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Creative and participatory methods for bolstering violence prevention in schools in South East Europe through shifting social and gender norms

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Abstract

Children have the right to be free from violence in schools, yet violence in schools persists. The social and gender norms, or unwritten rules of behavior that drive our collective beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives, perpetuate both positive and harmful behavior related to violence. However, social norms are malleable. To explore this further, the Regional Research on Violence Against Children in Schools in South East Europe project, supported by Terre des hommes and the Child Protection Hub and led by the International Institute on Child Rights and Development (IICRD) sought to work with young people and their supporters in eight South and East European countries from 2019–2021 to unpack how social and gender norms impact school related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and the potential role young people play in challenging destructive social norms in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, and Serbia. At the intersection of a child's right to be safe, to be educated and to be heard, this paper looks at a creative and participatory research approaches that bring children's experiences of violence in schools to the fore and centers their experiences.

This largely qualitative study drew on participatory and creative methods to explore the incidence and type of violence that children and young people are facing in and around school in South East Europe, who is most impacted by it, the social and gender norms related to violence (including SRGBV) against children, the mechanisms and child-led actions that protect children from violence and promote wellbeing, how children and young people felt able to prevent or respond to violence (and SRGBV specifically), and the ideas they had for prevention. National academic and independent researchers were trained on the research and analysis tools that were designed by the IICRD team to ensure consistency. Two schools in each country were chosen to run 2–3-day workshops with up to 15 young people aged 13–18-years-old and up to 15 adult supporters at each site.

This paper outlines the findings and focuses on the cyclical nature of research and practice where one informs the other. The multi-country research design and findings offer unique insights into effective approaches to work with young people as well as the levels of violence experienced by young people and their critical insights in how to implement enhanced safety in schools. In addition, this paper emphasizes the process

of conducting research using creative and participatory methods as this is not often discussed in detail in the literature. In order to develop research with children and young people that can effectively impact practice, we suggest it is imperative to have a relational approach embedded in research that provides training for adults to ensure they are equipped to do this sensitive work.

Keywords: violence against children; participatory and creative methods; social norms; gender norms; school-based violence

1 Introduction

Children have the right to be free from violence in schools, yet violence in schools persists. Violence prevention projects globally have had diverse structures, processes, and focus with varying degrees of success (Ozer, 2006). In order to address a paucity of children's perspectives on school-based violence prevention and literature on the subject, we sought to explore approaches to mitigating violence against children in schools in different ways by researching with children and young people to identify and learn from their perspectives. Uniquely, the Regional Research on Violence Against Children in Schools in South East Europe project, supported by Terre des hommes and the Child Protection Hub and led by the International Institute on Child Rights and Development (IICRD) sought to work with children and their supporters in eight South and East European countries to unpack how social and gender norms impact school related gender-based violence (SRGBV) and the potential role children play in challenging destructive social norms and promoting positive ones in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Moldova, Romania, and Serbia (Manion et al, 2021; Currie et al., 2021). The careful consideration of design and implementation supported us to better understand what processes kept violence happening in school settings, and to find ways to integrate different and more effective approaches to challenge and transform destructive social and gender norms, into norms that support safe violent-free schools or zones, that encouraged reporting incidents of violence, that disrupted patterns of violence, including both low level persistent violence and more intense violence, and that created more copasetic learning environments where students feel safe and included. To do this effectively we needed to work with young people to understand what they saw occurring in and around schools and how to co-create ideas for changing these norms. By privileging their unique and valuable insights, we recognized their inherent agency (Collins & Wright, 2019) and that they could provide a different way to tackle violence impacting children. However, as James (2007) suggests, making space for children's voice is insufficient to elicit and value 'the unique contribution to our understanding of and theorizing about the social world that children's perspectives can provide' (p. 262). Our approach needed to honor that they have essential information to share and recognize that they are often left out of important discussions.

