

**GENDER, SEXUALITY AND YOUTH EDUCATION IN BRAZILIAN  
AUDIOVISUAL TEACHING MATERIALS**

**GÊNERO, SEXUALIDADE E EDUCAÇÃO DE JOVENS EM MATERIAIS DIDÁTICOS  
BRASILEIROS**

**GÉNERO, SEXUALIDAD Y EDUCACIÓN DE LOS JÓVENES EN MATERIALES  
DIDÁCTICOS AUDIOVISUALES BRASILEÑOS**

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**ABSTRACT:** The study inquires how the concepts of gender and sexuality are translated into education projects aimed at young people. Two videos formed the documentary corpus of the investigation: *Minha vida de João* and *Era uma vez outra Maria*, both produced by Non-Governmental Organizations. We carried out works of video description, content analysis –as well as images–, and interviews with their producers. The results revealed that the materials act as a biopolitical device, since they establish a "politically correct" curriculum, presenting an ideal way of living sexuality in youth. We concluded that the videos are prescriptive and restrict a deeper reflection, limiting possibilities of change or rupture in relation to more traditional models of gender and sexuality.

**KEYWORDS:** Education. Sexuality education. Youth. Teaching materials.

**RESUMO:** O estudo indaga como se traduzem os conceitos de gênero e sexualidade em projetos de educação direcionados aos jovens. Dois vídeos formaram o corpus documental da investigação: *Minha vida de João* e *Era uma vez outra Maria*, ambos produzidos por Organizações Não Governamentais. Realizamos trabalhos de descrição dos vídeos, análise de conteúdo, assim como das imagens, acompanhados de entrevistas com seus produtores. Os resultados revelaram que os materiais podem ser considerados como dispositivos de biopolítica, pois estabelecem um currículo “politicamente correto”, apresentando uma forma ideal de viver a sexualidade na juventude. Concluímos que os vídeos são prescritivos e restringem uma reflexão mais profunda acerca do tema, limitando possibilidades de mudança ou ruptura em relação aos modelos mais tradicionais de gênero e sexualidade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Educação. Educação sexual. Jovem. Materiais didáticos.

**RESUMEN:** El estudio indaga cómo se traducen los conceptos de género y sexualidad en proyectos de educación orientados a la juventud. Dos vídeos han formado el corpus documental de la investigación: *Minha vida de João* y *Era uma vez outra Maria*, ambos producidos por Organizaciones No Gubernamentales. Realizamos trabajos de descripción de video, análisis de contenido, así como de imágenes, acompañados de entrevistas con sus productores. Los

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*resultados desvelaron que los materiales actúan como un dispositivo de la biopolítica, puesto que establecen un currículo "políticamente correcto", presentando una forma ideal de vivir la sexualidad en la juventud. Concluimos que los vídeos son prescriptivos y restringen una reflexión más profunda sobre el tema, limitando las posibilidades de cambio o ruptura en relación con los modelos más tradicionales de género y sexualidad.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Educación. Educación sexual. Joven. Materiales didácticos.

## Introduction

In Brazil, the discussions regarding young people's sexuality were initially formulated and concentrated in the health area. This theme enters education through public policies aimed at sexual education and, later, is amplified with the advancement of human rights proposals. In 1997, the publication of the National Curriculum Parameters (PCN) for elementary school was an important milestone for such policies.

Vianna (2010) points out that one of the advances of the document was to include the discussion of gender in the references for teacher training, because: "despite the criticism, the PCNs innovated by introducing the gender perspective as an important dimension of the constitution of the identity of children and young people and the organization of social relations" (VIANNA, 2011, p. 181).

It is necessary to clarify that the concept of gender is understood as "one of the constitutive elements of social relations based on perceived differences between the sexes" (SCOTT, 2002, p. 14), which is used as a category of analysis of social processes, considering above all how power relations are present within these relations, building gender identities that are not fixed, because they vary according to their intersection with other markers such as race, generation, religion, social class, etc.

Thus, with the publication of the cross-cutting theme entitled Sexual Orientation, one of the ten themes that are part of the National Curricular Parameters, the federal public agencies have launched several calls for proposals aiming to promote continued education projects for male and female teachers.

