TEACHERS' DISCOURSES ON YOUNG LESBIANS IN THE PORTUGUESE SCHOOL CONTEXT
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Abstract: *This paper aims to analyze teachers' discourses on young lesbians in the Portuguese schools. To that end, we carried out semi-structured interviews with 24 Portuguese teachers of middle and secondary schools. After having analyzed the retrieved data from the interviews, we identified four main themes: gender polarization; lesbian invisibility; homophobia; and measures against homophobia. Based on their discourses, we concluded that these interviewees have a small amount of knowledge about lesbian women's sexuality. Despite the legislative progress concerning the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People's rights in Portugal, teachers are not prepared to deal with this issue both inside and outside the school environment. Furthermore, this research includes some recommendations to deal with homophobia in the Portuguese school context. This study will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the discourses and practices towards young lesbians in the school panorama, highlighting the importance of promoting non-discriminatory attitudes in the Portuguese schools.*

Key words: DISCRIMINATION, LESBIANS, SCHOOL, CITIZENSHIP, PORTUGAL

Resumen: *Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar los discursos del personal docente sobre las jóvenes lesbianas en las escuelas portuguesas. Para ello, llevamos a cabo entrevistas semi-estructuradas con 24 docentes portugueses de las escuelas intermedias y secundarias. Desde el análisis de las entrevistas, se identificaron cuatro temas principales: la polarización de género, la invisibilidad de las lesbianas, la homofobia y ciertas medidas para luchar contra la homofobia. Con base en los discursos hemos llegado a la conclusión de que quienes educan cuentan con pocos conocimientos acerca de la sexualidad de las mujeres lesbianas. A pesar de los avances legislativos en relación con los derechos de las personas Lesbianas, Gays, Bisexuales y Transgénero en Portugal, el cuerpo docente no está preparado para hacer frente a esta cuestión, tanto dentro como fuera de la escuela. Aunado a lo anterior, esta investigación incluye una serie de recomendaciones para luchar contra la homofobia en el contexto de las escuela portuguesas. Este estudio contribuirá a una mejor comprensión de los discursos y prácticas hacia las jóvenes lesbianas en el contexto de la escuela, así como a la promoción de actitudes no discriminatorias en los centros educativos de Portugal.*

Palabras clave: DISCRIMINACIÓN, LESBIANAS, ESCUELA, CIUDADANÍA, PORTUGAL

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1.   Introduction[6]

In Portugal, legislative measures have been taken to recognize new rights to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People (LGBT), namely the inclusion of sexual orientation in the article 13 of the Constitution of the Portuguese Republic (Principle of Equality) (Canotilho & Moreira, 2011); the adoption of the same-sex marriage law on 31st May 2010 (Law N.º 9/2010) – although the article 3 of the same-sex marriage law forbids the adoption of children by same-sex couples–; and the adoption of a gender identity law (Law N.º 7/2011, 15th March) that establishes procedures for change of name and sex in the civil register.

However, despite these legislative measures, LGBT people still face prejudice and exclusion in different contexts and moments of their lives (Nogueira & Oliveira, 2010).

A considerable amount of research has shown that heterosexist[7] and androcentric[8] discourses and practices of violence in workplace, school and other social institutions are significantly correlated with LGBT people's suffering, depression and suicide (Oliveira, Pereira, Costa & Nogueira, 2010; Ragins, Singh & Cornwell, 2007; Smith & Ingram, 2004).

Despite the recognition that LGBT people are still discriminated in certain contexts – namely in the school context– and the growing importance of research on sexual citizenship and LGBT issues in the Portuguese academia (Almeida, 2006, 2010; Carneiro & Menezes, 2004; Costa, Nogueira & López, 2009; Costa, Pereira, Oliveira & Nogueira, 2010; Nogueira & Oliveira, 2010; Oliveira, 2010; Rodrigues, Oliveira & Nogueira, 2010; Santos, 2005), lesbian women seem still invisible in all these contexts (Cascais, 2004; Oliveira, Pena & Nogueira, 2011).

