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## **Self-touching, genitals, pleasure and privacy: the governance of sexuality in primary schools in Spain**

**Estel Malgosa**

AFIN Barcelona

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

**Bruna Alvarez**

AFIN Barcelona

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

**Diana Marre**

AFIN Barcelona

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Dirección para correspondencia:  
Address for correspondence:

Estel Malgosa, AFIN Barcelona, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, B13 Building. c/ Vila Puig s/n. Campus Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. 08193 Bellaterra. Spain. Email: [estel.malgosa@uab.cat](mailto:estel.malgosa@uab.cat)

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## Abstract

Until December 2020, Spanish primary schools were not required to provide any kind of sexuality education, and most teachers do not receive training to carry it out. However, sexuality is clearly present in children's daily life at school. We carried out qualitative research with teachers from four primary schools in Catalonia (Spain), aiming to explore how teachers without training in sexuality approach the issues in the classroom. Our analysis shows that teachers in the four primary schools governed children's sexuality in a gendered way by applying communicative vigilance and surveillance to regulate how children touched their own genitals. Findings suggest the need for continuing professional development and training to ensure teachers (re)think what adults may communicate to children about sexuality and gender when they have not received training in relationships and sex education.

**Keywords:** sexuality education, self-touching, primary school teachers, governance, Spain



## Introduction

‘I had a girl who masturbated against the table leg’, said Maria, second-grade teacher (teaching children aged ~7). She was responding to our opening question in a focus group of preschool and primary school teachers: How does sexuality appear in the classroom? The teacher continued, ‘And I said, “Sweetheart, sit up straight!” And I redirected her...’ Several other teachers described similar situations. Anna, a third-grade teacher (teaching children aged ~8) explained,

‘There was a girl who put her hands between her legs, and then I had to tell her to put her hand here on the paper to colour because otherwise the paper will move. I was looking for a way... but I didn't know how to say it. She has the right to experiment, but in the classroom, with your classmates... At first [her classmates] didn't pay attention to her because she was very small, but as they got older, they said, “What's wrong with her? Why is she doing that?”’

This article derives from a larger research project on sexuality education in primary schools in Catalonia, a region of north-eastern Spain. Although the participating teachers stated that they did not have any training in sexuality education and did not carry it out in the classroom, our objective was to find out what they were teaching their students about sexuality without realising it. We show how teachers in four primary schools used two mechanisms concerning the governance of sexuality—communicative vigilance and surveillance—to channel children's genital self-touching, according to gender and age. We start from the hypothesis that the gendered governance of sexuality in the educational practices of teachers is linked to dominant social constructions of sexuality and of childhood. Becoming aware of whether and how such constructions appear in the classroom can help us (re)think relationships and sex education (RSE).

More than forty years ago, Gagnon and Simon (1973) and Jackson (1982) observed how children were judged through labels for adult sexual behaviour. A child's practices can be considered sexual—and sometimes problematic—from the adult point of view, while they may not have an explicit sexual meaning for the child. To avoid an adult frame of reference, we talk about ‘touching one's genitals’ or ‘self-touching’ rather than ‘masturbation’, following Gagnon and Simon's view that ‘Only through maturing and learning these adult labels for his experience and activity can the child come to masturbate in the adult sense of that word’ (1973, p. 10).

Sexuality education in primary school has been extensively analysed from the perspective of teachers, for example in Australia (Robinson and Davies 2008), Turkey (Erden 2020), the USA (Connell and Elliott 2009), the UK (Epstein and Johnson 1998), Peru, Guatemala, Ghana and Kenya (Keogh et al. 2021), and South Africa (Bhana 2007), with an emphasis on barriers (Duffy et al. 2013) to provision, such as lack of preparation (Erden 2020; Martínez et al. 2012), fear of parental opposition (Duffy et al. 2013; Erden 2020), and inequalities that are transmitted when teachers offer sexuality education without prior training (Connell and Elliott 2009), including gender inequalities (Koepsel 2016), thus contributing to (re)producing normative sexualities (Epstein and Johnson