Both Universities and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have started to develop teacher training on the themes of sexuality and gender, producing didactic materials to support their actions. Several NGOs became references in the elaboration of educational resources on sexuality, so that their productions were adopted by public education networks and also indicated by the Ministry of Education and Health to work with young people.

The learnings from this training initiative to work on gender and sexuality were increasingly used by teachers in schools. However, there was resistance from some religious and conservative groups, which gained space in Brazilian society and in Latin America in general. These groups pressured the government and elaborated political proposals aimed at preventing the practical application of these works (LAGO *et al.*, 2019).

Currently, Brazilian universities and public schools experience a situation of repression and censorship of the work of male and female teachers and the school curriculum. Groups self-styled "defenders of the family" organize themselves to restrict any possibility of discussing gender and sexuality in schools (BRAGA; CAETANO; RIBEIRO, 2018).

In this context, the growing strength of religious groups, especially Pentecostal ones, which occupy more and more seats in legislative chambers, are influencing and redefining public policies according to their religious agendas (RIBEIRO; MONTEIRO, 2019). Moreover, they go against the principles of the secularity of the state and provoke discussions about the consequences of this participation and its reflections on the policy of expanding human rights.

Brazil is a country where discrimination by gender and sexual orientation causes high murder rates by homophobia (GRUPO GAY DA BAHIA, 2017) and violence against women. Therefore, the elimination of any and all mention of the word gender in the National Education Plan and the National Common Curricular Base - official documents that guide Brazilian education - was another setback for education policies (SOARES; MONTEIRO, 2019).

Despite this, strategies of resistance and change were also produced. It is urgent a (re)construction of spaces for reflection and participation to continue an educational and social project in which rights related to class, gender, sexuality and race equity are guaranteed. As part of this process, the educational collective continues conducting research, applying its results, and publishing studies that foster democratic actions about gender and sexuality in schools. Thus, the research results presented here are valid in the current context. We highlight, in this sense, what Brown (2011) points out: in the last twenty years there has been a multiplication and expansion of discourses on sexual, reproductive and gender rights. However, we understand that the central node is not in the discourses but in how to communicate them to promote the subjective appropriation of these rights, especially among more vulnerable groups. Education is, without a doubt, one of the spaces for discussion and training in which the appropriation and re-signification of theoretical knowledge about gender and sexuality is possible.

In this context, the audiovisual didactic productions on the theme of sexuality and gender, produced by NGOs, are configured as a relevant pedagogical-visual artifact to be

studied, being an important support material for Brazilian teachers who work with young people. Thus, this article, which originated in a doctoral thesis, analyzes how the concepts of sexuality and gender were addressed in two of the four videos that formed part of the research. *Minha vida de João*<sup>2</sup> and *Era uma vez outra Maria*<sup>3</sup> will be the two audiovisuals analyzed in this article, both produced by the Brazilian NGO ECOS - *Comunicação em Sexualidade*, in collaboration with institutions from other countries. ECOS has relevant experience in the development of educational projects related to the themes of gender and sexuality of young people.

Therefore, the question we ask is: how are the concepts of gender and sexuality translated in educational projects aimed at young people? One possible hypothesis is that, despite the fact that discourses about rights are announced as guiding projects about sexuality, in practice the narratives continue to be guided according to the notion of the deviation of juvenile sexuality and subordinated to practices of regulation and control.

To examine this hypothesis we analyzed the didactic materials that were produced by the non-governmental organization ECOS. We analyzed the ways that these didactic supports elaborated, translated and directed discourses about sexuality and gender to young people.

## Method

The research, qualitative in nature, aims to understand the social reality through in-depth data analysis. According to Esteban (2010), among the various characteristics that identify qualitative research, its interpretive and reflexive character is fundamental, which allows special attention to be given to "[...] the way in which different linguistic, social, cultural, political and theoretical elements jointly influence the process of knowledge development (interpretation), language and narrative" (ESTEBAN, 2010, p. 130).

