

Secondary Education Schools and Education in Values: Research and practice for the prevention of gender-based violence

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Introduction

'Pain caused by love as well as the dependency on a relationship are seen with a tendency of romanticism in our societies....we are taught that the extent of love can only be measured by the amount of suffering we feel and that only those who suffer know how to truly love' (Norwood, 1985)

The association between love and suffering is something quite common in our everyday lives. The idea that being in an intimate relationship also coincides with pain, in terms of being dependent on the other person and tolerating their behaviour becomes normalized through songs, art, TV series and other mediums of socialization. However, this normalization runs the risk of making forms of abuse within intimate relationships invisible or even more, of romanticizing abusive behaviour like domination and control and camouflage it as depiction of care and love.

The research presented in this paper aimed at unraveling adolescents' perceptions on love, violence and intimate relationships as well as at investigating what kind of forms of gender-based violence are most common among adolescents¹. In this way more informed recommendations could be made for developing strategies within the educational sphere for the early prevention of gender-based violence, which at the same time would contribute in reducing the chances of this phenomenon appearing in adult relationships. For the purposes of this research gender-based violence is understood as any type of violence (physical, psychological, economic etc) that is committed towards a person who is perceived to not conform to socially-accepted gender roles as well as social expectations based on gender, recognizing that this type of violence affects women and girls disproportionately. Furthermore, it is important to clarify that in relation to exploring adolescents' intimate relationships only heterosexual relationships were addressed.

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This research was conducted simultaneously in secondary schools in Malta, Spain and Cyprus however for the purposes of this paper a focus will be made on the results from the Cypriot context.

Mapping the study of phenomenon of gender-based violence (GBV) among adolescents

In recent decades gender equality policies within the field of education have been mainly focusing on ensuring equal access to school education for girls in a number of contexts while others have aimed in challenging the androcentric organization and functioning of schools. While equal access has been achieved to a significant extent in Europe, including the Cypriot context, not many efforts have been made in making schools free from abuse and discrimination on the basis of gender which would in itself promote the educational opportunities of girls and boys as it would enhance their chances of pursuing their full potential.

One cause of this lack in policy might be identified in the fact that GBV is commonly associated with adult relationships despite the variety of studies that show clearly the perpetration of GBV within the relationships of young and adolescent people. Many studies, particularly in the US, have focused on GBV among college students and more specifically on dating violence. An analysis of data on dating violence in universities in 30 different countries indicated that 29% of the students had committed aggressions within their relationships during the last 12 months, more than 9% of which constituted serious physical violence (Straus, 2004). At the same time studies in the US show a high percentage of GBV among adolescent and young people, with 30% of high-school and college students reporting experiencing dating violence (Carlson, 2003). Moreover, in another research on the same issue a significant percentage of the 37 adolescents (aged between 14 and 18 years) who participated, reported having been victims of psychological violence like consistent insults, threats, and even battery (James, West, Deters & Armijo, 2000). Furthermore, a longitudinal research study conducted in the US showed that female students who suffered physical assault as adolescents during their high-school years were more likely to be revictimised during university (Smith, White & Holland, 2003). This conclusion is quite important as it indicates that violence is a repeated phenomenon in someone's life, as girls who have suffered physical assault during adolescence were at greater risk to face physical or sexual assault in the future.

It is also important to mention that a number of studies have also researched attitudes towards the acceptance and normalization of violence. In Greece, a research involving 486 Greek female adolescents indicated that GBV is a frequent phenomenon in adolescent relationships with 1 in 2 girls reporting experiencing some form of intimate partner violence in current or previous relationships, while a high percentage of which justified the infliction of physical violence towards the female partner in cases of adultery or refusal to have sex, especially within marriage (Pentaraki, 2003). Similar results on young people's attitudes towards GBV have been found in a study with college students mentioned above where a high

percentage agreed that a husband can slap his wife under certain circumstances (Straus, 2004). Moreover, in a study conducted in 5 European countries involving more than 1, 887 female college students, the majority of participants tended to 'rationalise' their 'willing' accommodation of unwanted sexual advances while it seemed that a distinction between a 'date' and a 'relationship' facilitated girls' acceptance of sexual aggression on a date (Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies, 2008). This emphasis on the attitudes that young people and adolescents maintain towards intimate relationships and violence is instrumental in the perpetuation of violence as it will be further illustrated in the section on the results of the research undertaken in secondary schools in Cyprus.

