

Diversity in School: A Brazilian educational policy against homophobia Sergio Carrara,  
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**[Not the final version]**

*Abstract*

*Diversity in School* is a Brazilian initiative that seeks to increase understanding, recognition, respect, and value social and cultural differences through offering an e-learning course on gender, sexuality, and ethnic relations for teachers and school administrators in the public school system. The course and its objectives aim to enable staff and students in schools to realize their full potential through the promotion of a culture of inclusion. The course is the result of a partnership between the Brazilian government (Secretariat for Policies on Women's Affairs, Secretariat for the Promotion of Policies on Racial Equality, and the Ministry of Education), the British Council and the Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights (CLAM) from the State University of Rio de Janeiro. CLAM has developed the content and the methodology. Since 2008, 40,000 teachers have been trained all over the country. This paper highlights the importance of improving understanding of gender, sexual, ethnic and racial diversity in order to create a positive learning environment inside of schools.

Key words: Sexuality; Education; LGBT; E-learning; Brazil

*Introduction*

Across the globe, people at every socioeconomic level experience different forms of discrimination and exclusion as a result of having practices, identities or

physical characteristics that are deemed different from those that dominate societal norms. Very often, such prejudice is related to a person's gender, race, ethnicity and/or sexuality (UNESCO, 2012). However, it is increasingly recognized that markers of gender, race and sexuality are social constructions around which certain societal values and expectations are organized. Therefore there is no universal agreement or 'truth' regarding what it means to be 'normal' or to be 'different' – rather, such notions result from norms and behaviors that differ from place to place (Rohden & Carrara, 2008).

In many countries, academic debate, policy making and rights-based activism tend to treat gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race as separate and distinct issues. Nonetheless, there is an increasing recognition of how these issues have evolved over time, and also the manner in which they intersect with each other as Mason (2002) points out. One, perhaps banal, example is as follows: if in school a male student manifests signs of being gay, it is likely that someone will call him 'girly' or 'sissy'. However, few people ask why being called a woman should be offensive, or in what sense femininity is a negative attribute. Such an example demonstrates how misogyny and homophobia reinforce one another as discrimination towards women or femininity is fostered via discrimination toward those who are attracted to people of the same sex (Kimmel, 2005). Similarly, racist discourse frequently uses characteristics attributed to women to describe minority ethnic groups. In such descriptions, individuals and indeed whole communities are seen as more impressionable, short-sighted, out of control, impulsive, deemed 'closer to nature' and in need of more tutelage (Haraway, 1989).

Such discourse, whether it is about sexuality, gender or race, can result in people being treated as dependent requiring protection and being unable to fully realize their rights as human beings and as citizens. In the case of Brazil, a country considered highly diverse with a presence of Afro-descendent, white and indigenous races – more

than 50% of the population identified themselves as black in 2010 census – the government’s participation in addressing gender, sexuality, ethnicity and race in public schools recognizes the importance of this dialogue on the federal level and its need for streamlining into the local, institutional level.

### *The Brazilian Social Context*

Discrimination and homophobic violence in schools are critical problems for LGBT youth in Brazil as well as greater Latin America. The definition of homophobia, as explained by Borrillo (2010), includes prejudice and discrimination that affect lesbian, gay, bisexuals, and transsexuals. Although many teachers recognize the existence of discrimination within and beyond school walls, some believe that it is better to remain silent, for fear that speaking up may result in reprisal and ultimately, amplify and make the situation worse (Nardi & Quartiero, 2012; Reprolatina, 2011).

In a national survey conducted in 2009 (N = 2014), 26% of respondents admitted to having prejudices against LGBT people. In a subsample of LGBT people (N = 413), 53% of respondents admitted that they had been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation and/or gender identity at some point in their lives. The school appears as the most frequent sites of discrimination with an average of 27% experiencing acts of discrimination or exclusion (Venturi & Bokany, 2011).