Thus, Bakhtin's (1990) socio-historical and cultural perspective and his concepts of dialogism, intertextuality, and interdiscursivity offered the theoretical framework for the analysis of: 1) visual statements and textual narratives of the videos; 2) technical support and resources used; and 3) interviews with authors responsible for making the videos. In summary, it was a matter of analyzing the audiovisuals and their respective manuals to identify the educational proposals and the type of youth they intend to educate.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMatcineJi8>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtQvIgwYjqA>. Accessed on: 10 Jan. 2022.

For Bakhtin (1990), the points where the discourses intersect and interpenetrate can be understood as the organizing centers of the enunciateds, which should be referred to the social environment. This process of construction and appropriation of meanings present in each particular socio-historical reality has several dimensions, among which we highlight the relations of knowledge and power that occur in terms of disputes for the construction of meanings considered legitimate among different groups and institutions.

To perform the analysis we proceeded to the transcription of the two selected videos. According to Rose (2008, p. 348), "[...] the purpose of transcription is to generate a set of data that lends itself to careful analysis and coding". To this end, the description conducted focused on the ways in which the themes of gender and sexuality appeared in the materials. In addition to the transcriptions, silences, pauses, the use of music, sounds, sound effects, and the meanings of these elements were also recorded. Special attention was given to the visual aspects of the characters, the clothes, colors used, among others.

The analyses of the audiovisuais were guided by the approach of Visual Culture Studies, understanding the "[...] visual image as a central point in the processes and through which meanings are produced in cultural contexts" (HERNÁNDEZ, 2009, p. 21). We started from the understanding of images and other visual representations as carriers and mediators of discursive positions that contribute to think the world and to think of ourselves as subjects.

It was intended, in the analysis, to verify the relations between those said and those not said, putting in relation the images of the videos among themselves, as well as with others that are part of the culture, with the aim of composing a visual narrative that produces other meanings and understandings about the markers of gender and sexuality of young people. Mieke Ball (2004) explains that the critical analysis of the visual consists in creating ways to establish relationships between images, constructing meanings. In this sense, the author stresses that the investigation of how these images reverberate allows the establishment of relations about knowledge and power present in certain contexts.

To refine the analysis, we conducted semi-structured interviews with the people responsible for the elaboration of the selected videos, in order to understand: a) the purposes, interests and needs that justified their elaboration; b) the work that implied their production and c) the paths used to put them into circulation.

The interviews with the founders/coordinators of the Brazilian NGO were conducted in September 2012, in the city of São Paulo (Brazil), and lasted approximately one hour and a half. The semi-structured interview technique consists in the application of open-ended

questions, which follow a pre-established scheme, but are subject to adaptations according to the directions of the interview.

To this end, Minayo's (1999) method of data triangulation was adopted, based on the analysis of three different sources: audiovisual materials, manuals (that accompany the videos), and interviews with those responsible for the audiovisual production.

Thus, we selected parts of the videos that were directly related to the topics of interest of the research to take them as emblematic for problematization of the contents worked and in order to verify the arguments developed.

## Results

Since education is one of the privileged spaces - though not the only one - in the formation of young people, with respect to their rights, we question what kind of formation is being offered to these subjects regarding the themes of sexuality and gender. As already mentioned, we started by analyzing two audiovisual didactic supports in which the narratives involve juvenile sexuality and gender relations.

The video *Minha vida de João* was produced in 2006 and is 23 minutes long. The narrative presented focuses on the issue of masculinity and gender relations, as well as João's conflicts to exercise roles that are required of him. The discovery of pregnancy and the theme of paternity are present throughout the animation. It is a linear story that begins with João still a baby and the construction of his masculinity through situations experienced from childhood to youth, when he has to deal with the issue of pregnancy.

The second video, *Era uma vez outra Maria*, from 2008, is approximately 20 minutes long. This video explains the story of Maria, the girl who appears in the first video as João's girlfriend.

The MacArthur Foundation, Ford Foundation, Nike Foundation, OAK Foundation, John Snow Brasil, and Secretaria Especial de Políticas para as Mulheres, of the Brazilian federal government, collaborated with technical and financial support for the elaboration of the animation.

