

Body, representations and perceptions: a study in the degree course in biological sciences of the IFS


ARTICLE

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Abstract

Starting from reflections that expand the concept of body and corporeality, crossing the border of an ideal of a merely biological body, this article aims to present the results of the research project Beyond biology: body, representations and perceptions in the degree in biological sciences course at IFS – *Campus* São Cristóvão, registered and fostered by the Public Notice 01/2023 PROPEX/IFS of the PIBIC/CNPq program. This project aimed to map understandings on the theme of corporeality within the training curriculum of future teachers in biological sciences, also aiming to perceive the representations and vision that these students have about the theme. It is considered that future graduates of biological sciences will be confronted with a school reality whose debate permeates the construction of multiple understandings about the body and it is necessary to know what formative contributions these students have to face such challenges.

Keywords: Body. Representations. Teacher Training. Biological Sciences.

Corpo, representações e percepções: um estudo no Curso de Licenciatura em Ciências Biológicas do IFS

Resumo

Partindo de reflexões que expandem o conceito de corpo e corporeidade, atravessando a fronteira de um ideal de corpo meramente biológico, este artigo objetiva apresentar os resultados do projeto de pesquisa Para além da biologia: corpo, representações e percepções no Curso de Licenciatura em Ciências Biológicas do IFS – *Campus* São Cristóvão, cadastrado e fomentado pelo Edital 01/2023 PROPEX/IFS do programa PIBIC/CNPq. Este projeto objetivou mapear as compreensões sobre o tema da corporeidade dentro do currículo de formação dos futuros professores em Ciências Biológicas, visando também a perceber as representações e a visão que estes alunos têm a respeito da temática. Considera-se que os futuros licenciados de Ciências Biológicas se confrontarão com uma realidade escolar cujo debate perpassa a construção de múltiplos entendimentos sobre o corpo e é preciso saber quais as contribuições formativas de que estes estudantes dispõem para enfrentar tais desafios.

Palavras-chave: Corpo. Representação. Formação de Professores. Ciências Biológicas.

1 Introduction

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Since modern times, with the advent of scientific anatomy, the body has been seen as biological matter, exclusively intended as a means of human reproduction and therefore defined by a natural biological status. In the 19th century, in the wake of studies in medicine and biology, bodies were dissected into their parts, generating an undeniable advance for the field of natural sciences.

However, advances in the humanities, psychoanalysis and the social sciences since the 20th century have shown that the natural sciences have limited this understanding without taking into account that bodies are also immersed in broader cultural and social contexts, which order subjects to docility and disciplinarization, in a process of domestication already pointed out by Foucault (2013) in the 60s.

This relationship of power over bodies arises when the state imposes, through education, for example, the manipulation of the individual, establishing postures and gestures, or when it doesn't consider the multiple dimensions that the subject of the body and corporeality raises. In the words of Brighente and Mesquita (2016, p. 156), the body is repressed by the disciplinary power that makes it docile, with the tireless control that the ruling classes exercise over individuals with the aim of making them consumers and increasingly productive, without the possibility of thinking for themselves.

We therefore consider the body to be an important element for the subject to relate to the world, inserting them into the social and cultural space, forming a community of identification. Therefore, the school's contribution goes beyond the transmission of systematized knowledge, it acts directly in the formation of bodies, especially those considered "healthy" to act in the world.

For Foucault (2013, p. 301), the various apparatuses of power must take charge of bodies not simply to demand "blood service" from them or to protect them against enemies, not simply to ensure punishment or extort income throughout history, but to help them guarantee their health in full communion with the world.

Based on these reflections that expand the concept of the body and corporeality, crossing the boundary of an ideal of a merely biological body, in this article we seek to map the understandings on the subject within the training curriculum of future teachers of the degree in biological sciences at the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Sergipe (IFS – *Campus São Cristóvão*), also aiming to understand the representations and vision that these students have on the subject.