Despite the above studies, GBV among adolescent dating partners continues to remain an understudied phenomenon in Europe while at the same time the role that models of masculinity and femininity play in violence among adolescents continues to be under-explored. Many studies focusing on bullying in schools in the Mediterranean context for example, fail to introduce in their analysis the gender dimension of this phenomenon and therefore do not consider gender as an explanatory factor for these deviant behaviours. In Cyprus and Greece this happens despite the fact that research has shown that the majority of perpetrators of bullying are boys (Association of Psychological Health for Children and Adolescents, Greece, 2008), a reality that was explained as a result of the social pressures inflicted on boys to prove their masculinity by dominating and/or abusing girls as well as their male peers (Klein, 2006). Moreover this explanation is very much in alignment with a recent report by the World Health Organisation which has indicated that men who submit to violence against their female partners consider this violence justified and as a form of controlling female behaviour, since a man's honour is very often associated to the sexual 'purity' of women in his family (2002).

This association between manifestations of masculinity and violence is indicative of the need to work on deconstructing gender-based stereotypes from an early age in order to prevent GBV being experienced or perpetrated in adult life.

Theoretical and methodological framework of the research project

The main aim of this research study was to contribute to the prevention of GBV by studying the relationships and values developed during adolescence in order to identify perceptions and behaviours that might lead to the perpetration or toleration of this phenomenon in the future. The target group of the study was adolescents between the ages of 14 to 17 as it was considered that during this period a lot of teenagers form their first intimate relationships and develop values in relation to the models of attraction, e.g. the characteristics they consider attractive in their choice of a partner. The hypothesis was made that in many cases these models promote and value violent features perceiving them as attractive.

For the realization of the study a number of factors were taken under consideration in the analysis of the research data in relation to the gender socialization of adolescents such as the school, the family, the peer group and the media. The research was implemented using qualitative methods. More specifically, in Cyprus 12 adolescents and 10 teachers from 5 secondary schools were interviewed via semi-structured interviews while 36 adolescents participated in 6 focus groups, one conducted in each school and one in a youth centre.

The theoretical background of the study was based on a significant degree on the theory of Jesus Gomez in relation to 'love' and 'attraction' (Gomez, 2004). Gomez held the position that through socialization we interiorize a series of values and preferences that will determine the people we feel attracted to. Therefore in the analysis of the data 'love' and 'attraction' were seen as socially conditioned concepts, e.g. influenced by beliefs and values developed through socialization and therefore subject to change. Furthermore, Gomez considered as one of the main causes of GBV the association between love and suffering which as mentioned above is quite often promoted through a number of socialization factors such as the family, the media and art (films, songs, literature, etc). This association promotes the idea that suffering within an intimate relationship is something normal while through the media, and more particularly advertising violence is depicted as something sexy and attractive. These types of associations are quite problematic as they can render abuse invisible within an intimate relationship and therefore contribute to the perpetuation of violence.

Findings

The findings presented in this section mostly refer to the research data obtained during the study undertaken in Cyprus. However, comparisons or references are also made with some of the results reached in Malta and Spain, where the research was also implemented. It is important to mention that in presenting these results the aim is not to generalize across Cypriot schools and their population but rather to highlight some important outcomes that emanated from interviews with teachers and students that can be key in understanding the roots of GBV and therefore drafting specific recommendations and strategies for its prevention. Moreover the results of this study can also be important in providing a basis for further research in this area.

