"The role of women: new views" in yarning circles in high school

“O papel das mulheres: novos olhares” em roda de conversas no ensino médio

ABSTRACT

A school is a place to promote critical thinking, to question power relations, analyse social issues and encourage differences, i.e., a place of being and thinking. In view of this, it was necessary to include the topic in the discussion of school tasks based on academic practices carried out by students, who are scholarship holders in the Institutional Scholarship for Teaching Initiation Program (PIBID). The activities were developed through Yarning Circles and focused on the topic “The Role of Women: New Views”, by two undergraduate history students and supervised by both the High School teacher, who is in charge of the groups where the activity was developed, and the university teacher. The main purpose of the activity was to bring issues of gender and feminism up for discussion due to the need to awaken the students’ critical thinking, thus aiming to break with paradigms in favour of a new view at the role of women in society.

Keywords: Gender; Diversity; School education.

RESUMO

A escola é o espaço da construção crítica, do questionamento das relações de poder, de análise das questões sociais e da produção de diferenças, de ser e de pensar. Diante disso, considerou-se necessário inserir o tema no debate das tarefas escolares a partir de práticas acadêmicas realizadas pelas estudantes/bolsistas do Programa Institucional de Bolsas de Iniciação à Docência - PIBID. As atividades foram realizadas na forma de “Roda de Conversas” sobre o tema “O papel das mulheres: Novos Olhares”, por duas estudantes do Curso de Licenciatura em História e supervisionadas pela professora regente das turmas de Ensino Médio e pela professora do curso universitário. O principal propósito da atividade foi o de trazer para o campo do debate, a discussão de gênero e

1 In a public school located in the city of Santa Maria, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.
INTRODUCTION

Schools, as a place of knowledge construction and critical thinking development, also promotes the formation of subjects, bodies and identities. It becomes a political and social reference for the recognition, respect, dialogue and familiarity with diversity. Therefore, schools are the place to promote critical thinking, to question power relations, analyse social issues and encourage differences, i.e., a place of being and thinking. However, this does not happen often, resulting in oppression, suffering, humiliation and maintenance of inequality.

Based on this scenario and considering Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), that establishes that "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”, schools may prepare students for citizenship and provide them with the necessary skills to seek and fully enjoy the benefits of such a universal human right. Schools have a direct influence on the formation of behaviours and attitudes that guide an individual in society. In this sense, the Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil (1988), in Article 3, Section 1, Subsection IV, has as its fundamental principle "to promote the well-being of all, without prejudice as to origin, race, sex, colour, age and any other forms of discrimination.” Brazilian laws and regulations concerning education, which is the National Education Guidelines and Framework Law (Lei de Diretrizes e Bases da Educação Nacional – LDB/1996), the National Curricular Guidelines for Basic Education: Diversity and Inclusion (Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais da Educação Básica: Diversidade e Inclusão) and the National Curriculum Guidelines for Secondary Education (Diretrizes Curriculares Nacionais para o Ensino Médio – DCNEM/2013), anticipate the inclusion of these constitutional themes in the agenda of school discussions.

Therefore, there is an emergent and necessary panorama to introduce the gender discussion in the school environment. Historically, over the centuries, gender differences have been made in terms of male and female. In ancient Greece, the gender difference was explained by the amount of heat originally attributed to a single biological sex that would react more perfectly, externalizing the reproductive apparatus in a man's body, or less perfectly, leaving it inside of a woman’s abdomen. This idea of female inferiority has passed through the centuries, resulting in the understanding that women could never reach the same level of intelligence as men.
During the French Revolution, whose motto was Equality, Freedom and Fraternity (Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité), women fought alongside men, and their participation was of fundamental importance for the achievement of revolutionary goals. After that, they resumed their place in society as they continued to be considered incapable of assuming civic and political responsibilities. After World War II, one perceives a slow movement in relation to the prejudice that the patriarchal and macho society imposed on women. According to Rago (1995), it is understood that the majority of women, during most of the western historical process, had a secondary role if compared to men’s, thus remaining invisible and inert as if they alone were active and responsible for changes in society. In the first decades of the 21st century, women advanced towards the construction of an equal society with regard to gender issues, but the historical and cultural heritage in relation to the supporting role of women in society is still very present.

Because of that, it was considered necessary to include this topic in the discussion of school tasks based on academic practices carried out by students who are scholarship holders in the Institutional Scholarship for Teaching Initiation Program (PIBID). The activities were developed through Yarning Circles and focused on the topic "The Role of Women: New Views", by two undergraduate history students and supervised by both the High School teacher, who is in charge of the groups where the activity was developed, and the university teacher. The main purpose of the activity was to bring issues of gender and feminism up for discussion due to the need to awaken the students’ critical thinking, thus aiming to break with paradigms in favour of a new view of the role of women in society.