Heterosexism and androcentrism are rooted in the belief that some sexual and gender manifestations are "normal" and acceptable, while others are "deviant" and reprehensible (Zavalkoff, 2002). As Butler has shown (1993), heterosexism and androcentrism are both integrant parts of the hegemonic heterosexuality, that is, a normative system that affects not only behaviors, but also the process of constitution of the individuals.

In this regard, it will be crucial to explore some studies performed in several countries that demonstrated how harmful the school environment and its characteristics might be to

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[6] This study is part of the research project: Sexual Citizenship of Lesbians Women in Portugal. Experiences of Discrimination and Possibilities of Change, funded by the Foundation for Science and Technology and the Commission for Citizenship and Gender Equality.

[7] Heterosexism considers heterosexuality as the only possible discourse, neglecting other possibilities of sexuality. Furthermore, heterosexism may be explained by the equation "heterosexual experience = human experience", which makes all other forms of human sexual expression as pathological, deviant and invisible (Yep, 2002).

[8] Androcentrism recognizes the masculine norm as the true and principal possibility of existence, relegating women to an inferior status (Nogueira, 2001; Amâncio & Oliveira, 2006).

LGBT young people. Thus, research on LGBT young people in the school context has demonstrated that the environment in middle and secondary schools is generally non-supportive and unsafe for many of these young people. LGBT young people report experiences of harassment, discrimination and other negative happenings in school, often related to their non-normative sexual orientation and gender identity (Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009).

Negative experiences in the school context include physical and verbal violence (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Remafedi, 1987), sexual violence (Bochenek & Brown, 2001; Fineran, 2001), social exclusion and isolation (Ueno, 2005), and other interpersonal problems with their peers (Pearson, Muller & Wilkinson, 2007; Russell, Seif & Truong, 2001).

These experiences have a negative impact on several levels: increase of the absenteeism due to feelings of discomfort and insecurity, growing problems with discipline and lower levels of school engagement and academic success (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Murdock & Bolch 2005; Russell et al., 2006). Furthermore, the victimization in school has been related with an increase of health risk behaviors among LGBT adolescents, as drug abuse, suicide intention and harmful psychological effects (Bontempo & D'Augelli 2002; Espelage, Aragon, Birkett & Koenig, 2008).

Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of heterosexism in schools, as in all society, LGBT youth is not a uniform group. Their experiences may vary according to their individual characteristics, localization, characteristics of their schools and communities (Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009).

Some studies have analyzed the differences between schools regarding their size, number of students, socioeconomic level of the students, ethnical diversity and the development of the area where the school is located, as factors of protection or risk for LBGT students (Goodenow, Szalacha & Westheimer, 2006; Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009; Preston, D'Augelli, Kassab & Starks, 2007; Szalacha, 2003). The study developed by Szalacha (2003) has shown that schools with a larger number of students presented a more tolerant school environment to LGBT young people, than other types of schools. Other studies have shown that LGBT young people who attended larger schools, in urban areas, with young people from poorer social classes and with more students from ethnic "minorities", have had lower levels of victimization and less absenteeism for safety reasons, than the ones from sexual

"minorities" who attended small schools, with no students from different social classes and from different ethnic groups (Goodenow et al., 2006; Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009).

Moreover, according to the study performed by Kosciw and Diaz (2006), in the USA, the characteristics of a larger community can affect LGBT people's experiences at school. For example, one found differences between rural, urban and suburban communities. LGBT young people used to experience more violence related with sexual orientation and gender identity in rural communities, than in urban or suburban areas (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). One of the explanations for that result is that an urban school, which has more diversity, can offer the students a wide range of social "niches", providing them with more opportunities of social belonging (Goodenow et al., 2006). Another explanation is the lack of diversity in many rural communities and a bigger concentration of individuals with "conservative" values towards sexuality and gender roles, as well as religious beliefs that condemn and stigmatize homosexuality and gender non-conformity (Preston et al., 2007; Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009).