The narrative of *Once upon a Girl* is not linear, so that the story, in some moments, moves forward or backward, because although the focus is on the present, it is interspersed with scenes from the young woman's past and future.

Both are animation videos and, although they can be worked separately, they are complementary. It is possible to say that they complement each other, because the central issues

of the plots are gender relations and an unplanned pregnancy experienced by the young couple, John and Mary. In this way, the issues of paternity and maternity are told from the perspective of the two characters: in *Minha Vida de João*, the narrative is organized from the boy's point of view, while *Era uma vez outra Maria*, the same plot is built from the girl's perspective. According to one of the producers, the audiovisuals are aimed at educators, teachers, and health professionals, as well as to be used by them as pedagogical tools to work with students. This implies considering that young people are also the recipients of these videos, which must be mediated by the educators. According to the testimonies collected in the interviews, the option to use animation came from the need to produce a video without regional brands and that didn't use words, only images and sounds, since two institutions that participated in the production, Salud y Género (Mexico) and World Education (United States), were foreigners. The videos, therefore, should adopt a language that is more comprehensive, to be understood in Portuguese, English and Spanish speaking countries.

Since animation uses non-verbal language, the characters' expressions, sound effects, and images are the main elements that allow us to understand the presented plot. Speeches are replaced by noises and thought balloons with images and symbols that denote the meaning of what is being talked or thought. We emphasize that the use of speech and thought balloons are resources widely used in comics. In an interview, one of the producers highlighted the interest of the young public in cartoons, so that the videos were well accepted, even circulating in Portuguese-speaking African countries such as Mozambique and Angola.

Music is a resource used for the characters to inform their feelings, crises, desires, decisions, besides indicating the mood of certain scenes: suspense, tension, confusion, happiness, satisfaction, etc. The ideas of youth, gender and sexuality that they translate are verified based on the analysis of the social and cultural scenarios presented in the videos and with attention to the opposition between explicit or implicit, recommended or criticized, highlighted or omitted practices.

### **Gender, sexuality and youth**

Within the audiovisuals analyzed there is a tension that involves models of representation of youth, because although we can observe an attempt to portray the diversity of cultural models and ways of being young, when we take a closer look at the protagonists of the stories, we see a standardization both in the models of beauty chosen as in aspects related to physical constitution, social class, race, and family arrangements in which young people are

inserted. Such representations tend to a standardization of what it is to be young in Brazilian society, even though there are strategies capable of breaking with these constructed standards.

Regarding the aspect of socialization and cultural practices, it is interesting to notice how gender markers are present in the representations of juvenile groups, contained in the audiovisuals. Exclusively, boys have male friends and girls have female friends. In *Minha vida de João*, the protagonist's friends are shown as violent and aggressive and gather in the streets and bars. In contrast, João is sensitive, romantic, and dream.. In the video *Era uma vez outra Maria*, The friends of the protagonists are companions and confidants and circulate through the school spaces, parties, sports activities and within the family. One of the few spaces where there is more interaction between boys and girls are the parties, a place used for amorous encounters. Even though more traditional representations of gender conventions guide a good part of the practices of juvenile groups (girls are represented as more affectionate and boys as more aggressive), when young people are shown in their particularities, there is an investment in the sense of breaking and contesting these more conventional representations. The protagonists of the videos *Minha vida de João* and *Era uma vez outra Maria*, to a certain extent, break with the meanings attributed to what it is to be a man and a woman, revealing how gender identities are malleable and vary according to the historical, social, and relational context.

Louro (1999) emphasizes the need to problematize not only the opposition, which leads to binary thoughts about gender, but also the internal unity of each of these poles, revealing how they are fragmented, divided, and showing the plurality of ways of being a woman and a man in our society.