One of the main outcomes of the research undertaken in the Cypriot context is that infidelity or the suspicion of infidelity conducted by the female partner in a heterosexual relationship seems to be one of the most common reasons for which boys inflict physical violence on their partners. As it was explained by the participants in the research the infliction of violence in this case works as a restorative measure in that it restores the masculinity of the boy and his status among peers. More specifically it is used as means of 'regaining control' over the

relationship and 'correcting' the reputation and prestige/status of the male partner. An indicative quote from the interviews is the following:

'when they whisper that someone's girlfriend went off with another guy, he will try to be a smart guy by beating her up, and this is like saying 'I beat her and left her so I don't care if she slept with another guy' in this way he rises above the situation...in order to restore his reputation...his honour' (boys, 17 years old)

'this is the bad thing about relationships at this age that from the moment you enter a relationship with a girl you have to control her, you can't just leave her on her own. That's the bad thing about relationships' (boy, 15 years old)

In the latter quote it is clear that the participant almost feels obliged to inflict this kind of control on his female partner. This controlling behaviour was identified through the research as the most common form of abuse in teenage heterosexual relationships manifested especially through restrictions on the ways of dressing of the female partner or on socializing with certain people as well as restrictions on the movement and the places to go out.

Another important outcome of the study was that 'reputation' (or honor) especially in connection to sexual activity seems to be a very sensitive issue for girls in the Cypriot context, as the 'reputation' of girls many times becomes the target for verbal bullying in the school context. This is done via the transmission of rumours regarding a certain girl, in this way defaming her in sexual terms, an act which appears to be conducted by both male and female peers. As explained by a teenage female interviewee:

'It is very easy to destroy the good reputation of a girl, without her doing anything other than going out with a guy, they can call her a prostitute, they will make up stories that she did this and that and if this gets around, then its over, then she will be stuck with this identity' (girl, 17 years old)

What also seemed important and emphasized by female participants to the interviews was that it is very hard for a girl to disengage from this 'identity' once it is inflicted on her. The vulnerability of girls towards sexual verbal abuse has also been identified in other contexts (Eliasson, Isaksson & Laflamme, 2007).

Another important outcome which was shared with outcomes reached in the Spanish context refers to the attitudes that teenagers and especially girls have in terms of what constitutes a loving relationship. The research data indicated that a lot of teenage girls accept abusive behaviour in their intimate relationships as something normal without questioning it. This is very much related to the fact that many times they do not even identify that what they suffer from is a form of abuse, in other words they don't recognize abusive behaviour for what it is and in many cases they tolerate it. Such abusive behaviour ranged from the controlling types of

behaviour mentioned above to pressure on consummating a relationship. A relevant outcome to this finding is that many teenagers in all three countries identified violence mostly with physical acts, although there were some who identified possessiveness as a form of abuse. This kind of perception of violence renders psychological violence like threats, insults, control etc invisible to the victim as well as the perpetrator who accept this kind of violence as a normal consequence/characteristic of intimate relationships.

Furthermore, when asked to describe what love means to them, a high percentage of teenagers mentioned values like understanding, respect, trust and tenderness. However, relationships which include this kind of values did not seem to be quite frequent among teenagers as a number of participants stated that they had suffered within relationships or they knew a number of peers who had suffered abuse in relationships. Therefore their abstract ideas of what love is, however positive, did not seem to translate into their everyday realities in relationships. Related to this was the fact that teenage participants did not consider GBV as something which relates to them directly and therefore did not associate current beliefs and attitudes towards violence and love with violent attitudes that can develop in future intimate relationships.

In terms of bullying and more specifically bullying in relation to gender the outcomes of the research have shown that it remains a highly underreported phenomenon in the school context mostly due to fear of reprisals as well as further marginalisation within the school community. These elements are highlighted in the following quote by a teacher who describes cases of sexual harassment towards girls in her secondary school:

'They touch them in a way that they shouldn't, they tell them vulgar stuff, and whether they show it or not they feel uncomfortable. They might not show it, I have seen this a number of times, because they fear that they will be rejected by the group, by the macho guys'

The rejection by the peer group and especially by the popular boys in school seems to be quite intimidating and therefore a deterring factor in reporting cases of bullying, more so those related to the sensitive matter of sexual harassment. In relation to this, the research data have shown that also homosexual students, or perceived by others as such, constitute targets of consistent bullying within the school community, in the Cypriot context. Such abusive behaviours, including the sexual verbal abuse mentioned above, become even more normalized and silenced if not identified and named as such by school teachers and counsellors, which very often seems to be the case. For this reason it is necessary for mechanisms to be established through which students will be encouraged to report such incidents and find the support they need in order to face them effectively.