Summarizing, schools are spaces of multiple relationships and affections, which depend on their own characteristics, their type of students, as well as on the characteristics of the community where they are located. All these factors together may result either in a protective environment or in a threatening one, for LGBT youth.

2. Practices of professional educators in the school context

Studies have revealed that professional educators exhibit homophobic attitudes (Butler & Byrne, 1992; Clark, 2010; Fontaine 1998a; Fontaine, 1998b; Sears, 1992) and influence attitudes and behaviors of the other students (Fontaine, 1998a; Sears, 1992), who see them as role models or mentors. However, despite this homophobic scenery in schools has already been proved in literature, most of the schools do not approach the homosexuality theme, neither the prejudice of the teachers in their classrooms (Clark, 2010; Fontaine, 1998b).

Most teachers don't feel prepared to deal with this topic and only a few received some type of additional training on homosexuality in particular (Clark, 2010; Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004; Fontaine, 1998b; Sears, 1992), as well as on sexualities, identities and gender issues in general.

Literature indicates that people with more traditional attitudes towards gender roles are more likely to hold more negative attitudes towards homosexual people (Herek, 1991), and

negative attitudes towards homosexuality are related with the lack of information about it and less contact with homosexual people (Klamen, Grossman & Kopacz, 1999).

Seeing the heterosexist and homophobic environment in schools and considering the lack of specific training for the teachers on sexuality and on school environment for LGBT youth, it is crucial to create education policies which include training for the teachers on this subject (Clark, 2010; Riggs, Rosenthal, & Smith-Bonahue, 2010). The training on diversity and social justice must include an explicit work against the "violence of gender norms" (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001; Robinson, 2005), as well as instill responsibilities into the teachers, not only to stop heterosexist and homophobic discourses, but also to encourage them to work with their students in order to deconstruct gender and sexual stereotypes (Clark, 2010), which are passed down through generations, recognizing that the teachers and the school community also have responsibility to educate for diversity and for non-discrimination.

3.   Young Lesbians in the School Context

LGBT issues have been addressed from a neutral and universalist point of view by Richardson (2000) as if sexual citizenship had to be treated as a static concept, regardless of the LGBT people's lives. An approach that treats LGBT equally nullifies the specific experiences of these people, particularly of lesbian women, and it may be considered as retrogression to a subtle policy of male domination (Louro, 1997; Phelan, 1994).

Some researchers have proposed an alternative model to the universality of LGBT sexuality issues, suggesting a diversity of rights paradigm (Cooper, 1993; Rosenbloom, 1996), based on the idea that lesbian women have specific experiences of discrimination, and so it is crucial to promote campaigns equally specific for lesbian women's rights (Robson, 1992).

In the debate on women's rights, there were also tensions between those who defended the universalist perspective and those who promoted the model of differentiated sexual citizenship (Amâncio & Oliveira, 2006). Feminist studies have given visibility to women as an oppressed group, that needed visibility and reflection (Amâncio & Oliveira, 2006; Louro, 1997; Nogueira, 2001), but even in feminist studies lesbian women were rarely recognized as science subjects (Kitzinger, 1996).

One of the most remarkable findings regarding lesbian women's recognition has been their invisibility in the public sphere. Several authors identified the phenomenon of lesbian women's invisibility in several citizenship contexts (Fassinger, 1995; Kendall, 1996; Saari,

2001), and this invisibility is clearly related with heterosexism, contributing to the absence of lesbians in the public sphere (Nogueira & Oliveira, 2010), namely, in school.