In *Minha vida de João* the protagonist's identity is constructed in the interrelation with the models of masculinity of his friends and his father (besides other models that João comes across on the street), and that are anchored in violence, beauty, power, leadership and wealth. Despite this, John shows himself to be sensitive and romantic, concerned about the welfare of those around him, however, his peers ensure the maintenance of the hegemonic masculinity of the protagonist, exerting pressure for him to "fit" into the norm valued by the group, that is, gender learning is attributed and reinforced by his friends. John also imitates violent and aggressive behavior that he learns from his father and his friends, although he shows regret in the scenes in which he acts this way. In this case, the intention of showing that aggressiveness is learned during the socialization of the young man since childhood is a way to make visible how much this behavior has been socially nurtured and stimulated. In an attempt not to be ridiculed by his peers, João temporarily adapts to these violent roles when he is with the group, but in the moments he is portrayed alone, he adopts attitudes of care and affection.



In *Era uma vez outra Maria*, the protagonist also resists the roles that are assigned to her, but in this case, who exerts more pressure on the girl is her family, especially her mother and sister, who demand from Maria her participation in domestic chores, as well as other behaviors according to femininity models valued in Brazilian society, such as sitting with her legs closed, playing with dolls, among others. Some of Maria's behaviors and preferences break, to some extent, with those considered more accepted in our society, since she likes to play soccer and prefers more active games, which involve running and playing with a ball; however, these attitudes are always hindered by a pencil (which represents the norm) or by her mother. The psychological characteristics of the girl fit the attributes of a socially valued femininity: she is romantic and vain. If, on the one hand, the character of Maria is constituted through a model of femininity more socially valued, breaking, only at some moments, with this standard, João shows, more strongly, a type of non-dominant heterosexual identity, given that his attitudes and behaviors break with the most traditional models, attributed to men in our society, demonstrating interrelationships in which the masculine contains elements of the feminine and vice versa (POLICARPO, 2016). In the field of affective and sexual relationships, these characters do not employ an attitude of caring for themselves and the other, being portrayed as sexually vulnerable, so that an unplanned pregnancy happens.

In *Era uma vez outra Maria*, there is questioning, on the part of the protagonist, of the unequal division of labor in her own home; however, when the attributions referring to maternity and paternity are portrayed, there is a clear overburdening of the mother in the care of her child. At the end of the story, it is interesting to note that, in an implicit way, all Maria's questionings about the inequalities related to domestic work, experienced in her house, are put aside, considering that, in the final scene, when João takes his son for a walk, it is possible to notice that the boy is carrying a ball, that is, a toy associated as exclusive to boys.

In this way, it is worth questioning why Maria's claims, in the face of these inequalities, do not translate into a different education for her son, since the child appears to be subjectivized, again, to reproduce the hegemonic standards of masculinity. In this sense, the idea is that the vicious circle is not and will not be interrupted, so that there is no visible potential for change in this rigid scheme. On the other hand, although the model of fatherhood portrayed by the audiovisuals reproduces the inequalities with regard to childcare, the manuals do contain discussions about the importance of men's involvement in childcare.

In the handbook *Trabalhando com homens jovens*, that accompanies the video, there is a module entitled "Fatherhood and Caregiving," which presents "discussions around the issue of men's participation in the context of caregiving, focusing primarily on the processes of

socialization to masculinity, from a gender perspective" (ALLIANCE H, 2009, p. 86). The tension between the video *My Life of John* and its respective manual is evident. A plausible explanation for this distance is the production date of the materials, since the video is from 2006, while the manual is from 2009, i.e., the teaching materials were not developed together.

In Brazil, this unequal scheme, which concerns the issue of parenthood, is also translated into public policies, since the right to work leave when the child is born is granted to mothers (120 or 180 days), while the right to paternity leave is restricted to five days. Legally, paternity and maternity are treated differently. Thus, Vianna and Lacerda (2004, p. 116) point out that a dilemma pointed out in different areas in the discussion of sexual and reproductive rights is the "relative invisibility of men"; despite the greater interest in studies of masculinities, evidenced in seminars and publications in the country, this has not been translated into specific political formulations.