It is considered that future biological sciences graduates will be confronted with a school reality marked by debates that involve the construction of multiple understandings about the body. In view of this, it is necessary to know what formative contributions these students have at their disposal in order to face the challenges as future science and biology teachers.

In the first section, entitled “A long history of the body”, we discussed how the concept of the body has undergone historical and cultural changes. In the past, the ancient Greeks and philosophers valued health, athletic ability and fertility. In the Middle Ages, the body was subjugated by religious institutions and punished during purification processes. In the Renaissance, the scientific method became the guide and the body was seen as an object of study and experimentation. As a consequence, bicategorization into “male” and “female” was consolidated, leading to great difficulty on the part of society and doctors in discussing the existence of intersex people, for example, outside the field of pathologization. Nowadays, we can see how the body is shaped by society and the media as an ideal, which determines aesthetic standards of beauty. In this section of the article, we conclude that it is necessary to think that the body is not just physiology and anatomy, but also a whole that involves social issues.

This is because sociocultural relationships directly influence the body, as some social institutions are the first interactions that individuals have in society. We need to think that the body is not just physiology and anatomy, but also a whole that involves social issues.

Over time, the idea of the human body has undergone various historical and cultural processes, showing that visions are not permanent. From these historical

perceptions, it is possible to reaffirm that the notion of the body is influenced by culture and time. Nowadays, we can see that the lack of social recognition triggers a body image crisis and that the construction of identities is a unique experience for each subject, enabling individuals to relate to the world.

There are bodies that are considered by society and the media to be ideal, determining an aesthetic standard and, consequently, causing an increase in consumerism and producing psychological suffering, especially for women. For example, the body categorized as female has always been related to motherhood, to reproduction. However, these bodies are not only reproductive bodies, but also desiring bodies, which means that female bodies may or may not wish to have children, and this is not related to an innate and natural characteristic of all women and people with a uterus. It is essential to reaffirm that biological sex does not determine the individual, as this is formed by sociocultural factors that make up their identities, including sexual and gender identities.

When faced with intersex individuals, for example, we witnessed a scientific crisis in the 19th century when it was questioned whether there were only two sexes (male/female) in intersex bodies. By delimiting the restriction of sexual identity, surgical and/or hormonal interventions were imposed on these individuals, often triggering subsequent suffering.

Given the unique reality of each individual, constituting themselves as a body in the world, it is necessary to consider the challenges that teachers face in contemporary times. These are challenges that may require a critical and constant review of our belief systems, pointing to a necessary questioning of the official curriculum. This can enable the school environment to become truly inclusive.

In the second axis, “Representations of the body in the teacher training curriculum”, we mapped the curriculum of the degree course in biological sciences at the IFS – *Campus São Cristóvão* (2020), in order to identify which concepts of the body and corporeality permeate the Pedagogical Course Plan, trying to correlate the impacts of this presence (or absence) for the students of this course, teachers who in the future will have to face the

challenges that the subject poses, with diverse and increasingly plural basic education classrooms.

In this topic, we tried to identify the representations and visions that the students of this degree program have about the body. The degree course in biological sciences currently has 57 active enrolments, according to data from the Course Coordination Office (CLCB, 2024), divided into 3 terms (1st, 3rd and 5th). These students, we understand, will be called upon by the complex realities of school to teach content that touches on the subject. That's why, in our questionnaire, we were interested in finding out how these representations and views of the body and corporeality are sedimented in these students and how the curriculum to which they are subjected throughout the course allows them to broaden their views or not.

With this double information in hand (curriculum and student perceptions), we proposed a series of activities (such as conversation circles, lectures, workshops, mini-courses, etc.), which we present in part 3 of this article, entitled "Beyond Biology". In this section, we'll report on these activities that aimed to broaden these notions, which we believe point to a "beyond biology". This is because we start from the principle:

That school education approaches the human body as something purely biological, an organism constructed by a set of systems, where only the anatomical, physiological and genetic functions are studied, failing to address the social/historical and cultural aspects that are part of their experiences (Souza; Camargo, 2011, p. 22).