This was sensitive research, where we were working with young people under the age of eighteen on difficult and emotive topics. As such, we carefully designed and delivered methodologies that supported participants to feel safe, comfortable and engaged in the research process. The methodology and the research processes allowed local researchers to listen to children and young people through participatory and creative methods

that included play- and arts-based approaches. This paper outlines our youth-focused participative and creative process that was put in place to explore social and gender norms that perpetuated violence in and around schools. Illustrating the value of the methods and procedures it also proffers insights the young participants shared regarding their experience of violence in schools and the social and gender norms that perpetuate it. Below, we first briefly present how social and gender norms are constructed in the literature globally and consider the potential contributions of social norms theory to understandings of violence against children. We then introduce the participatory and creative methods employed to explore the research questions and some of the challenges that arose. We move on to present the findings shared by the young participants regarding the violence they encounter in their school lives and their ideas for how to identify and shift norms. We finish by discussing how we believe this is relevant in the study of violence against children and offer some concluding questions that deserve further reflection.

Drawing on an eclectic social constructivist theoretical framework which was inclusive of a social ecological and a systems thinking approach (Brofenbrenner, 1979; James & Prout, 2015; Wilson, 2008), the project also incorporated a gendered, generational, inclusion and diversity lens which recognized children as social actors or agents, influencing their own lives, the lives of others, as well as the societies in which they live (Dahlberg et al., 2007).

Using participatory and creative methods, this largely qualitative study sought to answer what types of violence do children and young people face in and around schools in South East Europe, who is most affected by it, what are the affiliated social and gender norms relating to violence against children in schools, including gender-based violence and what are the informal and formal mechanisms and child-led actions that protect children and promote wellbeing. Within this, we explored how children felt they could prevent or respond to violence against them and their peers and their prevention ideas. The research methodology was designed by the IICRD team, who trained national researchers on the research tools and analysis to ensure consistency. Two schools in each country were chosen to run 2–3-day workshops with up to 15 young people aged 13–18-years-old and up to 15 adult supporters at each site.

2 Literature review

We have seen increasing interest in how social and gender norms are carried out, how they influence social phenomena and how, if at all, they can be nudged into different, more socially beneficial norms (Manion, 2022; Harper & Marcus, 2018; Heise & Manji, 2016). Social norms are influenced by our beliefs, attitudes, and values, and they dictate how we feel we should act. These are also learned behaviors that start young in life. These are often described as the unspoken rules that guide our behavior in foreseen and unforeseen ways (Lilleston et al., 2017; Heise & Manji, 2016). Norms generally develop slowly over time (Eder et al., 1995), but there are situations that promulgate rapid normative change, for instance as was demonstrated with the predominant (while not unanimous) acceptance of the norm to wear masks in public places during the COVID-19 pandemic (Woodcock & Schultz, 2021). These guiding norms are powerful forces that are held in place by peers, or

rather people's perceptions of how they think peers will act towards their behaviors (Heise & Manji, 2016; Cislighi & Heise, 2018; Harper & Marcus, 2018). For instance, if someone enters a cafeteria where students diligently place their waste in appropriate recycling or composting bins, one may feel compelled to also dispose of their own waste in the same manner. We are influenced by the norms we see around us, and our behavior is influenced by how we perceive we may be seen by either following the norm or failing to follow it. Interestingly, people's beliefs may sometimes run counter to their actions because the pressure they feel to follow the norms set by those around them more powerfully sways their actions (Bicchieri & Xiao, 2009). Gender norms are based on those same underlying forces that focus our behavior based on perceived ideas of what is expected of us pertaining to, or delineated by gender (Pulerwitz et al., 2019). Gender norms are transmitted early in childhood and reinforced by the differential treatment of children of different genders (Amin & Chandra-Mouli, 2014). A common gender norm may include social acceptance and encouragement of males displaying aggressive domineering behavior over females (DeLamater et al., 2015; Manion et al., 2021). As Jewkes and colleagues (2019, p. 3) describe, 'gendered behaviors can shift before attitudes consciously do, and vice versa.'

Lilleston and colleagues (2017) note the critical importance of understanding and attempting to mold social and gender norms that are associated with violence against children. Norms are held in place by complex and imperceptible social actions (Eder et al., 1995). Social norms theories refer to the people whose opinion we care most about as 'reference groups' (Heise & Manji, 2016). Reference groups are not unified groups and can either consist of those closest to us or they can be random strangers. Similarly, they can be small close-knit groups or large diffuse groups. What tends to unify them is our perception that their opinion of us matters. Cislighi and Heise (2018) argue that the perception of how a reference group may approve or disapprove of our behavior matters because we assume there will be a sanction or reward based on our behavior. These social processes often go unnoticed but paying attention to these processes can help to surface them and allow people to examine norms and question whether they are destructive or constructive. More importantly it invites us to consider if they are malleable and if so, how we might shift destructive norms to productive norms (Manion, 2022).

