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Prevention of gender-based violence in the classroom: some observations

Ana Martín García*

C/Espartero 32, 1º E 15401 Ferrol (A Coruña), Spain

Abstract

One of the key objectives pursued by education is to instil values. Within the wide range of these encompassed by such an undertaking, principles such as the rejection of sexism and harassment assume an even more crucial role if we consider the many parallels that can be drawn between bullying and gender-based violence. These are the two most common expressions of violence in our society, and both have their basis in a model of dominance and submission that is not innate, but rather is learnt in society.

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1. Introduction

Based on a social history approach, the psychology of activity (Bruner, 1999; Holzman, 1997) suggests that individuals assimilate culture through participation in educational activities. The principal scenario for these activities is the school. In the classroom, students can either reproduce or transform the society to which they, as future citizens, belong. This is the starting point from which we can explain how and why constructivist and cooperative work, as well as a teaching approach based on coeducation, can provide tools for social interaction and contribute to the creation of a culture of equality capable of eradicating gender-based violence. Such a goal requires the implementation of innovation projects that ensure the cross-disciplinary participation of the entire educational community in order to work towards a fairer social culture.

* Tel.: +0034 981353385.

E-mail address: anamarting@yahoo.es

Without question, one of the key objectives pursued by education is to instil values. Within the wide range of these encompassed by such an undertaking, principles such as the rejection of sexism and harassment assume an even more crucial role if we consider the many parallels that can be drawn between bullying (Barragán, 1999) and gender-based violence (Díaz Aguado, 2009). These are the two most common expressions of violence in our society, and both have their basis in a model of dominance and submission that is not innate, but rather is learnt in society.

However, just as one particular context can lead to learning by imitation and thus assimilation of certain sexist behaviours and attitudes, so too new educational pathways exist which have the capacity to construct new, equality-based models in society. To this end it is necessary to acquire a gender perspective that takes into account roles based on gender, relationships and social and economic needs, as well as access to resources and the other constraints and opportunities imposed on men and women by society, culture, age, religion, ethnicity and so on.

The sexism that spawns gender-based violence is perpetuated by the historical division of the world into two spaces: a public, male arena, reserved exclusively for men, and another private and intimate sphere, inhabited by women. Similarly, the values that the inhabitants of each of these spaces were expected to possess were partitioned. Bakan (1966) called this the duality of human existence; a situation in which male and female values were under no circumstances compatible or interchangeable. Men were strong, whilst women were sensitive; men were dominant, women obedient. The roles assigned to men included being violent, lacking in empathy and dominant, whereas women were expected to be weak, emotional and submissive. In short, a clear dominance-submission duality was established.

Although present day society has progressed, some aspects of this duality have persisted. Thus, it is more acceptable for boys to act out their anger than for girls to do so, and it is more acceptable for girls to cry than for boys to do so; girls are more likely to be comforted and boys to be told that they are men now. Furthermore, studies have shown that relationships between boys and girls are not symmetrical and that there are numerous situations in everyday life based on abuse. Moving into adolescence, we find that skills, abilities and life projects still remain linked to gender. In textbooks, women's contributions are not made visible because this need is not explicitly specified in the curricula. Sexism and gender-based violence are everyday phenomena that influence the lives of our children.

The picture is very different if we turn our attention to the South. Inequality between men and women is infinitely worse in the developing world, despite attempts by supranational organisations to redress this imbalance between the genders, a disparity which is especially evident in the educational context. The international community is aware that the education of girls and women is a fundamental human right, and one which would equip them with the tools necessary for their empowerment and freedom. Therefore, female education has become one of the goals of both the EFA (Education for All) and the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals). However, closing the gender gap in primary and secondary education by the year 2005, and achieving gender equality by 2015, are milestones that have turned out to be unattainable. Governments need to devote greater efforts, resources and commitment to achieving these goals, because otherwise, this dominance-submission duality will continue to prevail and with it, the seeds of violence will continue to be sown.

