



THE ROLE OF THE SUSTAINABLE CRAFT PROJECT ON GENDER AND DIVERSITY ISSUES THAT ENTER THE SCHOOL GATES

O PAPEL DO PROJETO ARTESANATO SUSTENTÁVEL SOBRE QUESTÕES DE GÊNERO E DIVERSIDADE QUE ADENTRAM OS PORTÕES DA ESCOLA

EL PAPEL DEL PROYECTO ARTESANAL SUSTENTABLE EN CUESTIONES DE GÉNERO Y DIVERSIDAD QUE INGRESAN A LAS PUERTAS DE LA ESCUELA



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ABSTRACT: The present text brings an experience report lived in the development of an environmental education project conducted in a municipal public elementary school in the east zone of São Paulo. Entitled Sustainable Craftsmanship, the aforementioned project had as its premise the development of environmental awareness and the promotion of social responsibility practices aimed at reusing solid urban waste. However, during its development, craftsmanship has become a powerful strategy for discussing issues related to gender, sexuality, and sexual diversity. In this sense, the main objective of this work is to present the contributions of the *Sustainable Craft Project* in the fight against regulatory discourses that produce inequalities within the scope of human diversity. This experience made it possible to learn about other perspectives for approaching the theme of *sexual diversity* at school and to redefine the meaning of resistance in terms of work with sex education.

KEYWORDS: Environmental Education. Sustainable Craftsmanship. Gender. Diversity.

RESUMO: O presente texto traz um relato de experiência vivenciado no desenvolvimento de um projeto de educação ambiental realizado numa escola pública municipal de ensino fundamental da zona leste de São Paulo. Intitulado de Artesanato Sustentável, o referido projeto teve como premissa, desenvolver a consciência ambiental e preconizar práticas de responsabilidade social que visem o reaproveitamento de resíduos sólidos urbanos. No entanto, no decorrer do seu desenvolvimento, o fazer artesanal se configurou como uma potente estratégia para discussão de questões relativas a gênero, sexualidade e diversidade sexual. Neste sentido, o objetivo central do presente trabalho é apresentar as contribuições do Projeto Artesanato Sustentável no combate aos discursos reguladores que produzem desigualdades no âmbito da diversidade humana. Essa experiência oportunizou conhecer outras perspectivas para abordagem da temática diversidade sexual na escola e ressignificar sentido da resistência no que tange o trabalho com a educação sexual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação Ambiental. Artesanato Sustentável. Gênero. Diversidade.

RESUMEN: El presente texto trae un relato de experiencia vivida en el desarrollo de un proyecto de educación ambiental realizado en una escuela primaria pública municipal en la zona este de São Paulo. Titulado Artesanía Sustentable, el mencionado proyecto tuvo como premisa el desarrollo de la conciencia ambiental y la promoción de prácticas de responsabilidad social orientadas a la reutilización de los residuos sólidos urbanos. Sin embargo, en el transcurso de su desarrollo, la artesanía se ha convertido en una poderosa estrategia para discutir temas relacionados con el género, la sexualidad y la diversidad sexual. En este sentido, el objetivo principal de este trabajo es presentar los aportes del Proyecto Artesanía Sostenible en la lucha contra los discursos normativos que producen desigualdades en el ámbito de la diversidad humana. Esta experiencia permitió conocer otras perspectivas de abordaje del tema de la diversidad sexual en la escuela y redefinir el sentido de la resistencia en términos del trabajo con la educación sexual.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Educación Ambiental. Artesanía Sostenible. Género. Diversidad.

Introduction

Sustainable crafts are a practice focused on the field of environmental education that consists of transforming materials commonly discarded in the trash into handmade objects. In line with the conduct of contributing to sustainability and improving the quality of life of the people involved in the process, sustainable crafts are premised on developing environmental awareness and advocating social responsibility practices that aim to reuse urban solid waste.

From this perspective, part of the waste that would end up in landfills, streams, rivers, or oceans takes on another form through reuse, reducing environmental damage. In addition to craftsmanship, the *Sustainable Craft Project* aims to build a learning environment in which students analyze situations, discuss actions, and work to solve problems through cooperation processes. In this sense, learning for social change is based.

In developing the activities of the *Sustainable Craft Project*, an active, problem-based methodology was used, enabling students to develop their creative potential, share ideas, and grasp the learning and development objectives planned in the *Curriculo da Cidade de São Paulo* (Sao Paulo City Curriculum).

Berbel (2011, p. 29) defines *Active Methodologies* as "ways of developing the learning process, using real or simulated experiences, aiming at the conditions for successfully solving challenges arising from the essential activities of social practice, in different contexts".