We designed procedures to support young people to participate in processes to help identify norms not least because a small but emergent area of literature exploring gender-based norms and violence against children suggests that norms that perpetuate sexism and gender inequality continue to manifest in sexualized violence in schools, including through victim blaming and shame (Mayeza et al., 2021; Jewkes et al., 2019; Lilleston et al., 2017). Similarly, literature supports the idea that ongoing harmful norms that entrench bullying and emotional abuse between peers in schools (Perkins et al., 2011). Conversely, studies have also shown that focusing on normative shifts can support positive change, for instance Perkins et al. (2011) outlined an approach to tackle bullying by influencing social norms through poster campaigns, Barnyard, et al. (2020) emphasize that positive social norms can reverse a bullying culture, Tolmatcheff et al. (2022) further demonstrated that focusing on social norms can reduce bullying in schools, and Jewkes et al. (2022) identified both the role gender norms play in violence in schools, but also in how this opens opportunities to redress gender inequality to help reduce gender-based violence.

Children also defined what school violence and gender-based violence meant to them and what forms they had witnessed or experienced. As a corollary, Ferrar et al. (2019) confirm the high prevalence of violence and identify six common forms of school violence occurring in schools, but also in close proximity in homes and communities, maltreatment, bullying, youth violence, intimate partner violence, sexual violence and emotional or psychological violence. Bott et al. (2005) articulated that gender-based violence further denotes the systemic inequality that girls and women face, as seen in a myriad of experiences of violence, which are often entrenched in institutions, laws and cultural norms.

3 Research methodology

The project's research questions focused on social and gender norms related to violence against children and young people, informal and formal mechanisms, and prevention of violence. This research used a mixed methods study with a qualitative driven approach (Hesse-Bibber & Johnson, 2015). We used participatory and creative research methods (including art and play-based methods) drawing on a variety of contextualized research tools with children, young people, and adults. There are inherent risks in conducting research with children requiring heightened ethical mechanisms, but too often these have mitigated research with children based on fear or ignorance (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010). This undermines children's inherent knowledge about their own lives and ways to implement change (Meloni et al., 2015). To conduct meaningful effective research with children, creative and participatory methods help ensure they both can and want to participate. Creative methods have been extensively used in research with children (e.g., Harris et al., 2015; Clark, 2011) and often seek to foster supportive environments to meaningfully listen to them. The tools in this study built upon one another supporting trust building and a gradual deepening of researchers' understanding of children and young people and their communities' lived realities. The participatory approach sought to create space for open ended questions and interactive activities that allowed for young people to explore perceptions of violence, prevalence in their schools and communities, as well as the attitudes of their peers, parents/carers, and the broader community. To ease participants into the research, the research used a strengths-based approach exploring positive social norms and structures first and identifying how these could address the challenges and concerns of young people. In addition, the time was provided to co-vision strategies for prevention of violence, address social norms, and identify support services to respond to incidents, suspicions, and reports. A guiding principle woven throughout the research was 'do no harm,' ensuring that neither researchers, the methodology, nor the interactions between peers led to harm for any child or young person.

Researchers from the eight countries were invited to a three-day in-person workshop to develop research skills, form a community of researchers addressing sensitive subject matter, and provide recommendations to edit and further contextualize the tools and process. The three days fostered an opportunity for relationships to form through opening circles, jokes and laughter, challenging conversations, and shared reflections. The opportunity to both play within the workshop and outside (e.g., evening dinners and walks) and

feel comfortable in methodological discussions played a valuable role in the success of the research partnership for individuals within it and for the collective. While there is a long history of participatory research, explicit ‘description of methods, tools, and processes along with documentation of the challenges and facilitators of implementation’ (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020, p. 7) are limited, leaving us questioning what makes for quality and meaningful research processes. While literature exists on quality training for child and youth researchers, less exists on what is needed of researchers to be able to facilitate effectively. The opportunity to build a solid and trusting relationship between researchers and to include time to practice tools and critically reflect on facilitation approaches is pertinent for effectively conducting research of this nature. Well-crafted tools themselves are not enough. The team maintained ongoing communication through email, WhatsApp, and Zoom calls sharing lessons learned and wise practices along the journey. A spirit of openness, exploration, and a real commitment to the young people underpinned the work together. Researchers also took time to support one another through emotionally challenging and consequential subject matter.