The few studies which analyzed the different experiences of discrimination between lesbians and gay men in the school context referred that the homophobic violence is more visibly directed against gay and bisexual males (Yep, 2002) than against lesbians and bisexual females (D'Augelli, Pilkington & Hershberger, 2002; Kosciw & Diaz 2006; Poteat & Espelage 2007). Nevertheless, it is crucial to analyze these data prudently, to not contribute, once again, to the lesbian's invisibility as a specific experience of discrimination. One should rather try to understand these data, and question if they can, once again, be related to sexism and heterosexism, which attribute greater importance to the masculinity and heterosexuality issues.

Before the absence of studies on sexual citizenship of lesbian women in the school context, it will be crucial to promote a greater discussion and debate around the lesbian theme. One should not forget the weight of sexism and homophobia that are perpetuated in schools and promote the invisibility of these women; and should try to understand how the weight of homosexuality and the category "woman" influence the school environment itself.

In this study, we analyzed teachers' discourses on the existence of discrimination of young lesbians in the school context. In particular, we were interested in knowing the teachers' discourses on gender, the lesbian invisibility and the existence of homophobia in schools, as well as the measures proposed by them to eradicate violence and homophobia in the school context. Thus, this study aims to give visibility to the way in which schools view citizenship of young lesbian women, understanding the extent to which educational contexts may be discriminatory and, consequently, promote social exclusion.

4.   Method

The aim of this section is to describe and to explain the procedures that were adopted towards the method designed for the present research, to briefly present the instruments, to characterize the participants and to describe the process of collection, analysis and interpretation of the results.

Considering a Social Constructionist Paradigm, according to which the reality is an individual and social co-construction, the qualitative methodology was essential for the development of this investigation, since it would be the only option to collect and analyze

meanings, discourses and the constructions of the reality of the participants – in this case, regarding their experiences with lesbian students in the school context.

4.1 Participants

In this study, we carried out interviews with 20 women and 4 men, out of 24 participants, aged between 31 and 58 (Mean = 41 and Standard Deviation = 7,71). All the participants, except one, are currently teaching in middle and secondary schools. With regards to academic qualifications, the group is composed by 21 graduates, 3 of them postgraduate, and 3 with a Master's degree.

Regarding the civil status, 14 participants are married, 8 are single and 2 are divorced. Fifteen of them have got children and 9 haven't got. Finally, regarding the religious affiliation most of the interviewees mentioned being catholic (19 participants), one participant declared himself as an atheist and 4 of them did not identify themselves with any religion.

4.2 Instruments

To perform this research, each researcher used as data collection instrument a semi-structured interview script, which follows a semi-structured orientation so that each interviewer might ask the participants more flexible questions.

The interview script was divided into 3 essential parts: the first part was about the informed consent, where the participant (teacher) read the conditions of participation in the study; the second part corresponded to the collection of the participants biographical data; and, finally, the third part of the script consisted of the interview itself (i.e., the semi-structured questions that allowed to give an answer to this research).

The third part is essentially comprised by two types of question: general or specific of the school context. Firstly, with more general questions, the participant was questioned about information such as: "Do you know any lesbian woman? Do you think that a lesbian woman lives her sexuality equally in any Portuguese region? If not, in which region is it more difficult to be a lesbian? And in which environment? Do you think lesbians are discriminated in society in general? What could be done to reduce discrimination against lesbians?". The second type of question, regarding the school context, included questions such as: "What do you think about the school environment towards a young lesbian's life? What do you think about the lesbians' discrimination in the educational system? Has any female student in school told you that she was a lesbian? What reactions? Do parents and the school stand-up for these young

lesbians? Who is there or should be there for them? Should there be any measures to fight homophobia in schools? Which ones?".

Once again, the only purpose of the questions was to provide a general orientation to the interview. They followed a pattern but each researcher always made them more flexible according to the interviewee.

4.3   Procedure

The sample process had as base the theoretical sample. This means that the number of inquired participants is related with the theoretical needs and with the saturation of the answers (theoretical saturation), and not with the statistical and quantitative analysis of the data.

The request of the interviews was made through a direct contact with the participants by email or by telephone. It is important to highlight that during the process of selection, one used the snowball technique, i.e., the contribution of some participants by suggesting other possible candidates to be part of the study.