With this in mind, we pursued the central problem of the research, which was defined as follows: what are the perceptions and representations of the body present in the degree course in biological sciences at the IFS – São Cristóvão *Campus*? Throughout this article, we hope to provide some reflections on this issue.

2 Methodology

This article is the result of research carried out between the years 2023 and 2024, sponsored by Notice 01/2023/DPP/PROPEX/IFS, and already finalized, the results of which we present in this publication. This project was approved by the institutional Ethics Committee and is registered on the Brazil Platform under CAAE number: 79310324.3.0000.8042.

The methodological design was based on a qualitative approach and emphasizes the subjective as a means of understanding and interpreting experiences through the perception and representation that IFS biological sciences undergraduates have of the subject of the body. This research is of an applied nature, as it starts from reality to propose the application of workshops aimed at broadening the understanding of corporeality. In terms of objectives, it is also descriptive, as it aims to report the facts without personal interpretation, moving on during the project to an explanatory analysis and evaluating the facts in more depth.

The research was carried out in a municipality in the Metropolitan Region of Aracaju (SE), Brazil, at the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Sergipe – *Campus* São Cristóvão, in a degree course in biological sciences that has 55 undergraduates enrolled, but only 40 attend classes, according to data from the Course Coordination.

The survey was therefore applied to these 40 students, which made it possible to build a total sample in relation to the research population. A Google Forms questionnaire was used as the data collection tool, through which the students answered nine multiple-choice questions. In this questionnaire, we focused on the theme of body and corporeality, as we will discuss in a specific topic. After the mapping carried out in the first stage of the research, in which more than 70% of regularly enrolled students and 100% of those attending the degree course in biological sciences took part, we moved on to planning the conversation circles.

After analyzing the sample and in line with the objectives of the research, it was decided that the training activity would be carried out with students in the first period of the course, since at this stage, the official curriculum of the degree shows greater convergence

with the broader debate on the cultural and social contexts that involve teaching, with subjects that directly dialogue with the project's proposal.

In this context, the conversation circle methodology was chosen because it represents a model of interaction that is more open to debate and dialog, laying the foundations for a safe space for listening to concerns and doubts about the topics raised. To carry out the conversation circles, we invited external speakers and proposed that, at each activity, the participants answer a short questionnaire, which we will discuss later.

For this stage, the research was conducted and organized in three phases, throughout the year 2024, in conversation circles entitled as follows: 1: "The body in history or the history of the body: the de-construction of a concept"; 2: "Questioning the curriculum or which body goes to school?"; and, finally, 3: "Body, representations and power: the school and its disciplining power".

3 Results and Discussion

In order to map the representations of the term body, we initially analyzed the Pedagogical Project (PPC) of the biological sciences degree course offered by the São Cristóvão *Campus* of the Federal Institute of Education, Science and Technology of Sergipe-IFS (IFS, 2020). In it, six entries of the word "body" were found, with three of them referring to all the teachers who are part of the course, entitled "the body of teachers" (IFS, 2020, p. 8, 9 and 13).

Box 1 – Recurrence and categorization of entries for the word "body" in the PPC guidelines of CLCB (IFS, 2020)

CATEGORY	SUBJECTS	GUIDELINES	PAGES	TERM
	Plant Morphology and Anatomy	Basic anatomy of vegetative organs, primary and secondary body .	59	3rd

Biological body	Elements of Anatomy	Construction plans of the human body . Study of the Male and Female Reproductive Systems. Organic systems and morphofunctional organizations of the main body segments.	71	5th
Cultural/ subjective body	Education, Diversity and Citizenship	Not found.	41	1st
	Sociology of Education	Not found.	52	2nd

Source: Adapted from Federal Institute of Sergipe (2020).