Research participants were drawn from two schools in each site, usually one rural and one urban school. Within the schools, up to 30 young people aged, separated by gender, between 13–18 years old participated, as well as 8–15 adults per site including parents/carers, teachers, principals, school professionals, community leaders, and social service providers. In total 263 young people and 168 adults participated across the seven countries. The research was conducted in the local language and the local researchers translated the initial data analysis into English.

3.1 Dignity and ethics of voluntary, informed ongoing consent and assent

The research adhered to ethical research guidelines and principles for safety, dignity, rights, and well-being of the participants (Morrow, 2012). Research was conducted in accordance with children and young people’s rights (as outlined in the UNCRC, 1989), best practices in researching with children (e.g., Ethical Research Involving Children, UNICEF, 2013), and it adhered to Terres des hommes’ Child Safeguarding Policy (2015). The research was reviewed and approved by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Committee in Canada, as well as the national research boards in each country. The ethics addressed critical elements of voluntary and informed ongoing consent and assent, limited confidentiality, anonymity, do no harm protocol, power imbalances between researchers and participants, and use of data. The limits of confidentiality were shared with children, young people, and adults during the consent process so that all knew that if a young person was indicated to be at risk to themselves or others, and/or if incidents of abuse were witnessed, reported, or suspected, the research team would need to report it to someone who could provide support (i.e., appropriate authorities). The national and international researchers were cognizant that research on sensitive subjects, such as violence against children, can cause unintended harm to participants. For example, if confidentiality is breached, informed consent is not obtained, or a group of people is stigmatized. Further, researchers took extra care to be careful not to raise expectations, which could lead to mistrust of outsiders and disillusionment. The ethics in this research thus adhered to procedural ethics

(as outlined above) and integrated a relational understanding of research and an ethics of care that respects and recognizes humans as relational and emphasized the value of participants being respected and listened to in the research (Bussu et al., 2021).

All efforts were made to conduct research in person as there are added ethical issues to consider, mitigate, and respond to when conducting research with children on violence. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic began during the research data collection phase, so it was not possible for all research to take place in person. Where it was not possible, rigorous risk analysis took place, thoughtful adaptations, and additional ethical safeguards were put in place by national researchers to move to some virtual activities. Tools were adapted to use online with support of school psychologists and ethical support from Ministries of Education and local community teams.

3.2 Creative methods

The focus of the quantitative and qualitative research methods was to design participatory and creative instruments to meaningfully engage young people and adults in exploring violence taking place in children and young people's lives. The intent of the methods was to have a deep and nuanced understanding of children and young peoples' lived experiences and the social norms and practices around violence taking place in their lives. Open-ended questions created space for young people to share their perceptions of violence without being influenced by the researchers' own definitions or notions of violence. This included allowing young people to define what they perceived as violence, discuss the prevalence of violence in their lives, share their beliefs and attitudes around violence, and explore the impact of violence. Importantly, space was created for young people to develop strategies to prevent violence and to make recommendations concerning support services for victims and perpetrators.

The methods were developed in such a way that as the researchers moved through the tools, researchers were able to build trust with participants and their understanding of the current realities of young people gradually deepened. The methods began with the development of a safe shared space, where young people determined what they needed to feel safe and supported in the group of peers and researchers that they would work with throughout the research project. This allowed young people to set the boundaries and parameters of the work, alongside researchers. Creative tools were developed as a toolkit (see Currie et al., 2021) with special care and attention to the difficult subject matter, allowing researchers to learn about typical experiences of violence while being extremely cautious not to trigger or harm young people involved. In each site, local researchers set up processes to follow up with the young people in case someone was triggered or there were lingering questions or comments they wished to share. The tools were reviewed by the National Researchers to ensure acceptability in study contexts. For example, more traditional participatory tools used with social norm research, such as *vignettes* (i.e., sample stories) were used in combination with *body mapping* (drawing of bodies on maps and exploring thoughts, feelings, and actions) to explore fictional characters and experiences of violence for children and young people in their schools and communities. Since the vignettes were hypothetical stories, participants had more latitude to depersonalize issues

and share impressions, themes and issues that emerged in the exploratory discussion. The vignettes needed to be contextually appropriate in each country, and some adaptations were made to ensure they were.