In other words, they are learning situations that boost students' intellectual potential when encouraged to elaborate and re-elaborate based on their need to argue. The context of the *Sustainable Craft Project* involves the use of concepts from natural sciences, mutual influences between science and society, artistic language, aesthetic experience, and cultural knowledge and practices.

Starting in March 2022, the *Sustainable Craft Project* included two classes taught after school, totaling 48 students from the 5th to the 9th year of Elementary School. The classes were mixed and comprised students from ten to fifteen years old.

Execution craft work provided moments of significant interaction and, consequently, the approach to various subjects, among which issues relating to sexuality was predominant in the context of developing this project. Politics, gender equality, racism, homophobia, and transphobia were the most debated topics among students.

Debates are an opportunity to speak, listen, learn, and denaturalize violence and combat prejudice in the spheres of human consciousness. From the above, the question that will guide this experience report emerges: How can environmental education and visual arts

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approaches fuel practices of resistance to hegemonic discourses involving gender and diversity?

To contextualize the representations of gender that affect everyday school life and the resistance that can be fostered through craft work, some situations that occurred during the *Sustainable Craft Project* are exposed, based on the theoretical assumptions founded by Louro (1997; 2003; 2012).

Teaching in public schools for over twenty years, I realized how much the lack of educational practices based on human diversity impacts learning, acceptance of differences, and respect for sexual diversity. From this perspective, the approaches to the theme of gender and diversity in the development of an *Environmental Education Project* and the resistance practices that may arise from this will be problematized.

In this sense, the central objective of this work is to present the contributions of the *Sustainable Craft Project* in combating regulatory discourses that produce inequalities within the scope of human diversity.

But before delving into the issue, it is important to briefly discuss environmental education and its relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) planned in the curriculum of Sao Paulo's municipal school system.

Environmental Education and its relationship with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) planned in the curriculum of the city of Sao Paulo

According to Carvalho (2008), Environmental Education (EE) is a dimension of the ecological movement that seeks to involve social groups in constructing new ways of relating to the environment, aiming at action for transformation. In this sense, the author points out that

The socio-environmental vision is guided by complex and interdisciplinary rationality and thinks of the environment not as a synonym for untouched nature but as a field of interactions among culture, society, and the physical and biological basis of vital processes, in which all terms of this relationship change dynamically and mutually (CARVALHO, 2008, p. 37, our translation).

In other words, understanding environmental issues requires a more comprehensive view of the environment, including the field of natural sciences and social struggles, with the horizon of facing contemporary challenges and crises.

According to Sato and Carvalho (2005), there are different ways of conceiving and practicing environmental education, which they call *environmental education currents*. Such

currents consist of pedagogical propositions that will not necessarily solve an ecological problem but allow people to trace their history.

Namely, the *currents of environmental education* are categorized according to the pedagogical approach they present and named: a) naturalistic; b) conservationist/reservationist worker; c) resolutive; d) systemic; e) scientific; f) humanist; g) morals/ethics; h) holistic; i) bioregionalist; j) praxis; k) criticism; l) feminist; m) ethnographic; n) co-education; o) sustainability chain. Each current differs due to particularities; however, it may share some propositions.

Among the currents theorized by the authors, as mentioned earlier, the sustainability current will be briefly discussed by way of contextualization as it is closely related to the *Sustainable Craft Project*.

According to Sato and Carvalho (2005), the current sustainability was disseminated in the mid-1980s due to commitments made at the Eco-92 Conference and gradually gained space in the educational environment. In essence, sustainability currently encompasses concepts and practices that aim to establish the rational use of natural resources to ensure their availability to future generations.

Considering that economic development is the basis for sustaining the development of society, the function of an education that responds to the needs of sustainable development must consider current processes linked to the phenomenon of globalization and social concerns, improving the quality of people's lives equally.

In the pedagogical scope, the current sustainability encompasses several possibilities for educational interventions, including reuse/reduction of waste generation. With this perspective, the *Sustainable Craft Project* is supported by creating a dialogical, creative, and reflective space capable of enabling pedagogical practices based on the collective that aims to build human conduct committed to the planet's future.

According to studies executed by Carvalho (2008), working with Environmental Education requires a careful look at the historical, cultural, economic, and environmental heterogeneity in which the target audience is inserted. In this sense, it draws our attention to the need to read the environment in advance.

"reading" the environment is apprehending a set of social relationships and natural processes, capturing the dynamics of interaction among cultural, social, and biological dimensions in the configuration of a given socio-environmental reality. To achieve this, it is not enough to passively observe the surroundings, it is vital to educate our gaze, to learn to "read" and

understand what is happening around us (CARVALHO, 2008, p. 86, author's emphasis, our translation).