The activities carried out in the Yarning Circle project consisted of lectures and small sections in the “Film Club” and aimed to introduce current topics to the classroom. By contextualizing what feminism would be, it was sought to demystify established prejudices and stereotypes about the role of women in relation to society. Also, a timeline was drawn from the Middle Ages to the present, focusing on codes of conduct that have influenced Western society as well as the role of women.

2 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FEMINISM

The concept of gender, by emphasizing the social relations between the sexes, shows the existence of inequalities between men and women, which includes inequalities of power as one of its central elements. Moreover, gender is understood as a social and historical construction, produced from the biological characteristics of the subject. "The concept is intended to refer to the way sexual characteristics are understood and represented, or how they are brought into social practices and made part of the historical process." (LOURO, 1997, 22).
Despite the existing forms of prejudice, in the 1960s the Second-wave feminism emerged in Brazil. It was described as a movement with different objectives in relation to the issues claimed by the militants of the previous movement. According to Pedro (2012), in Brazil the Second Wave of feminism adopted a revolutionary methodology of dissemination of its ideas, i.e., the so-called "Consciousness Groups" or "Reflection Groups", made up only of women. These meetings were held in the participants' private houses as well as in bars, cafes, offices and libraries in order to discuss the problems faced by women and also oppose machismo. One of the purposes of the Women's Consciousness / Reflection Groups was to increase solidarity among themselves and improve their self-esteem.

Along with the urbanization process, women became visible in public areas, increasing their presence in universities and formal spaces. Feminism has had a profound impact on academia and scientific production, thus opening space for women to study about the feminine universe, the feminine culture, and the relations between sexes and genders. At the same time, it was placed as a theme based on its historical object: origins, movements, its leaders and mentors, its productions and its conquests. All these issues have been analysed by sociologists as well as some historians. Therefore, feminism was responsible for giving voice to women in all areas of social, political and cultural life in cities and in rural areas and even in the academic context, leading us to seek its presence in the various moments in history.

Louro (1997) states that, in the 1960s, which was a period characterized by social changes, feminist activists in the academic world brought to the universities not only their effective participation in classroom debates, but also their contribution to literature through their writings in books, newspapers and magazines.

In this sense, a misogynist and stereotyped view remained intact, defining it as a movement of unhappy women as well as frustrated by their inability to conquer the "strong sex." As a counterpoint to this perverse construction, some historical and sociological studies on feminism tend to be heroic, overvaluing the feminist ventures of some leaders, but at the same time decontextualizing them in the understanding and performance frameworks of that time. According to Rago (1996), contemporary feminism has been pointing to the need to produce a differentiated historical discourse, i.e., capable of creating new concepts and portraying the fields of problematization, and documentary sources which were previously unknown or underestimated. Therefore, it proposes a "feminist" reading of history, with all the intense controversies already provoked, either explicit or not explicit.

3 THE ROLE OF WOMEN: NEW VIEWS
Over the centuries, women were seen as an object and their role was limited to reproducing, preferably men, since girls were considered "naturally" unfit for heavy work and too fragile in the macho perspective. Women’s visibility is recent in history. For a long time, only men were considered as subjects of history. They were the ones who occupied public spaces and political positions, that is, they were at the centre of power decisions. Yet, a woman’s place was at home, taking care of the family and the house. The alternatives of marriage and motherhood were imposed upon them and, during their childhood and adolescence, they were prepared to do these tasks, always seen as a "pure" being who could not be in public places, i.e., male *par excellence*, so as not to corrupt their “purity”. Historian and researcher Del Priore states that:

Poor or rich, every woman had a role: to do the basic work for the whole family structure - to educate her children according to Christian values, to teach them to read and to do activities, to provide for sustenance and for physical and spiritual health, to obey and help her husband. That is, to be the "holy mother." If she did not do any of these, she would be confused with the "domestic devil." (DEL PRIORE, 2013, p. 12).

This meant that women were not only precluded from participating in public and political/social discussions because of their inabilities and limitations, but also deprived of being in the areas of political, social and cultural activism. There are still vestiges of this model in today's society. However, it is the family’s and the school’s responsibility, especially the educator, to provide the space for debate and present the existing models of behaviour in order to intervene, showing that social behaviours have nothing to do with innate or natural capacities, but are socially constructed. Colling asserts that the inclusion of new views about the traditional perspectives of history is very recent:

