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3-6 June 2024, Cagliari (Italy)

Education is a battleground of power, identity, and inequality. This volume unravels the tensions between exclusion and inclusion, privilege and marginalization, tracing how policies, epistemologies, and ideologies shape who belongs—and who is left behind.

PROCEEDINGS

01

Inequality, Inclusion, and Governance

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Vol. 1
**Inequality,
Inclusion,
and Governance**

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di Sardegna

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Stream H

**GENDER
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE
IN EDUCATION**

FEMALE BULLYING AT SCHOOL. THE MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF VIOLENCE AMONG ADOLESCENT GIRLS

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INTRODUCTION

Analysing bullying through a gender perspective has become increasingly necessary, driven by the recognition of both the potential and the limitations of literature that interprets phenomena – such as male and female bullying – as universal and, therefore, neutral-masculine rather than masculine-neutral. Over the past fifty years, female and feminist thought has developed a scientific discourse that deepens our understanding of reality in its complexity. This discourse highlights sexual and partial subjects (Diotima, 1987), emphasising a perspective rooted in sexual difference and gender as critical interpretative lenses. It also foregrounds knowledge situated and embodied within specific subjects and contexts (Haraway, 1988). This evolution has culminated in the compelling intersectional perspective, which enables us to address diversity, recognising that everyone simultaneously embodies multiple, intersecting diversities (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Therefore, it is essential to open both female and male bullying to autonomous interpretations (De Vita & Burgio, 2023; Burgio, 2018; De Vita & Vittori, 2022). The studies conducted in Italy highlight a theoretical and empirical gap capable of defining female bullying dimensions. The national research “Female bullying at school. An intersectional mixed-method investigation” (coordinated by De Vita & Burgio) tried to fill this gap. The survey involving several Italian Universities (Verona, Enna “Kore”, Milan-Bicocca, Genoa, Perugia and Foggia), through a mixed-method approach, sought to deepen the understanding of female bullying from a gender and intersectional perspective by highlighting its shades (De Vita & Burgio, 2023) and measuring its incidence of the phenomenon in Italy in terms of frequency (Batini et al., 2023), implementing data collection involving the school population of the early upper secondary school. This panel was therefore aimed

at including proposals that explored the several thematic cores around female bullying from an interdisciplinary point of view.

1. INSIGHTS FROM THE PANEL DISCUSSION

The panel highlighted how female bullying, though less visible than male dynamics, is equally pervasive and rooted in verbal, relational, and social exclusion. Peer relationships and social pressures shape roles and behaviours, often driven by cultural and gender norms that reinforce “femininity” and power hierarchies. Research using participatory approaches and Student’s Voice methodologies emphasised the value of involving students and adults as “experts” in addressing peer bullying.

2. SUMMARY OF THE MAIN SHARED CONTENTS

This paragraph summarises the main contents presented and discussed during the panel. We emphasise that some of the contributions received were not presented and discussed due to the absence of the panellists.

2.1 The size and forms of the phenomenon

Among the works presented, Scierri and Batini trace the data of the national research framing the phenomenon and confirming some research hypotheses, namely that bullying between girls manifests itself mainly between school desks and online, within the peer group of the same gender and school year and is often verbal and relational. Quantitative data show that bullying affects boys and girls equally, without greater female victimisation. However, there is a greater involvement of girls in episodes of verbal abuse and exclusion from the peer group. These specificities were confirmed by Genova and Quadrelli, who, through an action-research project carried out in the Marche Region (Central Italy), employed creative methodologies and thus stimulated students’ imagination through drawing. The drawings show a representation of bullying with a male prevalence in the role of the perpetrator, but also a complex phenomenology of female bullying, in which girls exercise psychological as well as physical violence towards both girls and boys.

2.2 Anticipation of the age of female bullying

Peroni showed how even school-age girls are subject to female bullying, pushed to conform to models of adult “femininity”. The absence of reference adults and the self-sufficiency of the young participants suggest a potential for resilience and self-empowerment in the face of intra-gender-based violence.

2.3 Itineraries for teachers and families

Caso and Altamura underlined how teachers and parents are essential in recognising and combating bullying, with the risk that ineffectiveness in the role makes them inadequate.

A guideline of interventions for adults has been proposed to improve support and prevention.

2.4 Social stigma and mutual recognition

Landuzzi and Dusi, examining the dynamics of social stigma, highlighted how female bullying reflects stereotypes that crystallise and impose themselves with the force of stigma. Experiences of abuse can profoundly influence the victims' self-perception, underscoring the need for an educational perspective of mutual recognition and respect.

2.5 Counteractions co-designing

De Vita and Vittori, on the other hand, presented the last step of the national research that involved some schools in Verona in the co-design of actions to prevent and combat female bullying by employing participatory and self-awareness methodologies such as the Theatre of the Oppressed and the 16 Attitudes, intending to create a compelling and replicable pedagogical model capable of promoting and increasing the emotional awareness of female students and teachers through a peer-to-peer approach.

2.6 Coping strategies for girls

Disalvo, based on the focus groups carried out in Foggia (Southern Italy), explored girls' coping strategies to contain peer bullying. The results of her research indicate that, although bullying negatively affects the social-emotional growth of adolescents, female students can draw on and build resilient devices from themselves. However, they need more outstanding educational support from adults to cope with the phenomenon.

2.7 Invisible spaces and cyberbullying

Emmanuele analysed how female bullying manifests itself in the so-called "invisible" spaces, offline, such as the corridors of a school or the locker room of a gym, and online, such as Instant Messaging and social media platforms. The "strategic" use of these spaces by those who perpetrate prevarication, together with the complex and articulated set of hetero-normative dictates of conformity to the gender culturally assigned to the subjects, makes the bullying

phenomenon less visible, more challenging to identify for adults and, ultimately, difficult to predict and control.

2.8 Responses to bullying in Irish schools

Rutherford's contribution has brought an international point of view to the discussion, which has so far centred on the Italian case. Focusing on the Irish case study, the researcher explored "girl-to-girl" bullying, showing how the use of a post-human approach highlights how the incidence of everyday contexts and tools can influence bullying dynamics. Therefore, Rutherford proposes adopting an "intra-action" perspective that focuses on the material dimensions of the phenomenon and the effectiveness of actions located in context to prevent and combat girl-to-girl bullying.

CONCLUSION

Female bullying often manifests itself in less visible ways than male bullying, as demonstrated by the analysis of invisible spaces "onlife". This feature requires greater awareness and training of reference adults to identify the phenomenon and intervene effectively. The contributions highlighted how teachers and parents can be both part of the solution and the problem. Training programs and participatory educational strategies can fill skills gaps. Female bullying reflects and crystallises gender stereotypes that impose standards of femininity and relational power. The studies suggested the need for interventions that challenge these norms, fostering an environment of growth that promotes diversity, counteracts stigma, and encourages inclusion and well-being of students. Girls can develop forms of resilience through self-empowerment processes and educational support among peers. Involving students and teachers in the co-design of counteractions, as shown using participatory methodologies (Student's Voice), can lead to greater awareness and more effective interventions.

The panel showed that addressing female bullying requires an integrated approach, including education, adult training, and participatory strategies, as well as a gendered and intersectional review of the bullying narrative from a gender perspective.

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