In this sense, Correa and Petchesky (1996) emphasize the power relations that operate on gender boundaries and concern cultural norms that produce social inequalities in the realm of sexuality and reproduction, so that "this inequality of power includes social systems that do not provide economic or educational incentives for men to become involved in child rearing" (CORREA; PETCHESKY, 1996, p. 166). Therefore, we can infer that these inequalities around motherhood and fatherhood are portrayed in a naturalized way in the didactic audiovisuals and are not questioned, problematized or tensioned. Moreover, wouldn't the option of presenting other types of experiences of maternity and paternity be a way to potentiate the discussion about rights and duties around these themes? In this way, the videos point little to a perspective of change about greater equality of rights and duties, because they end up reinforcing the idea that, while the elements involving reproduction are understood and portrayed as women's responsibility, the possibilities of transformation will be limited and partial. Ávila (2003) emphasizes the need to change the hegemonic model of reproduction and "[...] seek a sociability in which the meaning of fatherhood and motherhood are completely transformed, leading to an egalitarian sexual division of labor in the domestic sphere and in particular in childcare tasks" (ÁVILA, 2003, p.467).

## Final remarks

We conclude that the hypothesis formulated in the study was confirmed, given that, according to the contents of the videos, the ways of living sexuality at this stage of life are quite prescriptive, since young people are portrayed in the audiovisuals as dependent and

irresponsible, a perspective that restricts the potentialities of changes or ruptures with respect to more traditional models of gender and sexuality, revealing the limits imposed on the production of new knowledge and restricting a deeper reflection on the sexuality of this group.

We can infer that such materials act as a device of biopolitics, to the extent that they establish a "politically correct" curriculum, presenting an ideal way to live out sexuality in youth, through its anti-model: there is an investment in highlighting what should not be done and the negative consequences of disrespecting the norms of this ideal model, which supposes what would be the "good life" for this generation. However, the repetition of these models that are presented as "good for everyone" ends up restricting the freedom of individual choice, enclosing the possibilities of an autonomous and reflective sexuality by young people (HELLER; FEHER, 1995).

According to the authors, the biopolitical discourse replaces plurality by identity, opinion by "truth", demarcating the existence of a single "politically correct" perspective that aims at the cohesion and unity of the group, assuming that all young people can be guided in the same way, because they have the same behaviors, types of relationships, family, feelings, and desires. This attempt to homogenize the group is, for Heller and Feher (1995), "ideologically overloaded" because it suppresses the differences within the group itself.

If we start from the understanding that education is one of the spaces capable of questioning representations, it is possible to question why such audiovisuals miss the opportunity to generate alternative accounts that make it possible to expand the sense and meanings concerning gender and youth culture in our society.

Sorj (2009) argues that these crystallized social roles are rarely questioned, since there are interests in maintaining them. We agree with the researcher insofar as there are very clear interests in maintaining these consecrated places, however it is evident that the profound transformations produced in gender and sexuality relations are causing several social changes. Making these transformations visible is a political issue that deserves to be explored so that both men and women realize that greater democratization in these spaces opens up new potentialities for both.

In this way, values such as justice, responsibility, and mutual respect would be one of the engines for men's involvement with these changes (BONINO, 2011). Thus, as Trafi-Prates (2014) points out, storytelling can also mean 'changing the conversation', that is, putting into circulation other narratives about ways of knowing that are worthwhile because they reactivate and expand the public and/or private sphere.

As we can see, the audiovisuals that are used to educate young people and train teachers limit themselves to reproducing social roles already established around childcare and domestic services, which show a type of social organization that is very demarcated and that, in the limit, seems to narrow the construction of spaces of resistance or any attempt at democratizing the relations that involve men and women in private spaces.

Without a doubt, it is necessary to value the interest of these NGOs in promoting the debate on sexuality and gender in formal education. It is essential to train educators to work with these audiovisuals so that they can foster debates that question these stereotypes and models present in the narratives.

Thus, a sexuality education guided by the precepts of human rights which is based on the examination of issues and themes of sexuality and gender in order to problematize them, tension them, question them, in the sense of generating debates and the exchange of ideas, putting into circulation the diverse positions about them, their potentialities and their limits, may be a fruitful path so that each subject may reflect and analyze their own reality and make decisions which are more consistent with their desires, practices and life projects, that is, a perspective more committed to rights than to prescriptions.

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