Sharing this educational intention, the *Curriculum of the City of Sao Paulo* encompasses themes incorporated into the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), agreed upon in the 2030 Agenda by the 193 member countries of the United Nations in all stages of primary education.

The incorporation of the SDGs occurs in conjunction with the learning and development objectives of the different areas of knowledge through the selection of themes and methodologies that align with UNESCO's Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) proposal. "ESD brings a cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioral approach and seeks to foster key skills for responsible action by citizens to deal with the challenges of the 21st century" (SÃO PAULO, 2017, p. 37, our translation).

From this perspective, environmental education "can be a precious opportunity in constructing new ways of being, thinking and knowing that constitute a new field of possibilities of knowledge" (SATO; CARVALHO, 2005, p. 12, our translation).

The sustainable craft project and its relationship with gender and diversity issues

The Sustainable Craft Project began on March 7, 2022, when students were presented with some models of handmade objects produced with recyclable materials and the objectives of the work to be developed. Namely, in the development plan for the aforementioned project, it was planned to work on building giraffes using newspaper and glue as a base and, later, dolls using glass, newspaper, and glue.

Before starting work, the students enrolled in the project carried out a campaign at school to collect urban solid waste to be used to develop handmade objects. The students organized themselves into small groups and went around the classrooms, requesting small bottles (of medicine or food products) and newspapers to begin the activities.

In the initial collection process, they obtained a tiny number of glasses and no newspapers. The campaign was extended to teachers and other school employees to resolve the issue. They received a good amount of glass but, again, no newspapers. In their conversations with the people who donated the glass, they identified that due to the expansion of internet access tools, in the context of the school community where the project was developed, newspapers are not material consumed by families.

To resolve the issue, the teacher asked the students to collect supermarket offer flyers with the same texture as the newspaper. In other words, pamphlets that looked like magazine pages, due to their low adhesion to the glue provided by the school, were inappropriate for using the techniques to be applied in making handmade objects. Given the guidelines, the students mobilized and finally obtained satisfactory material to begin their work.

With the preliminary collection of materials completed, they began the project's first stage, which consisted of making newspaper straws to assemble the structure of the craft object. The set of creating the giraffes was realized very calmly, respecting the students' time and interaction needs, lasting between March and June.

Performing craft activities provided moments of conversation and, consequently, the approach to various subjects, among which the topic of sexuality was highlighted in the context of developing this project.

Maia and Ribeiro (2011) define the term sexuality as a vast concept that encompasses feelings, behaviors, values, and manifestations related to people's sexual and emotional lives. It is an inherent dimension of human existence, expressed subjectively or collectively, depending on the culture and historical moment. Such aspects are learned during socialization and accompany the individual throughout their life path.

Louro (1997, p. 26), using the words of Jeffrey Weeks, states that "sexuality has as much to do with words, images, ritual and fantasy as it does with the body". For the author, sexuality is regulated through censorship, consisting of regulatory discourses that establish knowledge and produce *truths* to be questioned.

It is essential to highlight that the development of the activities of the *Sustainable Craft Project* took place in an ample space, with groups of free choice. The arrangement of the tables facilitated circulation and contact among groups and allowed dialogues on different topics to be constructed and shared with everyone present.



Figure 1 – Assembling the newspaper giraffes

Source: Author's collection

The debates on gender and diversity issues were also motivated by the presence of a transsexual student, a fact which aroused the curiosity of the other project participants about the *enigmas surrounding this gender identity*. The younger participants, especially the 6th graders, asked many questions about the LGBTQIAP+2 universe, which were always answered very naturally by some of the project participants.

While they were producing the handicrafts, issues of gender and diversity that entered the school gates were on the students' main agenda at the weekly meetings. One of the conversations that caught my attention was a student's explanation of the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity:

Student A:

- Heterosexual is a person who is with someone of the opposite sex. A homosexual is a person who stays with someone of the same sex. Bisexual is a person who stays with both a boy and a girl.

Student B:

- Ah, homosexual is like Bruna³?

² Acronym refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and pansexual people. The "+" symbol at the end of the acronym encompasses other sexual and gender orientations, representing plurality.

³ Fictitious name.

Student A:

- No, Bruna is transsexual. Transsexual is a person who does not identify with their birth gender. Like... you were born a boy, but you feel like you're a girl and vice versa, you know? Bruna identifies as a girl and likes boys, so she is heterosexual!