Moreover, according to the interviewees, bullying is most often inflicted by boys who are popular in school who also employ other violent acts to 'prove' or manifest

their masculinity, like damaging school or other property. The problematic issue here is that these popular boys are very often included in the popular male models of attraction for teenage girls in which cases violence in the form of bullying or any other form is then perceived as something attractive, a fact that in itself can have very strong associations to the toleration and perpetuation of gender-related violence in schools and teenage relationships. The latter association is further enhanced by the fact that a number of interviewees said that girls very often tend to disregard rude, disrespectful or even violent behaviour from popular boys towards other girls if they are attracted to them and/or have a chance to go out with them. This latter outcome is indicative of the fact that even if violent attributes are not considered attractive by girls, they are also not considered a deterring factor for entering a relationship.

In terms of girls' popularity, good looks is an indispensable prerequisite for becoming popular in school as attracting male attention is what provides a girl visibility and a higher status within the school community. As mentioned by interviewees, quite popular in school are also girls who present themselves as sexually available and in this way also gaining male attention. Although from these initial findings it looks like the value and status of a girl is very much depended on how far they can attract male attention, for boys it doesn't seem that this is also the case. Although having good looks was also mentioned as one of the criteria that make a boy popular, this by itself was not enough. Rather other issues seemed more important for boys like the ability to socialize in terms of having a big circle of friends and acquaintances and the demonstration of behaviour considered rebellious like riding motorbikes in the school yard, working in nightclubs among others.

In conclusion, some final remarks in relation to the various factors that influence the gender socialization of adolescents. Family circumstances and parental attitudes towards children were mentioned by both teachers and students as having instrumental role as to whether the child will demonstrate delinquent behaviour, perpetrate bullying or tolerate bullying conducted at her/his expense. The media were also mentioned by both groups as crucial in promoting relationships who lack values like trust, commitment and respect as well as reinforcing rigid gender roles and prejudices. Despite the identification and critical view of these areas of gender socialization by the participants what was striking throughout the research was the overall lack in mentioning and therefore acknowledging school as an important factor in maintaining or reinforcing such behaviours. School was totally absent as a possible actor in either maintaining these rigid gender roles or intervening to stop their perpetuation. The lack in acknowledging the responsibility of schools in addressing social issues and taking a critical stand is a general gap in the educational policy in Cyprus which needs to be substantially addressed.

In addition to the above, adolescents find a huge gap in terms of communication in relation to issues of sexual and emotional nature with both parents and teachers. As mentioned by teenage participants, teachers often consider issues of a sexual and/or emotional nature as taboo and feel uncomfortable discussing about them with their students. On the other hand teachers mentioned that they do not feel sufficiently

trained in handling issues of sexual or emotional nature but also that in many cases they do not have the time to devote to such matters due to their overloaded schedule.

Conclusion

Gender-based violence, in its various forms, can and should be addressed not only in a sedative manner but also through preventive strategies. The role of schools and the overall system of education can play a crucial part in questioning the dynamics of gender power within current societies as well as empower young people to identify GBV and refrain from tolerating or normalizing it.

To achieve the above, schools and officials in the system of education must assert an active role in terms of including issues of a social nature in the curriculum and allocating the time needed so that they are adequately addressed. As comprehensive sexual education with a gender equality approach is still missing from the official curricula of schools in Cyprus, the platform through which adolescents would be able to express their concerns and discuss issues related to gender and sex remains unavailable and continues to formulate a major gap in the educational system.

Moreover and in relation to the findings of this research, it seems that another important policy measure that needs to be undertaken is the provision of a system for confidential reporting and archiving of GBV related incidents. In relation to this, counselors or other relevant actors in school must be trained in identifying gender-related bullying and abuse as to be able to contribute to the effective reporting and management of these issues. As the fear for reprisals makes bullying under-reported the lack of identification and addressing of such incidents as abusive further encourages the maintenance of a culture of silence within and outside the school context.

In conclusion, more pedagogical measures need to be developed in addressing GBV in school. Current practice of implementing mainly disciplinary measures like reprobation or expulsion has proven to be inadequate when dealing with abuse produced by socially-conditioned prejudices and behaviours. Rather, perpetrators as well as the general student population must be made aware through educational means of the effects, roots and future consequences of current gender-related abusive behaviours as well as the consequences of their toleration.

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