1998). Erden (2020) has pointed out that in schools in Turkey, due to this lack of preparation, teachers often approach the subject from the perspective of societal taboos and social values that (re)produce inequalities of gender and age, among others. Likewise, several studies indicate that where sexuality education has been incorporated into the curriculum, it often focuses on reproductive capacities, so that intercourse is constructed as the only sexual practice, while pleasure is absent (Koepsel 2016). This linking together of sex/sexuality with reproduction leads children to understand sexuality from an adult-centric perspective (Malgosa, Alvarez and Marre 2022).

In Spain, Martínez et al. (2012) have shown that, although the majority of teachers considered sexuality education to be important, almost half of the respondents said they had never taught it because it is not prioritised; there is a lack of training, resources and time; and the relevant legislation is ambiguous. Venegas (2013) has explored secondary school students' values and practices surrounding sexuality, highlighting the importance of sexuality education to the promotion of gender equity. Despite these studies, there is a gap in research on how primary school teachers deal with children's genital self-touching in school.

Following Venegas' (2013) writing on school as a space in which hegemonic sexualities are (re)produced and sexuality education contributes to gender inequalities, we analyse how the sexuality of children in primary schools is governed differentially by age and gender through two simultaneous processes. On the one hand, 'communicative vigilance' (Frekko et al. 2015, p. 704) operates as an apparatus of governmentality through the regulation of one's own and others' speech, and silences around sexuality. On the other hand, there is 'surveillance' (Foucault 1975), whereby power is exercised not through punishment but rather through the regulation of bodies and behaviours—for example, by prohibiting touching one's genitals or picking one's nose in public—which renders bodies docile. The school, as an educational institution, thereby becomes a space in which the frames of reference that justify sexual surveillance (Walby and Smith 2012) are inscribed to maintain the social construction that children are innocent and asexual (Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Robinson and Davies, 2008 among others).

### ***Relationships and sex education (RSE) in Catalonia (Spain)***

In December 2020, Spain's socialist government approved a new law on education (Organic Law 3/2020) that seeks to include RSE in primary school as a part of health education. The new curriculum has not yet been developed, nor has it been specified how teachers will be trained. In another legislative change, in September 2022, the government passed a law guaranteeing sexual freedom (Organic Law 10/2022). A provision of the law will use coeducation and RSE to raise awareness surrounding sexual freedom. We collected our data from 2017 to 2020, just before the new laws were passed. Despite the unquestionable value of the new laws, educational practices in relation to sexual (non-)education will take time to change.

Sixteen percent of the population live in Catalonia, one of the seventeen regions of Spain (INE 2021). The region's government, the Generalitat, has been responsible for education in the region since 1981, and is charged with implementing national standards of the educational system. In 2019, the Catalan Department of Education introduced

the *Coeduca't* RSE programme for all levels of compulsory education (ages 5-16) with the aim that, in three years time, all public and charter schools in Catalonia would incorporate a gender perspective and would offer RSE as part of Catalonia's coeducational model. Under coeducation in Catalonia—which was launched in 1970 with the mixed schooling of boys and girls and has evolved over time—feminine and masculine cultural practices are presented as equally valuable and as available to children of any sex (Subirats 2010). Under the new *Coeducat't* programme, teachers will be trained through a domino model, in which one 'interested' teacher from each school will receive 30 hours of training and will then train their colleagues. By the end of 2021, only 21% of Catalonia's 3,500 primary and secondary schools had a trained teacher (Baraza 2021). There is no data on whether these schools have begun to provide RSE. This limited implementation may be explained by the fact that for many schools, RSE is not a priority (Martínez et al. 2012).

### ***Communicative vigilance and surveillance: two types of governance***

Communicative vigilance (Frekko et al. 2015) 'teaches' through speech and silence the 'correct' and 'incorrect' forms of sexuality, (re)producing hegemonic social imaginaries that maintain inequality (Connell and Elliott 2009, 88). Communicative vigilance is not enacted by force, but rather by disciplining bodies with the aim of guiding and shaping the behaviour of others and oneself (see Urla 2019 on governmentality through language).

