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

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## 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.

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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.

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