In line with this observation in the Course's Pedagogical Plan – namely that the Plan does not include the necessary expansion of the concept of the body and corporeality in its curricular guidelines and syllabus – and pointing towards a more plural and diverse debate, we sought to map out the students' perceptions and representations. To this end, a questionnaire was drawn up with nine questions, using a Likert scale, in which we asked the 55 enrollees to respond voluntarily to the survey. From this population, we obtained 40 returned questionnaires from all periods of the course, which constitutes a representative sample of 72% of those enrolled, as we illustrated earlier.

Based on these questionnaires, we proceeded to analyze the sample, which indicated that, when asked if the body can be defined only as biological matter, and should be studied only based on knowledge of anatomy, 42.5% disagreed and 17.5% totally disagreed. 25% agreed that the body is only defined and studied as biological matter. However, when confronted with the sentence "The body is also the product of a cultural, social and historical construction, as well as being biological matter", 62.5% said they agreed and 32.5% totally agreed.

By analyzing these two entries, we can conclude that restricting the study and definition of the subject of the body solely to anatomical biological ideas may be enough

for a quarter of the sample, but the understanding that this same sample has of the production of the body as a cultural artifact, marked socio-historically, expands this perception, showing the need to build a broader understanding of the subject.

When asked about the guarantee of knowledge that the degree course in biological sciences offers on body issues in the classroom, 35% said that the degree course in biological sciences would guarantee all the knowledge that future students need to debate in the classroom. Curiously, 35% disagreed with the question, indicating the need to broaden training for debating these issues today, not least because, in relation to the next question (“Is it relevant to debate gender, the body and sexuality in the educational field and in the classroom?”), 100% of the students consider the issue to be relevant, with 75% totally agreeing with the statement and 25% agreeing.

Similarly, of the 40 interviewees, 19 of them (47.5%) agree that it is important to deconstruct the idea of the body only as biological matter in the educational field. And 30% totally agree, indicating that future science and biology teachers understand the need to broaden the paradigms relating to corporeality today. This question was corroborated by another question in the questionnaire: “It is important that students on the biological sciences degree course broaden their understanding of the concept of the body and its meanings”. On this item, 50% of the sample totally agreed, while 45% agreed.

In a very clear way, the data collected in our survey indicated that the students have an understanding of the need to build a solid and expanded education on topics such as gender, sexuality and the body in the classroom. However, many said they didn’t feel completely prepared to face this challenge, as shown by the 42.5% who answered “Sometimes true” to the statement “I feel prepared to discuss gender, body and sexuality with primary school students in the classroom”. 15% answered that this statement is false, i.e. that they don’t feel prepared.

This led us to the second stage of the research: conversation circles, i.e. non-curricular training spaces that could broaden the training process of future teachers, encouraging them to build autonomous and critical spaces for reflection.

Based on the mapping carried out in the first stage of the research, in which more than 70% of the students regularly enrolled in the biological sciences degree course took part, the conversation circles were planned.

At the end of the first conversation circle, entitled “The body in history or the history of the body: the de-construction of a concept”, participants were asked to answer an evaluation containing three questions. The first item asked for a general assessment of the day’s activity, ranging from “I hated it” to “I loved it”. On this item, all the participants ticked between “I loved it” (the majority) and “I liked it”, with no opinions differing from these.

When asked if they considered conversation circle 1 to be important for their training, everyone was unanimous in answering “yes”, completing their answers with comments:

Yes, because I feel it's extremely important for teachers to understand diversity and know how to deal with it in the classroom (Student 01).

Yes. Because it goes beyond the knowledge that the course proposes, it makes us reflect on the reality that we will face in the classroom (Student 02).

The second round, entitled “Questioning the curriculum or which body goes to school?”, discussed topics such as the body beyond the biological; the construction of the body and adaptation at school; and the cultural construction of body standards.