Sexuality is structured around power relations linked to age, gender, ability, class and ethnicity (Egan and Hawkes 2008). These categories play a key role in the life of schools (Thorne and Luria 1986) creating and reinforcing social norms about sexuality through verbal and non-verbal messages and educational practices that influence (self-)governance (Koskela 2012), creating shifting hegemonic sexual structures that are established as a hegemonic sexual culture (Epstein and Johnson 1998).

For Foucault (1978), sexuality functions as a mechanism of articulation between the disciplines of the body and the organisation of the population, poles around which 'biopolitics'—in the form of power over life—has developed. In this sense, sexuality is 'an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students, priests and laity, an administration and a population' (1978, 103).

Power is exercised through surveillance. In schools, teachers monitor children's sexual behaviours by means of 'routine, auto-pilot, semi-conscious' non-strategic surveillance (Marx 2012, xxv) paying particular attention to what they see as inappropriate practices jeopardising children's innocence.

Sexuality in its complexity—including regulations, norms, pleasures, and desires—cannot be understood without understanding the spaces in which it is constituted. 'Sexuality manifests itself through relations that are specific to particular spaces and through the space-specific practices by which these relations become enacted' (Brown et al. 2009, 4). The school thus becomes a space for disciplining the young bodies that adults intend to keep innocent and asexual, through the 'art of distribution' (Foucault 1978), which signals what can and cannot be done in a certain place.



### ***The masculine and the feminine: unequal governance***

Gender is produced through the repetition of everyday practices (Butler 1990) within the framework provided by dominant discourses of heterosexuality (Renold 2000). Gender and sexuality intersect with and influence each other (Allen 2013), as assembled and co-constructed categories (Enguix 2022). They are social elements when understood as a whole, whose properties emerge from the interaction among the parts (De Landa 2006), linked to specific forms of governance and the process of self creation through techniques of acceptance, resistance and denial.

The gendered governance of sexuality means that male sexuality is seen as a natural and uncontrollable instinct (Héritier 2002) driven by heterosexual desire (Allen 2013), while female sexuality is associated with the suppression of desire and the display sexual ignorance (Sur 2021). As a result, female pleasure rarely appears in the sexuality education classes described in studies in the USA (Connell and Elliott 2009; Fine 1988; Koepsel 2016), where teachers cites the example of the aggressive boy who deceives girls into having sex (Connell and Elliott 2009). The notion of 'male gaze' splits pleasure in looking between the active/male and the passive/female. In this way, boys learn to be active spectators in sexuality while girls become passive objects to be seen (Mulvey 1989)

### ***The governance of sexuality in childhood and self-touching***

The idea of childhood innocence, whereby children are viewed as asexual, having no curiosity, knowledge or opinion about sexuality (Blaise 2009; Egan and Hawkes, 2008; Moore and Reynolds 2018; among others) leads to the notion that children's sexuality must be governed, so as to 'protect' them from the sexual knowledge (Robinson and Davies 2008) of the adult world (Moore and Reynolds 2018).

Although studies have shown how discourses of innocence make children more vulnerable to harassment and sexual abuse (Jackson, 1982), they remain prevalent in the West, contradicting Freudian ideas concerning the 'normality' and 'naturalness' of children's sexuality, while aligning with theories of development (see Piaget, 1959) that consider the child too physically, sexually, emotionally and cognitively immature to understand 'adult concepts' such as sexuality or desire. At the same time, ultra-conservatives have appropriated the notion of 'childhood innocence' and have employed moral panic about its supposed loss as a political tool to undermine efforts to recognise the rights of people of diverse sexuality and gender identities (Robinson and Davies, 2018).