In 2010, a Brazilian NGO carried out a qualitative study on the topic of homophobic violence in public schools, held in 11 cities from all regions of the country, including school managers, administrative staff, teachers and students as participants. The findings showed the high degree of discrimination, including episodes of verbal, psychological and physical violence perpetrated against LGBT students and classmates. The study also highlights the lack of preparation of teachers and staff to deal with this

issue, pointing to the need to invest in training on gender, sexual diversity and homophobia for education professionals (Reprolatina, 2011).

The Brazilian federal government has been designing and implementing increasingly comprehensive public policies for the country's LGBT population. Initiated by previous administrations within the framework of HIV/AIDS prevention, state recognition and promotion of LGBT rights now extend across different ministries and secretariats, and have even been essential for the movement's organization and mobilization. A fundamental achievement in this process was the creation of "Brazil without Homophobia Program to Combat Violence and Discrimination Against LGBT and Promotion of Homosexual Citizenship", launched by the Federal Government in May 2004 (Carrara, 2012). The Brazil without Homophobia is a program that seeks to cover a wide range of policy areas including health, education, labor, justice and public security. This program would be run by the National Coordination for LGBT Rights, located at the Secretary for Human Rights, and its guidelines were defined in 2008 by the National Plan for LGBT Citizenship and were approved at the First Conference on LGBT Policies, which included a number of definitions in the area of education. During the first years of the program, a series of conferences were sponsored throughout the country to create dialogue about homophobia within the Brazilian mainstream and to coordinate engagement between State and civil society actors. One of the program's most significant results was the First National Conference for Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transvestites and Transsexuals, held in Brasília in June 2008, which was attended by President Lula. Based on the conclusions of the conference, an Inter-Ministerial Technical Commission organized the National Plan for the Promotion of LGBT Citizenship and Human Rights. The Plan was published and released in 2009 by the federal government with actions to be developed by various ministries. The Plan's

main objectives include “fighting stigma and discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity” and implementing “public policies that contemplate actions to combat homophobia and promote citizenship and human rights” (Carrara, 2012).

Not without resistance from conservative social forces, some of the guidelines in the program and plan have been implemented by various ministries, including Ministry of Education, the Secretariat for Women’s Affairs, and the Secretariat for Racial Equality. The training for teachers on issues related to “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” is one of the main actions carried out by education sector. It is within these policy shifts and greater social landscape the *Diversity in School* initiative is taking place.

In light of these nationwide policies approved at the federal level and the need to provide capacity building for teachers and school administrators addressing these issues with students, the Brazilian government launched in 2006 an e-learning course for teachers and school administrators: the *Diversity in School* initiative. The course is designed to address the intersection of sexism, racism and homophobia in the school environment – ultimately reaching greater Brazilian society. For the scope of this paper, we will be addressing the initiative’s focus on sexuality issues within the course framework. To achieve this goal, we will first provide a more comprehensive understanding of what is generally understood as sex education, focusing on the perspective of sexuality education approach, as we elaborate below.

#### *Sex education or sexuality education?*

For this reason, it is important to clarify the differences between “sexuality education” and the much more traditional idea of “sex or sexual education.” Sexuality is a very complex and historically specific concept (Foucault, 1990) and it is crucial to

discuss and clarify its possible meanings in different social and cultural contexts. From our perspective, sexuality education should be distinguished from sex or sexual education. Both issues are important, they are linked to each other in many different and intimate ways and they are both difficult to improve in Brazil as they are elsewhere. But they are not the same.

In Brazil the idea of a sex education is not a new one. In 1928 was when the first bill proposing mandatory sexual education in public schools (mainly for boys, it should be noted) was presented to Congress (Carrara, 1996). While the bill did not pass, since then different political actors have tried to find a place for sexual education in Brazilian schools. It is important to note that varying groups of licensed professionals (physicians, psychologists and sexologists) supported sex education in order to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and also to prevent what was called up until very recently, “sexual abnormalities”, referring to homosexuality.