It is interesting to observe in the students' speech that the devices restricting what can and cannot be verbalized in a school institution are closely related to the values transmitted to them within the family. This aspect was evident in my observations and listening to the dialogues when making the handmade objects, as I could see that some students were afraid because they were listening to specific conversations, giving the impression that they felt they were doing something wrong. In other words, discussions about gender and diversity were unnatural for some students.

The theme of *sexuality* brings in its content emotional loads originating from guilt, fear, prejudice, and the mistaken thought that specific knowledge would encourage children/adolescents to have sexual relations or homosexual practices. When, in fact, it is a perspective that brings a vision of the body coated with human meaning and offers instruments against breaking taboos, prejudices, and repressive behavior patterns.

Thinking about school from the perspective of promoting education for human diversity requires positioning itself against the tendentious logic of inferiorizing particular identities placed on society's margins by an identity that sees itself as superior to others.

> The white, heterosexual, middle-class, urban, and Christian man represents the standard identity, that is, he configures the reference that does not need to be declared because it was historically and socially determined. With this understanding, subjects who do not fit into these designations are considered to deviate from current social expectations and, therefore, are subjected to various forms of prejudice and social exclusion, thus configuring power relations in society (LOURO, 2003 apud VICENTE, 2021, p. 190, our translation).

For Louro (2003), social identities are only represented if linked to social belongings, conceived throughout the subject's personal experiences. In this sense, pedagogical work on human sexual diversity must consider students' reality and sociocultural environment, as well as their values, desires, customs, and beliefs. That said, it is timely to question what is taught and how it is taught.

The subjects discussed during the interaction between project participants opened possibilities for them to be expressed in manual work. Amid laughter and reports of school scenes, craftsmanship continued to point out practices of resistance against hegemonic discourses regarding human sexual diversity. When the group of students was informed that the colors and personalization of the little giraffes were free to choose, the first question immediately came:

Student C:

- Can I paint an LGBT?

Teacher:

- Of course, you can!

Student D:

- I'll do it too!

Student E:

- I'm going to make one too!

Resistance emerges between the school gates against the conservative discourses that control the pedagogical dimensions of sexuality based on Brazilian patriarchal culture. Because of the lack of openness for identity discussion in the school environment, the context of this project was configured as a powerful strategy for discussing issues of gender and human sexual diversity in the classroom.

Regarding this aspect, UNESCO (2010) points out that such approaches are restricted in various ways in school institutions. Not only through conduct or social norms but also at the level of legislation. In Brazil, no laws or normative documents oblige schools to link knowledge to everyday educational practices with a view to sexual diversity. Even in the most recent curricular documents, such as the National Common Curricular Base (Base Nacional Comum Curricular - BNCC) approved in 2017, the approach to sexual education has been based on biological and preventive aspects, silencing essential issues related to sexual diversity (VICENTE, 2021).

Still, according to the same author, the absence of explicit mention in the BNCC that these themes must be included in school curricula made many teachers and other education professionals understand that differences in gender and sexual orientation "could not be addressed in the classroom culminating in an atmosphere of censorship and silencing around such topics" (VICENTE, 2021, p. 161, our translation).

With this perspective, many school-age children and adolescents fail to receive clear, scientifically based guidance based on universal human values that underpin life in society (UNESCO, 2010).

At the end of the construction of the first craft objects, various shapes, colors, and meanings were obtained and expressed in the works made by the students (figure 2).

Figure 2 – Personalized little giraffes with colors representing diversity

Source: Author's collection

Figure 3 highlights paintings that reproduce the colors of the different flags representing the LGBTQIAP+ universe. From this perspective, resistance practices are subtly woven through the combination of colors, using an artifact coated with a dense load of meanings.

Figure 3 – Personalized little giraffes with colors representing the LGBTQIAP+ movement

Source: Author's collection

For Louro (2003), social, sexual, gender, race, nationality, and class identities are defined within social groupings based on culture and history. "These multiple social identities can also be temporarily attractive and then seem disposable to us; they can then be rejected and abandoned" (LOURO, 2003, p. 12, our translation).

From this perspective, the subjects and cultural practices that bear the marks of diversity are constituted as *unnatural* and targets of intense surveillance. Particular identities and their stories, when present in the daily life of school institutions, in most cases, occur on precise commemorative dates (LOURO, 2012).

As a result, children's schools and elementary schools take a few moments to "contemplate" these subjects and their cultures, while well-intentioned teachers strive to list these groups' "contributions" to the country — their share in the formation of music or music. Dance, their collaboration in economic activities or the arts, etc. In secondary and higher schools, the event is dressed in appropriate guises for the corresponding age group: a series of lectures is promoted, a "representative" of the minority in question is invited, or a film is shown followed by a debate and, with such measures, the claimed absence is deemed to be met (LOURO, 2012, p.45, author's emphasis, our translation).