Innovative tools, such as *'gender boxes'* were used to understand how violence affects children of different genders differently. This approach uses images to generate dialogue regarding what typical gender behavior is by identifying what is within and what is outside the typical *'gender box'*. This allowed participants to look at qualities of typical boys and girls as well as consequences for being different. Focus was placed on meaningful conversations that emerged from these tools of inquiry, and young people were generally keen to participate in these conversations, enjoying the opportunity to share thoughts and experiences that typically are not spoken about.

As the research progressed, tools shifted to focus on understanding the development and maintenance of social norms around violence against children, including understanding reference groups and sanctions for fictional characters that were based on typical experiences of young people in the region. In addition to helping researchers understand the complex social worlds young people inhabit, the tools also taught young people about social norms and how these may be impacting their and their peers' experiences of violence. This recognized the young people's agency to explore how they can work together to build positive social norms, and creative tools such as *vision collages* (which invited participants to create mixed media collages that articulated their vision for the future), and *safe school plans* (which had participants scope out tangible maps with ideas for building safety in their schools) were used to explore how young people can work alongside adults to create a safer environment. Young people had the opportunity to assess their involvement in the research, offering critical feedback to researchers through arts-based reflective monitoring and evaluation tools such as *rose, bud and thorn* that invited them to reflect on strengths (rose), budding opportunities (bud) and challenges (thorn). Researchers also worked closely with young people to develop a presentation for their school to share their learnings and prevention strategies with their peers and educators.

Several rounds of analysis were done, based on thematic analysis (Daly et al., 1997; Braun & Clarke, 2022) to systematically analyze our qualitative data. We began with reviewing local researchers' initial post-workshop reflections on themes, followed by review of artifacts and transcripts, then reviewing themes and adding them to a template to share across countries to complete and carry out a cross country analysis. Our process was iterative where we read and re-read data to explore and identify emerging themes. We aimed to find patterns in and across data *'in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives'* (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297).

4 Results

The comfort, safety and engagement garnered from using these tools allowed the participants to share their ideas, impressions, and insights with the researchers. These details could only be reported by the young people themselves which illustrates the importance of including them directly in research (Manion et al., 2021).

The young participants reported a myriad of experiences of violence in schools ranging from minor and irregular to serious and prolonged, which increased incidents of vio-

lence, particularly online, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Psychological violence and bullying were the most cited types of violence by the participants. They also noted that there were also high levels of sexual harassment and violence against girls. Violence was purported to be perpetrated by a range of people, including fathers, teachers, other adults, but the most cited group in this research were peers. Participants were cognizant of the long-term impacts of violence, and they reported an overarching lack of safety in schools and en route to schools. Given the ubiquitous nature of violence, participants also tended to depersonalize it (Manion et al., 2021).

Participants noted that experiences were both gendered and racially specific. Student participants identified a range of gender differences, including more experiences of sexual violence, shame and victim blaming for females (as illustrated by Angelone et al., 2021) and more physical violence for males. Participants noted that they believed males were more likely to use physical violence, whereas females were more likely to use psychological violence. Similarly, participants suggested females were also more likely to report violence. Participants confirmed that children and young people from marginalized groups, which differed in each location, were more likely to be victims of violence. In exploring the social and gender norms with young people across the eight countries, traditional patriarchal gender norms still dominated discourse within schools, where male and female roles and expected behaviors appeared to be tightly cast. There was some suggestion in some settings that this was shifting, however aggressive male behavior and demure female behavior were identified as common. Gender was woven into many of the findings in the research. This permeated how violence was understood, experienced and remedied. The permissive notion that 'boys will be boys' seemed to provide a broader remit for boys to behave more violently, while at the same time the restrictive notion that 'respectable girls are not violent,' ensured a more punitive approach for females who failed to fit these parameters. The idea of protecting female purity was also common and affected how violence was undermined, underreported, and minimized (Manion et al., 2021).