In fact, the dominance-submission model lies beneath all forms of violence today. Thus, students who engage in bullying or violent behaviour frequently hold sexist, xenophobic or racist ideas, and show a lack of the capacity for empathy or self-criticism and of course an inability to tolerate frustration. They have learnt to affirm themselves through violence and the domination of others. Similarly, those girls educated in the traditional stereotype of submission are more likely than others to become victims of harassment.

Abusers employ strategies that define their behaviour and which in many cases are strongly identified with those of a school bully. They justify their assaults in such a way that their violent behaviour appears rational. At the same time, they downplay the seriousness of their aggression and deflect the problem, always seeking an excuse. In the case of adults, this may be stress or work, and it is interesting to see how many young people also cling to the concept of stress as a pretext. They rapidly forget about their attacks, and show no real intention of changing their behaviour. On the contrary, they repeat their offences and argue that it is the victim who provokes their violence. On many occasions, the victims eventually assume this role, that of being deserving of punishment, and experience fear, anxiety, depression, disorientation, isolation and seclusion. Their emotional block does not allow them to act in accordance with rational criteria; they internalise sexism and dependence on their partner, and submit to any authority even if this is to their own detriment. Their behaviour verges on slavery, and they transmit these sexual stereotypes to those closest to them.

What is required is the implementation of empowerment, a process by which men and women take control of their lives, learn to set their own agendas and acquire skills that increase their self-esteem, enabling them to resolve problems and develop self-management. Empowerment is both a process and an outcome.

2. Coeducation

Promoting equality between men and women and preventing gender-based violence will entail transforming the current mixed-sex school into a coeducational school that takes people and the development of each of their identities as its benchmark, and which is a fairer school for everyone regardless of sex, where differences do not imply gender, educational or social inequalities.

By transmitting values to students which are not partitioned by sex, but rather common to both sexes, we in the education community can help create an equitable society capable of opposing gender-based violence and any form of dominance.

In the past, education was denied to women. Today, in contrast, the figures indicate that they are achieving greater academic success than men. To date however, their superior education has not sufficed to overcome the barriers that impede their routine access to positions of power or authority. In many cases, a higher level of education does not necessarily imply better employment opportunities. Even when women surpass men in academic performance, they continue to face considerable deficiencies and discrimination in the labour market, and end up in jobs which do not leverage their skills. Yet education, although not the only ingredient of female emancipation, nevertheless remains one of its pillars.

The reasons that prevent women from moving up the career ladder are many and varied, but one of the main ones is the difficulty of reconciling the public and private spheres, a problem which once again derives from the aforementioned model of duality (Díaz-Aguado, 2009).

With regard to the value or utility of violence, we must bear in mind that the educational curriculum does not provide for a critical analysis of war or of its consequences, nor of assaults and their social and personal effects. It is therefore no wonder that many young people see violence as an acceptable means to achieve their goals or deliver justice. Violence has been justified as a means to an end and its effectiveness proven by examples of a historical nature.

There are other aspects that deserve consideration, such as the fact that women perceive the eradication of sexism as a gain, whereas men perceive it as a loss. These issues serve to help define the objectives to be pursued in innovative educational plans aimed at achieving the prevention and eradication of violence against women.

Coeducation is a vital tool in such plans, since it encourages the peaceful coexistence of boys and girls in the same educational space. It must be accompanied by relationships of equality, avoiding the rigid hierarchies and groups that contribute to reproducing the model of dominance-submission. The aim of coeducation is to establish a teaching methodology which although not based on a feminist perspective, does take a constructivist view of women and men, in an attempt to unite them in equality. A further aim is to lay the foundations necessary to end all forms of violence and to foster rejection of the abuse of power, foundations which impose limits on the other, defend personal and collective spaces for freedom, expression and self-realisation, and which establish relationships of equality and dialogue between men and women.

Recently, debate has resurfaced over the desirability or not of a segregated education which separates and differentiates between boys and girls. From the perspective of an education in equality, this model is misguided. Only the everyday coexistence of students, regardless of their sex, can lead to an egalitarian society. Clearly, sharing space can lead to an increase in conflict, but this is not necessarily negative since it can also expand opportunities for learning about conflict resolution. Segregation and exclusion do not educate.

