Educating students about gender relationships to fight gender-based violence: reflections from a school project in the province of Trento[*]

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Summary. *Addressing the problem of gender-based violence is a fundamental imperative to building a democratic society with full equality between women and men. Schools play a crucial role in achieving this objective by taking ownership of the gender dimension of education. Schools can become the catalysts for changing the patterns of gender relationships and a powerful tool in reducing gender-based violence. Within this framework, the article critically discusses the first results of the project 'Educare alla relazione di genere' [Education about gender relationships] promoted in the province of Trento, with a methodological emphasis of participants' direct experience and their relationships.*

Key words: gender-based violence, school project, gender perspective.

Addressing the problem of gender-based violence is a fundamental imperative to building a democratic society with full equality between women and men. Male violence against women has its roots in history and society, and it draws on those cultural and relational models that shaped power relationships between genders, at a cost to women (Romito, 2000;

Trasforini, 1999). However, violence is not only a matter of men's power over women, but it also frames men's life experiences, identity and relational models. For some men, turning to violence is a tool to show themselves and people around them that they're "real men", because different models of masculinity based on respect and reciprocity between genders are lacking (Ciccone, 2009; Connell, 1996).

Within this framework, schools plays a crucial role in promoting a different culture of gender relationships based on equality, respect and empowerment of differences (Gamberi, Maio, and Selmi, 2010; Tamanini 2007). By working within schools, it's possible to deconstruct gender stereotypes on which inequalities between women and men are built and to develop best practices to counteract the violent degeneration of gender relationships. Educational workshop on gender relationships encourage boys and girls to create their own life path out of the normative constraints of models of masculinity and femininity that impose on boys' violent tendencies to manage gender relationships and deprive girls of their freedom and the possibility of full citizenship.

Starting from these bases, the aim of this article is to critically discuss, both methodologically and in terms of content, the results of the experimental project entitled Educare alla relazione di genere implemented in the Autonomous Province of Trento and promoted by Assessorato alla Solidarietà internazionale e alla convivenza and by Assessorato all'Istruzione e allo sport of the Autonomous Province of Trento, IPRASE and the Centre of Interdisciplinary Gender Studies of the University of Trento .

The article develops as follow: the first section is devoted to reviewing key epistemological concepts which can insert a gender perspective in educational practice in order to change the dominant gender order. The second section is devoted to reviewing the facts and figures of the project, while in the third section the methodology used to develop the workshops with boys and girls will be critically discussed in order to highlight best practices for transforming gender relationships and promoting equality and empowerment.

Changing gender models and educational practices: an interpretative framework

Gender is a crucial dimension of humanity, around which experiences, different opportunities, resources and constraints are organized. The awareness of one's own gender identity and its social implications arises largely through socialization, or the transmission process between the generations – through practices and institutions – the cultural, social and interactional heritage of a particular society (Crespi 2008). This deeply stereotyped "gender legacy" results in that only some specific inclinations of both masculinity and femininity find space and social legitimacy. Drawing on Connell's definition (1996), we shall define the dominant models of masculinity and femininity.

In the first case, it's a form of masculinity «that occupies an hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations» (Connell, 1996, p. 68) and which finds its own expression in the subordination of women to men, in the supremacy of particular forms of masculinity over others, in the use of force and violence as a distinctive identifying feature and in the institutionalization of heterosexuality as a shared relational and sexual model. Conversely, a specific variation of femininity exists: an identity performance that conforms to subordination and male desires, defined by a set of traits specific to the desirability of the male gaze (Crawley, Foley, & Shehan, 2008). Although the available gender repertoire to become women and men is extremely normative, the process of socialization has not to be understood as a linear process of transmission and/or internalization of rigid sex roles, but as a process that occurs in the communication of the relationship. In this process, the individual may be able to build on their own meanings and to accept, reject or modify the dominant cultural models offered by society. Therefore, gender socialization should be seen as a continuous work of construction-negotiation of differences, identities and roles that occurs in individuals' interaction and gender identity can be interpreted as a fluid and relational process, open to transformation (Piccone Stella, & Saraceno, 1996).

In the growing path, this process of self-seeking is particularly relevant and it's connected to a variety of agencies of socialization: family patterns, relational experiences with peers, communication and consumption patterns as well as the educational environment. In these processes, differences and

inequalities can have critical consequences for both the future of individuals, men and women, and for society in general. In other words, it's by the proposed modalities of gender socialization, that the available space to experience one's own desires and life projects outside the normative boundaries of gender are found. Thus the different cultural models of femininity and masculinity available to girls and boys depends on the development of egalitarian and respectful gender relationships.

The critical stage of this experimentation is often the school, that is simultaneously a fundamental point in the production and reproduction of gender identity and the first social structure – beyond the family – in which girls and boys are confronted with the universe of social norms and relationships that maintains the unequal gender order. In this sense, schools play a particularly important role in laying the basis for future social relationships based on respect and valorization of individual subjectivity. Indeed, schools not only have the task of providing cognitive tools, but they are rather relational spaces for the development of individuals subjectivity. «Educating» in fact «means supporting children and adolescents in the complex process of constructing their personal and social identity» (Sartori, 2009, p. 44).

It is a privileged position which is perpetually poised between the risk of reinforcing dominant stereotypes and the ability to subvert them (Gamberi, Maio, & Selmi, 2010), by providing boys and girls new ways to define themselves and to set up relationships built on a different gender imaginary.

Educating students about gender relationships: the development project

After outlining the epistemological assumptions that guided this experimentation, this section shall illustrate and discuss some of the significant pedagogical and gender elements of the project in order to outline all the key information required for the critical discussion on the workshop working methods explained in the following section.