Until the Second World War the supporters of sexual education in Brazilian public schools had two main concerns. Their first concern was with improving the race and health of the Brazilian population, considered at the time a society particularly “degenerate”. Some representatives of the Brazilian intellectual elite defended the idea that to be a “healthy and developed” nation, Brazil needed to be white (Caucasian). Brazilian miscegenation was seen as a danger to the national societal project (Stepan, 1996, Seyferth, 2002).

Their second concern was one of morality. They wanted to prevent “sexual perversion”, as they used to call all sexual practices different from those performed by a man and a woman in order to reproduce. There was no space for dialogue about the importance of sexual pleasure without procreative purposes. Sexual pleasure was considered neither a relevant aspect of individual well-being nor, what is most crucial, a

fundamental way to build social ties or social relationships. That is to say, sex or sexual pleasure had little value beyond biological reproduction.

This formal way of framing sexual education was not embraced by conservative groups, principally Brazilian religious leaders. Though Brazil has a multitude of different religions, the Catholic Church maintains great political power. And in the Catholic Church traditional sex education is seen exclusively as a task for parents and priests. It is a private matter that addresses a kind of “necessary evil” (sex and sexual pleasure), only acceptable inside the institution of marriage as a way to build a Christian family. As a result, today Brazil’s public schools system continues to lack sex education curriculums and policies.

While the Catholic Church holds a similar stance as decades past on “sexual perversion”, the medical community has evolved considerably in the second half of the century (Green, 2001). At the beginning of the nineteenth-century prison sentences for homosexuality ended in Brazil, however homosexuality continued to be considered a mental disease. In 1985, after pressure from the young LGBT movement, homosexuality was erased from the roll of diseases acknowledged by the Brazilian Medical Association. And in 1999, the Federal Council on Psychology stated that no professional could “favor pathological diagnoses of any homoerotic behavior or practice” confirming that Brazilian psychologists “shall not adopt coercive action to direct patients to non-required treatments,” defining expressly that “they shall not collaborate with events and services that propose treatment for and cure of homosexuality” (Resolution 1/99).

After the AIDS epidemic arrived to Brazil and took its first victims in the early 1980s, calls for the need of a biologically oriented sex education curriculum in public schools multiplied. The divide between conservatives (those who believe in abstinence

first and no sex before marriage) and liberals (those who believe in safe sex in order to prevent risk of disease or pregnancy) grew wider with time. Ultimately, the liberal position prevailed and the general attitude which guides government policies in regards to sexuality is centered on a general strategy of “harm reduction”. Meaning, it is not expected that people radically change their sexual practices, abstaining from sex before marriage; nor is homosexuality or prostitution, among free and responsible adults, to be morally condemned. The government supports media campaigns related to HIV/AIDS prevention and shows increasing commitment to the human rights of gays, lesbians, transgender and sex workers. One main product of these campaigns is to encourage people to use condoms when having sexual intercourse as an essential measure to avoid infection (Vianna, Carrara & Lacerda, 2007).

As far as sex education is concerned, during the late 1970s and 80s some information was given to high school students during biology class. In 1999, still within the context of the fight against AIDS, the Brazilian Ministry of Education established through its National Guidelines for Public School Curriculum that sexuality should be considered crosscutting content, that is to say: sexuality should be discussed and addressed in different disciplines and not only in biology class. This was an important transition from sex education based on information about the body (physiology, anatomy or diseases) to the direction of sexuality education. Sexuality education is not seen only as a biological concern, but also seen through a social and political lens involving pleasures, identities, power, discrimination and activism intersecting with other social markers of difference like race/ethnicity, social class and age (Carrara et al, 2011). *Diversity in School* course is based on sexuality education approach.