We must promote intergroup activities that serve to foster friendship between boys and girls and lay the foundations for improved participation in cooperative and constructivist work based on shared goals. Cooperative learning in heterogeneous groups is preferable to individual and competitive learning. It is necessary to distribute opportunities for exerting power and taking centre stage equitably, so that is not always the male sex which wields control, excluding women from power, nor women who are always expected to be understanding.

Particular emphasis should be placed on the fact that the social and psychological differences assigned to each sex are not linked to biological differences between the sexes, but are forged by culture, history, tradition and education.

This is why educational curricula should incorporate a gender perspective that, in the words of Professor Díaz Aguado (2009), enables young people to understand the richness of diversity and the essence of equality.

In short, in order to prevent gender-based violence at school it is imperative to create educational innovation spaces and projects which leave outdated models behind and facilitate assimilation of current social changes, enabling us to adapt to a complex and changing reality.

In this context, boys and girls need to learn to say no to pressure from others, say no to the abuse of power, stop doing what custom dictates and learn to recognise their own desires and reconcile these with those of others. These are new avenues towards self-realisation and freedom that can be explored through coeducation.

Education is in part the key to this change, but this key must be wielded by society as a whole. To this end, we need to create social awareness and constant dialogue. There is a huge gap between what society expects from teachers and the resources they are given to achieve this.

It is essential to raise awareness in order to overcome this disparity. Schools must cease to be closed environments sheltered from the realities of everyday life. The family-school relationship must go beyond the mere exchange of information to become a collaborative effort between equals, without imposing either the position of the parents or of the school, because otherwise we would repeat the model we want to eradicate. Neither should have to submit to the other. Instead, we must work for the common good. It is clear that in practice, this task will not be easy. Similarly, the task of clearing away the methodology of many veteran teachers, based on iron discipline and punishment as educational tools, is not something that can be achieved overnight. The risk of dominance is still present in education today, where the rules are obeyed under threat of punishment, penalties or expulsion. The correct educational approach would be to prioritise listening in order to identify what lies behind a conflict, to pay attention to how we treat each other and to teach students how to express their own emotions, listen to those of other people and share them. Such an approach would contribute to the development and maturity of young people. We must therefore pay close attention to all means of teaching equality, in the knowledge that we should not only pursue equality among students, but in all social relationships both inside and outside the classroom.

Creating a climate of closeness and trust is the key, breaking the walls surrounding students' fears and uncertainties and listening to their sorrows and their hopes. This also means being alert for signs of possible violent behaviour, whether suffered by victims or perpetrated by aggressors. Teachers must learn to spot the early signs of violence and the modus operandi of abusers, and must also transmit this knowledge to those directly affected so that they do not assume an attitude of submission but instead recognise such behaviour for what it is and in doing so, refuse to accept it.

From emotional abuse that damages the self-esteem, through personal or even family threats, to the emergence of a split personality where the abuser loves as much as he hates, there is a rising scale of violence that must be identified in order to tackle it.

In adolescence, young people begin to experience their first feelings of romantic love and embark on their first couple relationships. Providing them with an education in emotional intelligence is a crucial step towards preventing gender-based violence. This entails much more than dispensing a few random pieces of advice; rather, it involves concerted interdisciplinary work aimed at the destruction of sexism and the achievement of self-esteem, equality and justice.

3. Permanent proposals vs educational innovation

Normally, the prevention of violence is addressed in schools using materials created by various NGOs and institutions; however, few of these materials have been adapted to the age of primary education or even secondary education students. It is therefore necessary for teachers to adapt or create their own materials tailored to their own particular context.

Whilst it is rewarding to produce specific programmes on coeducation and the promotion of equality, this is insufficient when it merely meets ephemeral criteria. Such goals require a constant, daily presence in order to obtain results. The construction of equality and non-violence can only be undertaken from a holistic and continual approach, and must always include the prevention of gender-based violence.