According to Foucault (1978), ambiguity surrounding childhood causes the 'pedagogisation of the child's sex', whereby the school and the family –among others such as doctors and psychologists– become the institutions responsible for sexuality education (Vázquez and Moreno, 1997). This strategy was strongly evident across the West in moral panics over child masturbation during the 19th and 20th centuries and was evident in Spain during the Franco regime (1939-1975), with the purported aim of

preventing disease (Vázquez and Moreno, 1997). In medicine nowadays, self-touching is considered a normal and healthy activity, although its 'excessive' use is seen as associated with frustration, boredom, loneliness, low self-esteem, family conflict, and other problems (Leung and Robson, 1993).

When it comes to self touching in children, according to Mallants and Casteels (2008) there are multiple discursive positions about what is normal, abnormal and pathological, and current paediatric recommendations are to ignore touching or distract the child, as well as to provide age-appropriate information about sexuality. International (Balter et al. 2016) and national (López et al. 2002) studies show that teachers observe genital self-touching daily in early and middle childhood. Discomfort and lack of training can lead some of them to approach sexual expression only in response to children's questions, instead of proactively initiating dialogue about sexuality with them (Larsson and Svedin, 2002). Balter et al. (2016) propose training to increase the comfort of teachers when addressing sexuality in the classroom. According to some studies, families and teachers have difficulties talking to children about genital self-touching, so they opt for distraction or ignore the practice (Gagnon 1985; Kayiran and Sönmez 2020).

## **Method**

The SexAFIN project, initiated in 2017, aims to contribute to the development of high-quality RSE in primary schools. As one of the aims of the project, we have used participatory methods to find out how teachers govern, guide and shape meanings and behaviours related to sexuality based on the dominant social constructions that adults have about sexuality and childhood.

For this paper, we analyse data produced in 12 focus groups involving a total of 96 teachers – 85 women and 11 men – conducted between 2017 and 2020 in four public primary schools in the province of Barcelona: two in a peri-urban municipality (two focus groups per school in 2017 and 2018), one in a rural municipality (one focus group in 2018), and one in a large city (three focus groups in 2020). The sample was varied in terms of age and years of employment in education. The average age was 39 years old (ranging from 21 to 60 years old), and the average length of employment was 13 years. All the teachers indicated that they had no training in sexuality education of any type. Only three teachers from two schools indicated they did not want to participate in the study; they did not specify reasons for this.

Focus groups explored what teachers' understood as 'sexuality'. The use of focus groups facilitated group discussion about a defined area in a comfortable setting, thus avoiding some of the power imbalances that are typical between researchers and participants (Adler et al. 2019). A focus group approach also enabled us to collect data that might be less accessible in the absence of group interaction (Lezaun 2007), due to the sensitivity of the topic. In each hour-and-a-half-long focus group, we asked experiences related to sexuality in the classroom, whether they taught sexuality education in any form, from what age they thought it should be offered, and who, according to them, should inform children about sexuality: parents or the school.



The data elicited were recorded, transcribed, coded and categorised by topic. Using the software package Dedoose, we used narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2008) to identify patterns in teachers' narratives of their experiences in educational settings. Real names were removed during transcription so all the names cited here are pseudonyms. Results from the study were communicated to each school every year, to enable teachers to reflect on their educational practices and help them find ways of incorporating RSE into their work.

## Findings

Although teachers claimed not to formally teach sexuality education, sexuality education is implicit in how teachers speak, act, silence, monitor, discipline and guide children's speech and other practices surrounding sexuality. One of the most oft repeated concerns of participants was how to manage genital self-touching in the classroom. Although participants considered such touching to be 'natural' in very young children 3 to 5 years old, they problematised it in children of 6, 7 and 8 years old. On the one hand, teachers felt responsible for redirecting these practices so that other children wouldn't say something about it to others. On the other hand, they felt unsure about what kind of information to provide, because they feared that if children had too much information, they might want to try out the behaviours. Ultimately, therefore, the focus of our work was on how teachers balance the risk of what children *might say* against the risk of what children *might do*.