In particular, this section will focus on the following elements: a) the genealogy of the project and the educational needs of the territory in terms

of gender education, b) the description of the number and types of classes involved and the reasons for their selection, c) the participated approach to planning and evaluation carried out with the teachers.

a.   First, *Educare alla relazione di genere* gathers the information of the research *Genere e processi formativi* conducted by IPRASE in 2007 with the participation of the Provincial Commission for Gender Equality and the Equal Opportunities Commission of the City of Trento. This project was aimed at exploring for the first time in the province the perceptions of teachers on gender issues in schools and to identify any activities on these issues carried out by educational institutions. The main outcomes of the research was the increased awareness of the teaching staff of the role of gender differences in education and the potential problems that a lack of attention in this area can produce, both in the development of students subjectivities and in their ability to build positive relationships between genders in adult life. However, this research showed that this awareness didn't correspond to an actual action or initiative of this issue both in terms of teaching and planning in the educational institutions surveyed (Tamanini, 2007). *Educare alla relazione di genere*, is therefore aimed at bridging this gap by firstly, developing a teaching and design methodology capable of deconstructing the dominant gender roles, secondly by providing girls and boys with the necessary critical tools for self-formation, by strengthening at the same time an educational culture of gender in the province;

b.   in quantitative terms, the project involved four high schools and three middle schools of various classifications (in regards to high schools: two secondary schools, a technical school and a vocational training institute) in different geographic locations (some in the city, others in the valleys of the province) to ensure a diversity of participants and to test the project in different contexts. In total, the project involved 18 classes during the school year 2011/2012 and 16 teachers as project coordinators and class co-coordinators. The project consisted of 15 hours per class workshop conducted by an expert trainer in gender education. The project involved exclusively pre-adolescents and adolescents for several reasons: firstly, it is a particularly important moment in terms of identity, where girls and boys are entering into adulthood and where the relationship with the other gender (to the disadvantage of peer groups matched for gender) plays a key role. Moreover, it is an age when boys and girls are ready to engage in reflective practice that the teaching methods of deconstruction of the project required. We are clearly aware that it is equally important to

develop educational tools specifically for preschool and elementary school, but given the resources of the project the age range of 11 to 18 was chosen with the hope of being able to develop new and different tools especially for younger people in the near future;

c. another significant element of the project was the development of a detailed design methodology of the workshops in close collaboration with the teachers involved in each school as coordinators. This collaboration was facilitated through training, workshops and opportunities for assessment and documentation of the project. The purpose of this choice is twofold: on the one hand, it addresses the need to ensure a training program customized as much as possible to the class in which it is implemented in, drawing on its resources and possible negatives. Custodians of this knowledge are clearly teachers who, by being involved in this early stage, helped in making the workshops accessible and tailored to the needs and expectations of girls and boys. Secondly, the planning, monitoring and an evaluation carried out between teachers and gender expert trainers became a real and actual training session for the teaching staff, aimed at disseminating and promoting gender issues within the educational culture of the schools specific skills, capable of becoming a part of the educational culture of each schools well beyond the end of the project.

Discussion: relationships and subjective experiences that transform gender relationships

After providing some background information to frame the philosophy and the development of the project, this section will focus on the methodology used in the workshops and on best practices developed to promote a change of gender relations toward equality and respect. The keywords that guided the methodological choices of the workshops were relationship and subjective experience, in order to stimulate not only the level of knowledge (or provide information on gender differences), but also to enhance the level of "know-how", i.e. to develop communication and interpersonal skills, and the level of "how to be", i.e. to develop a greater

understanding of one's own identity, value, cultural model, experiences and expectations.

All workshops were conducted in mixed classes concurrently working with girls and boys. Although some teaching methods in the field of gender and equal opportunities have stressed the importance of working in split mode between boys and girls to promote a more straightforward comparison between homogeneous groups and the subjective empowerment of students (usually women), this project decided to go the opposite way by educating boys and girls about the constraining aspect of gender patterns for both the men and the women. Thus making gender relationships within the classroom a vital educational resource and by aiming at not flattening the gender dimension on womanhood (or on something that affects or that paradoxically only girls "have").

Figure 1. **An example of students' reflections on dominant stereotypes**

In this sense, "practicing" the relationship and listening became the stylistic feature of all activities (from the narrative, to visualization, brainstorming, and so on). Boys and girls in mixed groups first faced the task of learning to read the stereotypes that trap the lives of men and women in our society and afterwards were invited to re-imagine their own and others' identities outside of these patterns (see Figure 1).

The second key element was the enhancement of subjective experience: using an expression dear to 70s feminism, we could say that it is a methodology "starting from oneself", where personal experiences become the starting point for explore both gender differences and gender inequalities. Every activity, therefore, aimed to combine the experiential and subjective reflection on gender identity (for example one's own loving relationships, family patterns, relationships in the classroom, in future life projects) with a wider and more general reflection on the social and cultural construction of gender roles, relationships, inequality and resources.

This choice draws on the belief that it is crucial to contextualize the reflections and actions on gender identity not on a 'abstract' and theoretical level, but constantly relating them to the daily life experience of girls and boys. Thus these reflections can be effective and not be perceived as an additional "topic" to learn. The continuous reference to individual experience (through a narrative or creative stimulus), in fact, achieves a twofold aim: on the one hand, it avoids the risk that the issues raised are perceived as "other than myself" and, paradoxically, ends up reinforcing the idea of neutrality and of the insignificance of gender stereotypes in their life plans. On the other hand, it allows them to deconstruct from within the culture of neutrality and formal equality upon which girls and boys often build their vision of the world (helped in this by the school, family, media) by exploring how differences are a fundamental part of everyday life and how inequalities are hidden even when it seems that they do not exist. Moreover by changing our daily habits one can change the social models of gender.

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