At the end, there were important reflections on the construction of a hegemonic subject of the body, being male (white), cis, straight, thin and without motor disabilities, and a question was left for the students: “How can we make school a place of inclusion and equality?”

After these reflections, the students were asked to answer the same questions as in the first conversation circle, with the aim of observing their understanding, fixation and involvement with the topics discussed in this second stage. When asked again about the importance of this circle in their training, they all confirmed its importance and complemented it:

Yes, because they gave us guidance on how we should behave in society, showing that the body goes beyond the body, where the classroom is a place to teach freely, where everyone is welcomed regardless of their gender (Student 03).

Yes, because it will be an issue in the future and we as educators have to know how to approach it (Student 04).

Yes. Due to the sociological discussion on the idea of gender, diversity must be respected. Creating a democratic space for social inclusion at school (Student 05).

Yes, because it made us reflect on the body as all-important, preparing us to experience it in the classroom. Inclusion in the school environment (Student 06).

Yes. To know how to welcome my students in an inclusive way in the school environment and in society (Student 07).

Yes. Because we as teachers need to understand and learn about bodies and sexuality (Student 08).

In the last conversation circle, called “Body, representations and power: the school and its disciplining power”, some questions were asked about the power of our thoughts; to this end, some images of different bodies were distributed and the students were asked to rate each image, without expressing their opinions. When approaching the topic, a question was asked: “How can we define something as reality?” Starting from the thought of sociological imagination, we reflected on how the perception of subjects’ private lives is closely linked to broader social contexts.

This was followed by reflections quoting Foucault (2020) on power relations, noting that “society abuses power through the institutions of schools and prisons. This means of domination aims to tame human behavior”. Power relations are formed from the relationship of dependence on the will of others and this relationship is geared towards the control of bodies. An example of this is situations that occurred in the Middle Ages, and how this relationship took place through punishment. And so the question arises: how do men and women learn to behave?

Based on sociological thinking, it was reinforced that, through social practice (micropower and dissolved biopower), the individual is involved in a network of power relations – school, church, work, family and the state as generators or recipients of these

relations. It has been shown that the school explicitly imposes this power relationship in the control of the individual (separation by age, uniform, separate desks, teacher versus student hierarchy) and that power is installed through sexist, racist and homophobic discourses.

After these observations, the students were asked to answer the same questions as in conversation circles 1 and 2, with the aim of observing each student's understanding, fixation and involvement with the topics discussed in this third stage. When they were asked again about the importance of this conversation circle in their training, they confirmed its importance and complemented it:

Yes. To know the influence we have and to be able to talk about it with my students (Student 04).

Yes. To gain knowledge for my academic training (Student 07).

Yes, because it's good to know the historical context of the facts so that we can avoid reproducing them again and improve as a society (Student 09).

Yes, because these power relations will be important in our education (Student 10).

4 Conclusions

In view of the aspects observed in this study, there is a need to broaden the perceptions of the body and corporeality of biological sciences undergraduates to “beyond biology”. To do this, the PPC of the course in question was analyzed and it was discovered that the word “body” is only observed in the biological sense, without considering its sociocultural issues. Based on this analysis, questionnaires were drawn up with nine questions, in which the students answered questions about their understanding of the concepts and meanings of the body. Based on this data, the topics to be discussed in the conversation circles were decided.

The conversation circles about the body, held with the students, not only increased their knowledge about the historical social processes that the body has gone through, but also demystified several misconceptions that these students had. The implementation of

the circles, combined with raising students' awareness of the body, proved to be a viable strategy for contributing to the training of future university students on such a recurring issue in classrooms.

In addition, the study also identified important challenges, such as the lack of consolidated knowledge about the history of the body and the understanding that biological sex does not define the individual and that it is the result of a social context. Thus, there is a need for continuous monitoring to ensure the success of the conversation circles and debates.

For future studies, we recommend re-evaluating the course's PPC, in view of the challenges facing teachers in contemporary times and the need to make the school environment inclusive.

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