To accomplish the implementation of an innovative educational project that is based on the achievement of objectives in the so-called hidden curriculum is no mean feat. The voracity of the labour market, the impact of the

crisis and the advance of globalisation as a result of rapidly developing technologies have all led schools and families to demand a better education in ICTs, languages and mathematics...But who is concerned about developing innovative projects aimed at improving social and ethical behaviour? And yet, if this founders, the rest lacks any meaning or basis.

We need genuine conceptual changes that will enable students to learn and above all understand the true meaning of equality. It will not suffice to replace the old concepts with other, scientifically accepted ones. We need some kind of "genetic" connection between the students' spontaneous theories and the scientific theory we wish to transmit. This is the only way that students will truly assimilate the new concept and perceive its validity and its superiority over previous ones. They must be enabled to see this not only within a theoretical framework, but also in situations that involve a cognitive challenge.

4. Objectives of innovation projects aimed at the prevention of gender-based violence

Using a socio-affective methodology based on lived experience, steps can be taken to facilitate personal transformation and encourage action. It is necessary to feel emotions and teach how to feel them, and to promote learning that goes more than skin deep using techniques that permit the expression of emotions and deeply held beliefs. Students must be taught to think about, reflect on and analyse what they feel, and be enabled to describe their experiences. From this basis we can begin to incorporate facts, concepts and theories which, now that the students have a greater awareness of the issue, can be discussed and assimilated. Lastly, we can act, encouraging the development of critical, transforming attitudes that arouse the desire to participate in an education based on equal opportunities.

The most important aspects that an innovation project aimed at preventing gender-based violence should incorporate are summarised in the following points.

1. To revise the curriculum from the perspective of gender.
 - Selecting inclusive and coeducational teaching materials.
 - Fostering critical reflection among students about the concepts of masculinity, femininity, violence and emotional education.
 - Providing models of masculinity that are not associated with violent behaviours and models of femininity that are not linked to submission.
2. To provide teachers with a training in practical ways of constructing equality.
 - Incorporating the perspective of gender into education. It is imperative for teachers to receive training and awareness raising about gender inequality in the world and its consequences.
 - Teaching based on constructivist, heterogeneous and cooperative models using flexible groups in which students take turns to play a central role.
 - Collectively analysing and constructing values consistent with non-violence and conflict resolution.
 - Assigning central spaces equitably by planning a spatial organisation that enables the egalitarian coexistence of students.
 - Providing students with guidance on decisions regarding their academic, professional and life projects that is based on freedom and diversity of choice and does not reflect the constraints of gender stereotypes.
 - Conducting a meta-evaluation of teaching actions, paying particular attention to an analysis of any gender-based expectations that may persist among teachers. Differences in teachers' expectations affect student behaviour.
3. To examine human rights and non-violence as goals to be achieved not only in the classroom but in society as a whole.
 - Raising students' awareness so that they become agents of transmission, conveying what they have learnt and practised in the classroom to their families and applying it in their daily lives. Endowing them with the responsibility for assuming this task.
 - Raising awareness about violence and its social and personal consequences.
 - Ensuring access to education regardless of sex, ethnicity, culture, etc.

- Providing an education in affective and sexual relationships and in peaceful coexistence, fomenting equality of women and men and tolerance of sexual diversity.
4. To develop and disseminate prevention and action protocols in cases of gender-based violence.
 - Coordinating schools and social institutions in order to provide rapid and apposite help to students or families experiencing abuse.
 - Detecting and preventing instances of micro-violence.
 - Advising on models of relating and attraction.
 - Monitoring the children of women subjected to gender-based violence.
 - Addressing cultural diversity and the impact that other cultures may have on women's development.
 5. To engage families in the task of coeducation and enhance active parental involvement in education and school.
 - Raising awareness of the importance of an emotional education for men and women as a means to achieve their full development free of prejudice and patriarchal gender stereotypes.
 - Unlearning gender mandates and rethinking the values and attitudes permeating our cultures and lives which contribute to gender inequality.
 - Working towards women's empowerment.

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