The interviews were held with teachers from several middle and secondary schools in several localities of Continental Portugal and Azores. The interviews were held in quiet places to enable its adequate audio recording and had an average duration of 30 minutes. After a complete transcription of each interview, it was made a qualitative analysis in the data analysis software NVivo8, a computer program which helped the researchers in the qualitative data analysis, allowing them to store, organize, categorize and manage the data.

4.4   Assumptions of the Data Analysis

In order to analyze the data of the study, the researcher opted by the thematic analysis of the interviews. The thematic analysis may be considered a qualitative method whose aim is to identify, analyze and describe patterns within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The current data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations, namely the six steps that a thematic analysis must include: i) become familiar with the data; ii) generate initial codes; iii) search for the themes; iv) review the themes; v) define and name the themes; vi) produce the report. From this structure it was possible to obtain the following results.

5.   Analysis and Discussion of the Results

As previously mentioned, the analysis of the interviews was based on the thematic analysis. At the end of the analysis it was possible to get 4 main topics that will be analyzed in detail.

5.1   Gender polarization

Participants produced discourses based on a dimension of gender polarization, i.e., discourses that establish and reiterate traditional gender roles and norms. Gays and lesbians were perceived as people that reverse social roles assigned to men and women. According to participants' discourses, homosexual men behave and define themselves according to traditional female roles, whereas lesbian women behave themselves following male gender roles.

Teachers recognize people as homosexual when they do not behave according to the "gender role assigned to their sex", explaining the heterosexism patent in the participants' discourses and the difficulty, or impossibility, that they have to think about sexuality as independent of sexual identity and vice-versa. Besides having mentioned the heterosexist discourses, the presence of sexist social constructions was also evident in teachers' discourses sexist social constructions, e.g., they referred to the existence of different social roles for men and women, reinforcing gender polarization.

"I can already see the difference, by the kind of the games or the clothes they choose, children who are more aggressive, not as feminine as they should be, or boys that walk to the board swaying their hips and all the class starts laughing." (TM-40F-A)

"And I can also notice it here in Azores, that the roles "man/woman" are still deeply rooted. The woman's role, the man's role. And then that is also going to influence sexuality." (AR-36F-A)

Gender polarization influences the way of recognizing, respecting and "accepting" "non-heteronormative sexualities". Consequently, participants do not conceive the sexes, the genders and the sexualities as independent and with an equal value. The question of homosexuality will continue to be seen as something non-normative and, consequently, not "acceptable".

5.2 Lesbian Invisibility

Throughout the teachers' discourses, some references were made to a certain lesbian invisibility in the school context. Our interest was to know the participants' discourses on the lesbian invisibility and its (in)direct consequences. This invisibility includes explanations, presented by the interviewees, for their notions of existence or non-existence of lesbian women in society, or for their level of knowledge in this area. Regarding this topic, most of the individuals, in one way or the other, demonstrated that the visibility of the lesbian population is much reduced.

"Maybe because I don't attend the same places they do or, I do but I just don't notice them. But I think it's normal that I don't notice them, because sexual orientation is not exactly written on people's faces."(AR-45F-C)

"(…) maybe because lesbian women hide themselves as a couple of friends, for example, if we see two girls holding hands or with one's arm above the other's, unless they kiss each other on the lips or show a more intimate gesture, they are considered as friends."(SC-33F-C)

The lesbian invisibility is a constant in the participants' discourses. Teachers report that they have little knowledge about the existence of lesbian women in their life contexts, including school, and that the affective behavior of a lesbian relationship may be understood as that relation of friendship. This situation would not be perceived similarly if it involved a relationship between gay men.

There were some references which demonstrated that lesbian women are starting to become more visible in society, especially due to the adoption of the same-sex marriage law. Nevertheless, those references were made using gay men as an example. Sexuality of (lesbian) women is not visible or recognized.