*Diversity in School: a Brazilian experience*

The movement for sexuality education supported by the federal government and public school system continues to be streamlined into curriculums. The general idea of the recent education policies is that diversity (of gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and race) is not only to be “tolerated” in public schools but that they must be welcomed as a method to build a “culture of human rights and citizenship” as defined by the Ministry of Education (Brasil, 2007). Through this scope, The Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights (CLAM) at the State University of Rio de Janeiro’s Institute of Social Medicine (IMS/UERJ) created a comprehensive initiative called “Diversity in School”. The initiative seeks to promote a non-sexist, non-racist, non-homophobic, cross-cutting approach in public institutions of education in accordance with national and international legal frameworks including but not limited to National Policies for Promotion of Racial Equality, Brazil without Homophobia Program and National Plan for Women’s Policies, CEDAW, Beijing Declaration and Durban Declaration.

*Diversity in School* offers an e-learning course on gender, sexuality and race relations for education professionals. The course is a result of a partnership between the Brazilian Government’s Secretariat for Women’s Policies (SPM), the Secretariat for the Promotion of Policies on Racial Equality, the Ministry of Education, the British Council and the Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights at the State University of Rio de Janeiro (CLAM).

*Diversity in School* was successfully piloted by CLAM in six cities in Brazil in 2006, involving 1,200 public school teachers as students. Those cities represented the Brazilian diversity: a city with a high level of black population in the Northeast; another one with a majority of indigenous people in the Middle West; a city from the Amazon region; a rural and conservative city from the South; and two urban cities from the

Southeast region with high levels of violence and social inequalities. Since the initial launching, the course's content has been revised and expanded in order to make the program accessible through a distance learning platform throughout all of Brazil. The course aims to promote a culture of inclusion for public schools' staff and students in an effort to carry out further reaching effects in Brazilian society. The course and its content offer a critical reflection for education professionals on issues of gender, sexuality, sexual orientation and ethnic/racial relations from a social, cultural, historical, educational and political perspective (Carrara et al, 2011)

According to Rohden & Carrara (2008), the e-course is based on the following basic principles:

1. gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnic differences must be respected and valued and cannot be used as a criterion for exclusion;
2. the importance of fostering periods of reflection in relation to the processes of naturalization and biologization between men and women and prevent turning differences into inequalities;
3. discrimination based on race/ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity are present in students' daily lives and therefore merit a transformative approach from teachers;
4. the issue of sexual orientation is an open discussion involving delicate moral topics and the course doesn't aim to reveal the 'truth;'
5. anti-discriminatory laws are not enough to prevent violence and intolerance toward gender, race and sexual orientation. Therefore actions in schools can work to transform more equitable social norms and practices between students;

The goal of these principles is to foster public school teachers understanding about the ethical implications of each topic and allow them to form their own opinion.

Schools serve as a strategic space for social and political transformation, thus fulfilling their mission to work with students by engaging them with tools to create their own opinions based on a critical reflection process.

The e-learning platform offers a teaching modality that reaches a larger number of professionals in less time, strengthening the multiplier effect. The course is offered by public universities all over the country, including areas in both urban and rural locations. The universities seek to engage educators from kindergarten to high school, highlighting the importance of those themes to the everyday life in school. All educators that finish the course are encouraged to implement actions in their own school about some specific topic related to the course.

The course consists of 200 hours of activities: 30 hours of face to face meetings and 170 hours of e-learning activities. Currently, 38 universities offered the course at least once and it is estimated that about 40,000 public school teachers have been trained from 2008 to 2012.

The curriculum is divided into five sections: (1) Diversity, (2) Gender, (3) Sexuality and Sexual Orientation; (4) Ethnic and Racial Relations and (5) an Evaluation. It starts with a discussion about the concepts of culture, cultural diversity, ethnocentrism, stereotypes, social prejudice and social discrimination. Within the area of sexuality, the course conveys the idea that sexuality is a complex experience that involves cultural, social, historical and political aspects, in addition to the biological and psychological dimension. Therefore, sexuality must not be understood as a mere matter of instincts, impulses, genes and hormones. The course recognizes the importance of physiology and anatomy as constitutive of what is possible in terms of sexuality. However the course recognizes the importance to consider not just biological predispositions alone can generate sexual behaviors, gender identity or sexual

orientations. They make up a set of potentialities that only acquire meaning through socialization and the learning of cultural conventions (Vance, 1991).