### ***Self-touching and children's age: from natural to inappropriate***

#### *As if I didn't see them: 'natural' touching*

In one of the focus groups, there was a clear consensus that while young children may touch their genitals in class, as they get older, they stop doing so 'out of embarrassment'. Teachers reported that in preschool (ages 3-5), touching occurs daily in the classroom and teachers approach it 'naturally', because, according to participants, children are 'in the period of exploring', and of 'discovering' their bodies and those of others. At an age when children are perceived as asexual, touching their own bodies or each other's bodies—sometimes called 'playing doctor'—is considered to be motivated by the anatomical exploration of bodies and is not problematised. Laura, a preschool teacher explained: 'They do it out of curiosity, between them there's no problem'.

The perception that these practices are 'natural', 'normal' and, above all, asexual aligns with the perception of early childhood as asexual and innocent (see Moore and Reynolds, 2018; Robinson, 2013, among others) and its intersection with theories of human development, which define and universalise certain physical and cognitive milestones, normalising childhood experience (Robinson and Davies, 2018). Therefore, the governance of these practices is minimal: 'I can't stop them,' reported Laura. 'The doctor undresses you'. Some teachers commented that they pretended not to see the children touching their genitals, so that they wouldn't have to inform their parents.

However, at a certain age, teachers' perceptions change, as seen in this explanation by Miquel (teaching children aged ~7):

I have realised that at the point of 6, 7, 8 eight years old, it depends, is when the change occurs, the change that ... when you lose your naturalness and when you start to put up, everyone at their own pace, the first barriers or modesty or embarrassment.

According to the participants, between the ages of 6 and 8, children start to feel embarrassed about sexual issues. In Spain, this is when changing rooms and bathrooms—previously unisex—are segregated by sex and when children lose their 'naturalness' and instead laugh when body parts such as the penis, vulva and buttocks are named using word that adults relate to sexuality. In a UK study on childhood, sexuality and television, Kelley et al. (1999) show that children use laughter to reflect the recognition that they have crossed into adult territory, hitherto considered taboo. In line with this, children's laughter and jokes described by teachers in our study show that children recognize that sexuality is a taboo subject in their daily lives. .

The perceived loss of innocence of children aged 6 to 8 means that the same touching is now perceived by teachers as a practice related to adult sexuality that must therefore be monitored and 'disciplined'. This perception clashes with the social conception of children as asexual and immature, and with that of sexuality as belonging to the adult world and private spaces, making such behaviours difficult for teachers to handle. It seems that what changes here is the adult's perspective, since it is possible that for children these practices continue to have the same meaning as the did when they were smaller. They could simply be associated with bodily pleasure—like getting a back rub or eating pizza—not to sexuality.

### *Redirecting inappropriate touching*

Teachers of children ages 8 to 12 reported 'needing' to discipline the few children who engaged in self-touching at this age. A teacher named Marta (teaching children aged ~8) described the case of a girl who frequently rubbed her vulva against the table leg, rocking back and forth and sweating. She had contacted the girl's parents, but the parents were not concerned. However, the teacher thought she should do something to prevent the girl from touching herself in class. Marta explained, 'It was like a bad habit. It was the whole day. It was a matter of months before someone would realise what she was doing and say something'. With her concern about someone 'realising', it seems that Marta feared that other children would give an adult meaning to this practice, that is, that they would relate it to sexuality, and therefore identify it as a practice that should be carried out in private. The risk to Marta lay in the possibility that children might understand this adult meaning and 'say something'.

Before the age of 8, the communicative surveillance that is applied to children's sexual practices in the classroom is based on silence: teachers do not talk about it and pretend not to see it. But from age 8, the disciplining of bodies is activated through surveillance to prevent the child's classmates from *saying something*: 'Put your hands

on the table', 'Sit up straight'. In fact, Marta proposed to the girl that she go to the bathroom or an empty classroom when she noticed that she was stimulating her vulva.