"(…) since the gay marriage has been approved, it's effectively much more visible in the streets people assuming their homosexuality through love gestures (…) I think people feel more protected and that allows them to expose themselves (…)it doesn't mean that there are more or less [homosexual] people, maybe I'm just more aware of this, maybe I'm more alert, maybe they are more comfortable and so, they let things be more visible." (AF-49F-C)

The adoption of the same-sex marriage law had some positive repercussions on the visibility of homosexual relationships, as it is mentioned by some of the participants.

However, another aspect has become important through the analysis of the interviews. In several situations, towards the lack of knowledge of lesbian women and their invisibility in society, they chose to talk about the male homosexual context, establishing a parallel between gay men and lesbians. This means that, despite the reduced visibility that lesbian women have to many of these people, a lot of the participants had knowledge and information about male homosexuality.

It is here evident, once again, how the existence of lesbian women is silenced and seen as the feminine version of the masculine homosexuality. It alerts to the need of recognizing female homosexuality as it is: recognize it as something with its own existence, with its specificities, and not just as a variant of a masculine phenomenon where, once again, women are observed through male lens. In schools, specifically, the non-recognition of the existence of lesbian students and the consequent non-recognition of their needs leave these female students more vulnerable to homophobia and its consequences.

5.3   Homophobia

One of the central aspects in the comprehension of these interviews is the discourse that teachers have on the existence of discrimination or homophobia in the school context.

Most of teachers considered the school context as a space of discrimination and homophobia. Discrimination is perpetrated by different people.

"It starts by the school curriculum itself, what they call Sexual Education, which is not Sexual Education, but sex classes. The sniggers and the subjects which are all directed at heterosexuality. That…in the school, since the beginning." (CO-58M-C)

One of the reasons of discrimination in the educational context is the school curriculum, namely the Sexual Education ones. If the teachers aren't trained and aren't sensitive towards sexuality and diversity issues, it won't be easy for them to promote a supportive environment where students can effectively learn. It is not enough to implement the curriculum about diversities in schools; firstly, it is important to provide schools with the necessary tools for the success of the students and of the school community.

Within the school context, students were considered the main responsible ones for discrimination or homophobia, towards their colleagues.

"(…) there were already some sniggers in the classroom, that our teachers don't understand very well, but there's always someone who says 'teacher, so-and-so were kissing and hugging behind the gym"(…). You know that young people are very cruel to each other's and, sometimes, when there are differences, it's very hard. If they are different, they are quickly labeled." (MF-50F-C)

Nonetheless, the teachers described their own professional class as discriminatory towards these students.

"(…) some colleagues, as I said, might comment that they don't understand, that they think that it's not normal, that it's unnatural." (AR-36F-A)

"(…) one of them actually said that she really didn't understand, that it was weird, how could two women like each other (…)" (IA-35F-A)

At last, the support staff members were also described as perpetuators of discrimination against LGBT people within the school environment.

"(…) one member of the school staff took two girls to the Head of school because they were holding hands in the hall, and assumed themselves as lesbians(…)" (CO-58M-C)

In this school context, described as homophobic, the students were identified as the main contributors to the perpetuation of homophobic discrimination. Teachers were also seen as discriminatory towards their students and colleagues. Equally, the support staff members were referred as perpetrators of discrimination in the school environment. These data corroborate the studies previously performed, regarding the increasing violence among peers in the school context, and yet the fact that the teachers, the administrators and all the school board personnel exhibit homophobic attitudes, which influence the students. Attitudes of the teachers and school board personnel exert influence on other students.

Although most of the individuals had assumed that the school is a discriminatory space, there were some people who presented an opposite position, demonstrating, for example, positive conducts adopted by the schools, towards lesbian students or teachers. However, the number of teachers who shared this point of view was substantially smaller than the number of those who admitted that the school is a homophobic context.