The course compares the expression ‘sexual orientation’ (presenting three basic variations: homosexuality, heterosexuality and bisexuality) to the still very widespread notion of ‘sexual option,’ understood in Brazil as a deliberate choice made autonomously by individuals, independent of their sexual choice. This opposition results from an understanding that our ways of thinking, feeling and acting are reflections of our social experiences and not individual voluntary acts. Sexual orientation does not mean, therefore, something that people choose or can change ‘according to their convenience’. Sexual identity refers to the manner people perceive themselves in terms of sexual orientation, and the way they make public (or not) this self-perception. For this reason, it also represents a political act, a manner of asserting someone’s belonging to a group considered ‘deviant’ and a critical way of taking a position in relation to social rules. The position adopted in the course is: LGBT people have as many possibilities and capabilities as heterosexuals in love, affection, relationships and the rearing of children.

The course works within the assumption that there is constant discourse on what is seen as morally correct, normal and legitimate in terms of sexuality and gender. There exists a sexual hierarchy in which heterosexuality is considered ‘healthy’ at the cost of stigmatization, degradation and even criminalization of sexual diversity. And because of this hierarchy, discriminatory attitudes, such as homophobia, arise. To overcome these challenges in the school environment, the importance of taking into account young people’s experiences and perceptions on themes such as sexual diversity, sexual and reproductive rights, pregnancy, desire, pleasure, affection, AIDS and drugs is emphasized. Education methodologies for youth regarding sexually transmitted

infections (STIs), AIDS and pregnancy must be employed recognizing the development and exchange of behavior, choice and desire does not depend only on rational decisions.

The course discusses how schools reflect racism, homophobia and sexism that are also characteristic of Brazilian society at large. An example of this is policies related to education that seek to minimize discriminatory attitudes by denying their existence as a reality and, thus further reinforcing them.

The course's pedagogical model is based on the students' autonomy, favoring the balance between individual and cooperative learning through interaction. The development and organization of activities are intended to make the teachers acquire a solid knowledge about the themes. The didactic texts and the course activities are available in a collaborative-learning environment, through which the students communicate and interact with their "class" and their online tutors, sharing their knowledge, their ideas while simultaneously understanding, listening and interacting with their "classmates". This space for exchange offers both students and online tutors a place for constructive, reflective dialogue for all involved about issues the course addresses.

### *Voices of change*

Between 2012-2014, CLAM conducted an evaluation study in 10 states from all five regions of the country, with public school teachers who participated in the course Diversity in School between 2008-2011. Eighteen focus groups were conducted with a total of 189 public school teachers, as well as online questionnaire 749 of them completed. The results of this evaluation showed that the course brought development two-fold on personal, professional and community levels. For the scope of this paper we will be focusing on the qualitative data.

For the project to deconstruct gender issues and sexuality, the course worked to provoke a reflection on social gender roles, hierarchies between men and women, and how schools contribute to the objectification of these issues. As a teacher from the south of Brazil said during a focus group “the course helped change my outlook on what is considered masculine and feminine. Before I thought housework was a woman’s responsibility. Now I think it should be shared”.

A kindergarten teacher working with students between 2-5 years old in the central region of the country explained the change of perspective in her pedagogy: “I am trying to bring the groups to play together. No more boy games vs. girls games. Everyone plays together. The course taught me this”. Although the course provides suggestions of activities to engage students in the classroom, some universities developed specific materials for the younger ages on those topics (Xavier Filha, 2014).