Our goal in this and related research is to uncover patterns in how teachers engage with these issues and what this says about understandings of childhood and sexuality. One pattern we identified is the fact that as age increases, self-touching in the classroom begins to be seen as something requiring intervention. The problem does not seem to be the practice itself; several teachers pointed out that they were not against self-touching *per se*. Rather, their concern was to discipline bodies so that self-touching would only occur in an appropriate socially designated space. As can be seen from Marta's proposal to the girl, something that is considered private in the adult world is not done in a public space, such as a school classroom, where other children might see it and say something. Elias (1978) has written how the circumscription of sexual behaviours to private spaces was part of the process of civilisation that began in the sixteenth century in Europe, which separated private life from public and social life. Even today, when these practices occur outside the private sphere, they provoke negative reactions: of repugnance, disgust and discomfort. But, at the same time, the socialisation of children requires that they learn these forms of modesty so that they will not be considered 'abnormal' or 'sick' (Elias 1978).

Emma, another teacher (teaching children aged ~11), described the following situation:

I've had a girl who masturbated in class, under the table. Very often... and she would sweat with a very red face... and I didn't know what to do, because they're big and they have to realise what they're doing. Then one day I called her and said, 'What were you doing?' And she said 'nothing', and I said, 'I know what you were doing and it's not that it's bad, but it has to be done at home, in private and not in class in front of the rest of your classmates'. But she keeps doing it [in class].

For teachers, an 11-year-old girl is too 'old' to touch her genitals in class. It seems that at this age the girl should know not to, despite the fact that she has likely received no sexuality education beyond that which her family may have provided. The children at the schools participating in this research are not taught, for example, that touching the vulva or the penis can be a sexual practice called masturbation, that this touching can give pleasure, that many adults and children do it, and that in our culture the activity is only carried out in private spaces, just like passing gas, picking one's nose or burping. However, the greater difficulty of educating children not to touch their genitals in public (compared to picking their noses, for example) highlights the special status attributed to sexuality, which likely reflects teachers' own fears and anxieties.

In a very different way, teachers perform communicative surveillance through silence (often acting as if they have not seen students touch themselves) and redirection (asking them to put their hands on the table, to sit properly or to visit the toilet) and, perhaps, by pulling an uncomfortable or surprised face, adopting a tense posture, or via other non-verbal means we have not addressed in this narrative-based research. And it is through this communicative vigilance that a child is expected to learn—and, above all, to obey—the social limits placed on self-touching. But there is always room for

misinterpretation: children may instead conclude that self-touching is bad or simply that one cannot or should not talk about it with adults.

### ***Self-touching and gender inequality: the problematisation of female pleasure***

#### *Problematising self-touching by girls: what others will say*

When the teachers described the contexts of self-touching that were most difficult for them to address, they never talked about boys. Upon noticing this pattern, we asked, 'So, in the class only girls touch themselves?' 'No!' came the resounding answer, 'The boys too!' Yet when asked to discuss cases of self-touching that were difficult to handle, none of the teachers shared a story about a boy. 'Especially girls, more than boys' said one Eva (teaching children aged ~7). Joanna (teaching children aged ~10) said, 'I guess it's more obvious, right? Boys touch themselves and all, but you see girls in a full-on orgasm!' 'Yes,' added Sara (teaching children aged ~6), 'Maybe in boys it's more discreet, you don't realise it, they put their hand under their pants or smock... it's more hidden. On the other hand, in girls it's the movement that is most evident. And you find them there again and again on the bench: *taca taca taca taca* and the next day *raca raca*, so what do you do?'

Mention of the 'problematic' or difficult situations to be addressed by teachers due to girls touching themselves at school recurred in each of the 12 focus groups. Boys' self-touching in class was never problematised. According to the teachers, boys' self-touching was more discreet and therefore 'not seen', which seems strange given that the arousal of people with a penis is much more visible than that of people with a vulva.