In an attempt to correct history, the objects of investigation were pluralized, thus admitting, as historical subjects, the workers, the peasants, the slaves and the women, who were underestimated or placed in an arena of lesser importance. Due to this desire to reverse traditional historical perspectives, we began to look at historical events through the view of other subjects. In the case of women, we have sought to show their presence in history, including them as objects of study, subjects of history; and for this, the category of analysis - gender - is used to theorize the issues of sexual differences and power relations between men and women. Working with women’s history presupposes the mastery of analytical categories for the understanding of gender relations, permeated by power relations. In analysing the history of women, their participation in groups opposed to military dictatorships, these categories multiply in terms of importance. (COLLING, 2004, p. 01).
Hence, this project "Yarning Circles – The Role of Women: New Views " came out as an attempt to introduce a new perception on historical perspectives, i.e., the need to bring to the school environment the debate about the role of women in society. In this sense, promoting a dialogue about such a topic has brought up new views on the traditional models, and these are subject to ruptures and new positions in the face of gender issue.

The Brazilian educational system was historically conceived and organized according to the standards of heteronormativity, thus valuing as a model an adult, male, white, heterosexual. Complementary to this, are social, political and epistemological processes by which some individuals and groups become normalized while others become marginalized. (LOURO, 2004).

Therefore, it is necessary to break paradigms to encourage new perspectives, new thoughts and new postures that respect and support gender equality. It is the school's responsibility to make the students reflect upon issues that shape society, deconstructing gender bias and contributing to the construction of new models of relationship between men and women based on principles of equality and justice. The school is an educational space in which attitudes are built and ideas are confronted. In other words, it is a place where individuals recognize themselves as people of rights and duties, where they challenge themselves, where discoveries are made, and where the teaching of accepting and living with differences must happen.

Based on this concept of teaching, learning and thinking, the activities promoted in the Yarning Circle project were developed through weekly meetings for one year (2016-2017) and involved different classes of Youth and Adult Education (EJA), i.e., High School students from a public school located in the city of Santa Maria/RS. During the meetings, specific issues were approached, such as: a) gender inequalities in the contemporary Brazilian society; b) stereotypes and stigmas that are present in school environments; c) contemporary codes of behaviour; and d) reflections upon the role of women in society.

All the meetings started with discussions around the contextualization of gender issues, followed by debates focusing on the same issues. In the “Film Club” sections, an initial approach on the topic of the video previously watched was also taken in order to highlight the context of that era as well as its society and codes of behaviour. In addition, workshops were held as a means to create texts, sentences and drawings. Figures 1, 2 and 3 show the posters developed by the students during the workshops that integrated the Yarning Circle project.
As a result, the students had the opportunity to express their understanding of the world and specifically of the gender issue addressed in this study. In these workshops, the students were divided into groups, and posters containing images of women were distributed among them in order for the students to make protest slogans or drawings about the female universe.

4 METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research. According to Michel (2009), the purpose of a qualitative research is not to show opinions or people, but instead explore the spectrum of opinions as well as the different representations on the subject under study. In other words, it seeks to understand the phenomena from the subjects' point of view. In addition, a bibliographical research method was used and so data was collected through documents, books, articles and theses.

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the activities developed in the Yarning Circle project, some inferences and conclusions were made. First of all, it was possible to have a new experience, which contributed to the development of spontaneity, reflection, autonomy and curiosity among the students, young people and adults, in relation to education and feminism. Through classroom participation, the students could interact with their classmates, the undergraduate history students, and the teachers as
well, by having discussions on the concepts of gender, feminism, sexism and machismo. In the first meetings, it was found that the students had no knowledge of these subjects, but only a few basic ideas.

At every meeting, since the initial presentation and through all the debate and discussions, it was possible to demystify some misrepresented and prejudiced thoughts about gender relations, thus deconstructing the idea of women's submission to men. In addition to deconstructing the ideological, conceptual, political, social and sexual configurations that organize the world, feminism has given visibility not only to women and to women's issues, but to the cruel forms of exclusion that primarily act in the public sphere. At the same time, it has proposed alternative forms of social and sexual organization, which are essential for the construction of more egalitarian relations not only between the sexes, since it is basically the construction of a new concept of citizenship in an ever changing field.

The creation of posters, drawings and slogans proved to be an excellent means of communication and exposition of ideas and concepts, and it raised the students’ attention on the importance of gender equality and mutual respect. Much of the information that constitutes both individual and collective knowledge is conveyed by visual means, and the reflection upon the drawings and posters produced was essential to the construction of critical thinking and the understanding of the messages present in the writings.

6 CONCLUSION

For a long time in history there was the predominance of a narrative focused on political concerns, which exalted men and their heroic deeds, excluding and silencing the history of women. Therefore, bringing gender issues into the classroom environment contributes to dismantling the sexist culture that has been standardized for so many years and allows us to reflect upon this topic, thus “filling the gaps” that have been silenced for a long time.

REFERENCES