The topics of sexual diversity, homosexuality and gender identity have been considered “hot topics” and are still regarded by Brazilian public school teachers as a difficult subject to broach. There remains resistance from students, teachers and school administrators. In several geographic areas, conservatism heavily influences students’ and teachers’ perceptions. Religion, especially the Catholic and Evangelical faiths, is a strong barrier that prevents the discussion from happening in Brazilian schools. However, we see changes in attitudes toward LGBT students on the school premises after their participation in Diversity in School training. According to a teacher from the northern part of the country, “in general, teachers have no training in this area, which hinders the understanding of these issues....”Another teacher from the same region said that “the course takes the teacher out of your comfort zone. Makes you think. Makes you grow”. As well, a female teacher from the Amazon region said during a focus group:

“Since the beginning of the course, I noticed that its approach to gender and racial diversity issues were treated according to my own way of understanding them. However, the sexual diversity issue, especially homosexuality, was a problem for me. The course broadened my horizon and made me see things from a new perspective. Even being aware that there’s still in me a rooted prejudice against the full acceptance of homosexuality, I think that the course was a first impact, and I’m sure that from now on I’m going to deal with these themes in a different way, more cautiously. Now I know how to continue and make decisions in the classroom according to different needs.”

Teachers and administrators recognize that all issues presented at the course are part of their realities in the classroom on a daily basis. A teacher from Rio de Janeiro called attention to this aspect: “The themes approached in the course are present in the classroom. So, we must be prepared not to segregate those who are different. The course shows us the ways to do that.”

Some participants have mentioned being aware about the intersection between homophobia and racism for example. A teacher from Rio de Janeiro said: “I’m black and I work with black students. What I looked for in the course was how to improve their self-esteem. There are so many prejudices and, in the classroom, I realized there was a prejudice against homosexuals even stronger than that against blacks. This issue must still be worked out, and the course has helped me to see how I can manage this”.

There are several cases of schools and their students and administration mobilizing around issues of sexual orientation and gender identity after being trained by Diversity in School. This mobilization, albeit occasional and nascent, reveals a change of perspective on these issues and points to the need to continue to work with education professionals. Furthermore, it shows that community mobilization actions are also needed to work on these issues within the realm of public schools. In the Northeast, for example, teachers from a rural school developed a community campaign to raise awareness about violence against women and the national domestic violence law. In the Brazilian capital, Brasília, a group of teachers and students of a public school organized

an event to support a male teacher, openly gay, who was suffering homophobic bullying by a group of students.

### *Conclusion*

*Diversity in School* is offered by more than 38 public universities in the whole country, with support from the Brazilian Ministry of Education and with a platform for e-learning courses. More than 40,000 teachers from public school system have participated in the course and their feedback has been very positive with reports of change at both personal and professional levels. Since 2012, the curriculum is available in English at CLAM website (CLAM, 2012).

Since 2009, universities and research centers on gender, sexuality and ethnic/racial relations, from different regions of the country, have organized conferences, carrying out research and evaluation studies highlighting the importance of the debate around these issues from an education perspective.

However, more recently, we have seen an increasing resistance to sexuality education by conservative forces at different levels. Many teachers pointed out the religion as a barrier to develop activities about sexuality in the school setting. Most of the teachers do not have support from families and communities, mainly from evangelical groups, to bring discussions on gender and sexuality for the classroom. At the political level, conservative groups in the Congress seek to prevent the implementation of actions related to sexuality education policies in school, under the allegation of “loss of family values”. Therefore, educators and managers pointed out the need of a deeper discussion about secularity and secular school in ages of conservatism.

Despite of all resistances and difficulties, we do believe that reducing discrimination by improving ours and our students’ understanding of gender, sexual,

ethnic and racial diversity is crucial to the creation of a healthy learning environment inside public schools that catalyzing and ensuring a more educated, equitable, next generation of Brazilian citizens.

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#### **Acronyms**

**CLAM:** Created in 2002, the Latin American Center on Sexuality and Human Rights (CLAM) is a sexuality rights resource center at the Institute of Social Medicine, State University of Rio de Janeiro (IMS/UERJ). CLAM produces, organizes, and

disseminates knowledge about sexuality from a Human Rights perspective, to help fight gender inequality and discrimination against sexual minorities. See [www.clam.org.br](http://www.clam.org.br). To learn more about the e-learning course curricula see [www.clam.org.br/en/teachers-training/](http://www.clam.org.br/en/teachers-training/).