For the author, such approaches bring social minorities into the focus of attention, but the exceptional nature of the pedagogical moment reinforces the marks of these identities, which continue to be identified as *strange identities*. In this sense, Louro (2012) warns about the tactics designed to guarantee the hegemony of particular uniqueness to the detriment of others.

We need to pay attention to the public and private strategies that are put into action daily to guarantee the stability of "normal" identity and all the cultural forms associated with it; pay attention to the techniques that are mobilized to mark "different" identities and those that seek to overcome the fear and attraction that "eccentric" identities provoke in us. Finally, we need to turn to practices that destabilize and deconstruct the naturalness, universality, and unity of the center and reaffirm the constructed, moving, and plural character of all positions. Then, history, movement, and changes may seem less threatening to us (LOURO, 2012, p. 51, author's emphasis, our translation).

Returning to the analysis of the work produced, in mid-August, we began the project's second stage: Making dolls using, basically, glass, newspaper, and glue. They had already collected enough raw materials at this project stage to continue their work.



Figure 4 – Doll assembly stage

Source: Author's collection

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In order to provide project participants with a visual reference of the work proposal, the teacher asked one of the students, by free choice, to produce different costumes using paints of different colors (figure 5).

Figure 5 – Personalization of costumes produced by a project participant

Source: Author's collection

The choice to construct personalities of black ethnicity was due to the importance of their representation in the educational sphere and the positive recognition of African people in Brazilian social formation. Personalization of clothes was at the discretion of each student. As a result, they obtained dolls with very varied characteristics and costumes (figure 6).



Figure 6 – Dolls representing the diversity of Brazilian black ethnicity

Source: Author's collection

Representations make it possible to highlight resistance, confrontations, and resignations. Precisely because these plots are present in different ways in school knowledge and at all stages of schooling, revealing themselves in space-time. The infinity of differences between social groups is one of the elements responsible for humanity's material and cultural progress. That said, there is no doubt about the importance of these representations for the construction of self-image and self-esteem, as well as for self-affirmation and the constitution of multiple identities.

Many teachers do not feel safe and prepared to address sensitive topics in the classroom, as certain subjects instill the idea of illegality concerning the conceptions of certain groups. A fraction of these professionals have concepts of sexuality marked by doubts, fears, and taboos arising from family, religious, and social repression. In general, they tend to react based on their values about the way in which their sexuality was constructed and not from reflections that allow them to dissociate their principles from the students' right to receive clarification about sexuality (MATTOS *et al.*, 2017 apud VICENTE, 2021, p. 97, our translation).

Not discussing these topics in the classroom, say Mattos *et al.* (2017 apud VICENTE, 2021), is going against the grain of what is currently understood as education. To overcome the prejudices generated in teaching sensitive issues, the authors argue that it is necessary to equip students to reach a certain level of awareness and express their opinions in a plural and democratic way. Mattos *et al.* (2017 apud VICENTE, 2021) further argue that the ideal is to work on these themes in the context of an investigation.

Furthermore, it is essential to equip teachers to work on this dimension of human formation from the first years of schooling. On the other hand, the teaching staff needs to open their windows of rationality, be willing and involved in training to understand the nuances of human diversity better, and, in this way, be more prepared to help students graduate entirely, as knowledge is capable of to tear *down walls* and deconstruct any feeling of taboo.

Considering these considerations, it is possible to affirm that the context of the *Sustainable Craft Project* was configured as a suitable space to debate and reflect on issues related to sexuality from a didactic perspective and the deconstruction of values historically rooted in society.

Final considerations

When the activities of the Sustainable Craft Project began, the intention was to sow Environmental Education practices that would materialize locally, given the need to preserve the planet in its physical aspect. It was not expected that the seeds of Environmental Education could follow different contours in other parts of human life.

This rich experience was an opportunity to learn about other perspectives for working on sexual diversity at school and giving new meaning to resistance. Resisting is not going into battle or generating conflicts to defend a cause but seeking other ways to break with the regulatory discourses that produce certain truths, hierarchize differences, and generate gender, ethnic, and class inequalities throughout society.

As demonstrated throughout this report, Environmental Education and visual arts approaches were consolidated in the context of the Sustainable Craft Project as a powerful strategy to fuel resistance practices in the face of regulatory discourses that produce inequalities in sexuality.

Resistance is a way of occupying school spaces and demanding the debate around gender and sexuality in the institution. Resistance because these practices affect the natural order of things. Resistance because it is clear how latent gender inequalities are in the school context. And above all because in this dynamic, shyly or explicitly, other resistances are engendered.

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