.

Analyzing the path taken in this research, we reinforce the perspective of Cameron and Humbert (2020) as the themes of gender and sexuality become visible to students, explaining some inequalities in social and school contexts, encouraging them to question the legitimacy and the source of certain ideals (as patriarchal and hierarchical), creating an environment more conducive to reflection and the redefinition of social relations. We suggest carrying out investigations that broaden the views and the possibilities of promoting social justice. As a way, we point to the collaboration between teachers-researchers, to make explicit the relevance of new nuances in the students’ relationships to knowledge.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation, to any qualified researcher.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Research Nucleus at the Institute of Physical Education and Sports of the Federal University of Ceará. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants’ legal guardian/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CL contributed to the study conceptualization and led the preparation of the manuscript. EF, LS, and LV helped with the study conceptualization and provided feedback on drafts of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

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Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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