Another preschool teacher, Rosa (teaching children aged ~4), described a case she found 'problematic' to manage:

She spent recess on the corner of the slide masturbating. She didn't play. In the classroom it shouldn't be done. There are other spaces for it. The girl should be made to see that it's a private behaviour, because then she'll reach upper primary school and then it's not that she doesn't realise. It's that there are other children. And you can work on it naturally, but they [the children] always try to hurt each other. And maybe there will come a time when you have to tell her the truth. The consequences it could have. Because... it has social and physical consequences too, because her vulva is beyond irritated, but anyway, she will notice that on her own. But the consequences it could have for her in relation to others ...

Here, the risk lies in the possible verbalisation of the act others, which is why the teacher thought that the girl should be told 'the truth'. Rose seems to be referring, on the one hand, to the supposed negative physical consequences of masturbation, which recalls the claims made by medical discourses of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Laqueur 2003). On the other hand, however, she is referring to the social consequences derived from possible teasing by the girls' peers—who have learned

through communicative surveillance that touching one's genitals is taboo, that you can not do it in public, and that you cannot talk about it to adults. Finally, a child's self-touching in class could reflect poorly on the teacher, suggesting that her communicative vigilance and surveillance have been ineffective. In this sense, the fear that other children may say something could be linked to concern about being considered a bad teacher. That is, teachers may fear that children will say something to other children, teachers or parents, who will in turn judge the teacher for failing to guide children's practices appropriately.

Spronk (2014), writing about her research with young people in Kenya, points out that bodily sensations allow us to understand the configuration of gender and sexuality, because the meaning of physiological pleasure is built culturally through labels linked to norms and prohibitions. In our study, it is a practice that is probably pleasant for the children but that teachers associate exclusively with adult sexual pleasure. How teachers perceive children's reactions to their own bodily sensations allows us to understand how the categories of male and female sexuality and childhood are configured. Although many teachers claim to see self-touching positively, it seems that seeing a girl giving herself pleasure by touching her genitals in class clashes strongly with the intersection of two adult social imaginaries: that of asexual childhood and that of female sexuality represented from the perspective of self-control and danger (Vance 1984)—rather than pleasure. The fact that no teachers reported a 'problematic' case of self-touching in a boy might be due, as the teachers suggested, to the fact that 'it was less visible'. However, when we asked if children don't touch their genitals in class, in all schools they said 'yes'. So, the boys touch themselves even though it is not as problematic for them as the girls reported. A more plausible explanation may be the fact that self-touching in boys does not trouble the social imaginary of male pleasure-seeking and sexuality represented as a natural and uncontrollable impulse (Héritier 2002, 264). In other words, this non-problematisation of boys' touching is linked to dominant social constructions: an active male sexuality that makes its sexual desire visible (Allen, 2013), and passive female sexuality that does not express its sexual desire publicly (Sur 2021).

Sur (2021) suggests that teachers expect girls to behave according to the dominant social construction of 'good girls': passive, innocent, polite, hardworking and asexual. That is, their gestures and actions should not be interpretable as sexual and/or promiscuous. To this end, historically, strong surveillance has been applied to orient women's sexuality toward reproduction, that is, towards being a 'good mother' and the 'good wife' (Foucault 1978). Thus, when girls perform the sexualities associated with the adult femininity of a mother—for example, by playing kitchen or playing with dolls—this does not trigger debate (Thompson 2010) because these activities are not read as an expression of sexuality, which is usually understood as consisting of adult sexual practices and relations. But of course, the mother role emerges from a reproductive sexuality, the only sexuality that is accepted for females. In contrast, when girls touch their genitals in class, rocking back and forth and sweating, they break one of the taboos of contemporary society, which is female pleasure. And teachers both problematise these girls and worry about their 'sexual reputations' (Sur 2021).

*If they know, they'll do it: the (non-)communication of female pleasure*



Many adults reduce sex and sexuality to genital sexual practices (Davies and Robinson, 2010) instead of understanding them as emotional experiences (WHO 2006). In this way, sexuality is constructed as adult, heterosexual, and genitally-focused, and intercourse is constructed as the only truly sexual practice. In Spain, the social construction of sexuality is still closely linked to vaginal intercourse (Alvarez, Malgosa and Marre 2022). This reduction of sexuality in the social imaginary of adults contributes to limiting children's access to information about sexuality, since talking about sexuality with children contributes to moral panics because of the juxtaposition of childhood and sexuality (Davies and Robinson 2010).