"In my school we have colleagues who are lesbians. And they are perfectly accepted. No one talks about their sexuality, but it's tacit. They are perfectly accepted." (TM-40F-A)

5.4 Measures against homophobia

In the previous theme, it has become evident that, according to the participants, homophobia and discrimination still exist in schools. Thus, it would be essential to analyze the measures that these teachers can or cannot propose in order to soften these situations. Among them, political measures and education courses on diversity, sexualities and gender issues are found.

The discourses of some participants showed that the main measure to fight homophobia and discrimination is the respect for diversity, in the broad sense of the word. More than informing about different sexual orientations, one should promote human rights as something of all and every single person.

"In first place, uphold the human rights, the respect for the others. That's what I tell the kids, that from violence to homophobia, everything passes by the lack of respect that one has for the other (…)" (AR-45F-C)

The vast majority of the teachers reported that inclusive education courses on diversity are the most effective way to end the discrimination and homophobia in schools.

"Always bring someone who can give information to the students and then discuss it with them in open sessions." (IC-35F-A)

"Firstly, it's necessary to start by the bases…it's necessary to demystify this, it's necessary to provide the youth with more information (...) that can be debated, talked, discussed (...). (MM-37F-A)

Definitely, few participants referred the political measures as a method to reduce discrimination.

"Maybe some political orientation. A law that could help, maybe." (FR-40M-A)

Teachers' discourses demonstrated a lack of training on sexual diversity issues for teachers, school staff personnel and society. In particular, most discourses showed that there

is a lack of education courses and resources to deal with the specific issues of lesbian students. Therefore, it is crucial to promote training on diversity, sexualities and gender in order to fight (hetero)sexist discourses and practices in the school context.

6. Conclusion

It is possible to verify the existence of sexist and heterosexist discourses and a dimension of gender polarization in the discourses of the interviewees. There is also some recognition of the lesbian invisibility in the school context and in society in general. They recognize the existence of homophobia in the social context in general and in the school in particular, and that homophobia is practiced by different actors in these contexts, including students, teachers and school support staff. The interviewees propose some measures to fight homophobia in society and in school, specifically political measures and training courses on diversity, gender issues and sexualities.

Through teachers' discourses, one could verify that the school, as society in general, practices the violence of denying the existence of lesbian women, marginalizing them in the social discourse. Schools also seem reluctant to include the theme of homosexuality in their agenda, perpetuating, thereby, the discrimination and the prejudice towards those who transgress heteronormativity, and losing the opportunity to promote the respect for non-normative sexual orientations in schools and in the social spectrum in general.

Thus, school is a place which, trying to hide the existence of a non-heteronormative reality, increases the social exclusion, becoming itself a potentially unsafe place for lesbian students. In this regard, it is fundamental to implement in schools a specific training on genders and sexualities for teachers, auxiliary staff, students and for all the school board personnel. A more critical view on the role of school could allow to rethink the current educational practices, promoting greater gender equity, social inclusion, and the constitution of a citizenship for all, fighting sexism and homophobia, among other forms of oppression (Junqueira, 2007). It is important to promote debate on the way in which young lesbian women live their sexuality, so that they are not invisible when one talks about the school environment and violence in schools.

It is indispensable to question, not only what is taught, but how it is taught and how students understand it. It is also crucial that the community and the school professionals are attentive to homophobic language and practices inside and outside the schools. Teachers must understand that their students may identify themselves as LGBT and, in no way, their

right of having access to a safe and supportive learning environment can be taken, just like that of heterosexual peers (Michaelson, 2008) and all other students, independently of their sex, social class, political ideology, ethnicity, religious affiliation, or socio-economic condition.

More research works in this area would help to understand the possible variety of perceptions that teachers have regarding different types of homophobic expressions, and in what circumstances do the teachers intervene, or not, when they hear or watch them. It would also be important that the future studies examined how these teachers' intervention, or the lack of it, affects the school environment for the LGBT youth (Kosciw, Greytak & Diaz, 2009), especially, for the young lesbians.

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