On one occasion, after we had conducted a workshop with fourth grade children (children aged ~9) in which the students had talked about genital touching, some parents had made a complaint to Teresa, their son's teacher. Their complaint was that the boy had come home from school saying that he had learned in the workshop that 'if a girl put her fingers [on her vulva], it gave her pleasure'. A few weeks later, during the focus group we conducted with the teachers, Teresa told us that she believed that parents should have been 'warned' that genital pleasure would be discussed during the workshop. This suggestion was striking for us, because the parents had been informed that their children would participate in a workshop on sexuality. The fact that Teresa thought the topic of genital pleasure needed a separate 'warning' reveals that, for her, a discussion of pleasure could not be taken for granted in a discussion of sexuality. She added:

I'm imagining now that this 4th grade boy decides to try with a girl from his class to see if it gives her pleasure or not ... Of course, to me that doesn't seem... I don't know... It's a real thing, which he'll end up discovering, but maybe he doesn't need to do it at age 9, right?

In this explanation, Teresa problematised the sharing of information between peers in a formal context—in this case, a workshop on RSE at school—as something that stimulates curiosity to try a certain sexual practice with others. That is, she perceived a direct link between knowing about sexuality and practising it, coinciding with the belief that sexual information leads to an early onset of sexual practices. Although several studies (Duffy et al. 2013) show the opposite to be true, it is a concern shared by many adults (Jackson and Scott, 2004), reflecting occidental societal norms that only adults can perform sexual practices for pleasure. In contrast, children are seen as lacking in arousal and desire and incapable of pleasure. Teresa worried that this newly informed boy might want to explore female pleasure with a girl classmate. Again, her concern may have been related to her role as a 'an agent of surveillance' (Marx 2012, xxv). Should two students experiment in this way, the interpretation of parents and the school administration might be that Teresa had not exercised proper surveillance of the children's bodies to ensure their continued asexuality and innocence.

The belief in asexual childhood makes it difficult to talk to children about bodily pleasures. Knowing and saying are understood to provoke action. Therefore, in the absence of RSE, teachers move between the risk of what someone might say if a child



touches herself and what children might *do* if someone tells them about genital pleasure.

## Conclusions

In this research we wanted to know if and how teachers govern, shape and guide childhood sexuality in primary schools. We analysed their stories about children's genital self-touching, one of the most repeated concerns of the participants. Although participating teachers said they do not teach sexuality education, sexuality is part of the hidden curriculum of schools (Connell and Elliott 2009) and our findings show that teachers govern sexuality in childhood according to age and gender through mechanisms such as communicative vigilance and surveillance. This governance is organised around constructions of an asexual childhood in which it is better for older children not to *know* so that they won't *do*. Because if they do perform actions such as self-touching, they run the risk that someone will *say something*, breaking the taboo surrounding sexuality in childhood, and perhaps calling into question the competence of the teacher.

Findings from this and related work reveal teachers' perception of their lack of tools to address issues related to sexuality, in particular genital self-touching. Without training in sexuality and gender, and without spaces for debate and critical reflection on these issues, the practices of teachers (re)produce inequalities based on personal social and moral constructions. That is, their actions, responses, and gestures govern and monitor the sexuality of students according to their interpretation of dominant social values, for example, problematising the visibility of girls' pleasure or not talking directly about self-touching and the spaces that our society reserves for it. In this sense, an important first step would be to conduct similar research to that described here among teachers trained in RSE, to provide a point of comparison with the current findings. Our analysis suggests the need for continuing education and training for teachers in primary schools that allows them to (re)think the sexuality education they offer, reduce inequalities of age and gender and, finally, be able to *say something* meaningful about self-touching, pleasure and privacy among children.

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