Participants detailed the locations where violence was more common, such as nearby bus shelters, public washrooms, and specific areas in school grounds. They also identified the actors who promulgate problem norms. The reference groups, or those people whose opinions mattered, included people known to the young people, but some participants, particularly in Serbia, noted that the media also had a strong role in setting and perpetuating norms.

Thematic analysis identified four systems of social norms that limited reporting of violence, increased the use of violence, increased the acceptance of violence, and limited the intervention of third parties. The impact of normative processes minimized the impact of violence, limited mitigation and recognition of violence and curtailed reporting. Participants provided both examples of strong descriptive norms, or beliefs of what others do, as well as injunctive norms, or beliefs of what others approve of. Both led to a failure to name violence as violence, to reduce reporting of violence, to perpetuate victim blaming and feelings of shame by victims, and to fear intervening due to repercussions. This appeared to be further complicated by cultural ideas and assumptions that intersected with norms, including traditional gender roles, assumptions that violence is static, and that women and children do not engage in violence (Manion et al., 2021).

The experiences and entrenched levels of violence and poor rates of reporting in school were deemed to be affiliated with the level of trust in the systems of protection and

apathy due to the perceived breadth, intractability, and significance of violence. All this promoted distancing approaches that displaced the feeling of responsibility for reporting or intervening in situations of violence, including assumptions that someone else would report violence, not wanting to bother someone, assuming others were responsible for reporting or intervening, attempting to report in non-direct ways, or avoiding it altogether (Manion et al., 2021).

Social norms that promoted violence were preserved by the notion that *everyone uses violence*. Similarly, the idea that violence in some circumstances is acceptable, for instance in the case of revenge, further incited violence. This was particularly noted for boys. Further, the commonly held belief that *victims of violence must have done something to deserve it*, that *real men use violence with their partners*, and that *boys can take more punishment*, all contributed to the continuation of norms that accepted violence and limited approaches to intervening. Likewise, norms also promoted hiding violence and retaliation against violence (with violence) (Manion et al., 2021).

Participants shared their insights about the role third parties took when violence occurred. Examples of descriptive norms emerged including that *people will do as their parents did*, including intervening or ignoring. Norms that reduced the likelihood of a third party intervening based on others approval (injunctive norm) included norms that were based on fears that those who intervene would be ridiculed; that teachers and police are untrustworthy; apathy as it was assumed children and young people are not listened to (Manion et al., 2021).

Non-normative attitudes, values and beliefs also supported a culture of accepting violence in schools and displacing responsibility. Concurrently, non-normative behaviors that offered reprieve for young people included gathering and protecting together, offering alternatives, following rules to keep safe, and telling others about violence without reporting (Manion et al., 2021).

As the aim of the research was to mitigate violence in schools, researchers focused on better understanding what the circles of protection, both formal and informal, were for young people. These varied across countries and schools, but largely included family, particularly mothers and other guardians, some trusted school professionals, and some peers. This did not include many additional personnel from external institutions. Overall, the circles were limited to those closest to the young people. Participants reported relatively few teachers and other educational professionals that they trusted to discuss violence with. Participants across several countries also highlighted a general lack of access to and trust in police and other statutory services. In tandem, participants also noted there were too few formal supports within schools to offer protection (Manion et al., 2021). This accumulated to feelings of a lack of safety in schools.

The research also sought to amplify the voices of young people and their approaches to bolstering safety within their contexts. However, one of the alarming findings from the study was that participants in most countries did not see themselves as agents of change. They reported feeling helpless, without many avenues for addressing violence, and they did not feel that they were listened to or taken seriously. They also reported a minimization of violence which was not taken as a serious problem worthy of redress. Where violence was addressed, some, for instance in Albania, noted that it was treated as an individual incident, rather than a systemic problem. This undermined successful sustainable and systemic interventions.

This research project represented a marked exception for participants where they expressed gratitude that they had been given a platform to discuss issues that mattered to them, felt listened to and respected, and had space to explore future visions and actions to take at small and large levels. They also saw an avenue to build school safety plans and enact some of their ideas.

5 Discussion

With an aim to explore the social and gender norms of violence that children and young people face in and around schools in South East Europe, this paper reviewed the findings from a project exploring the social and gender norms that perpetuate violence in schools in eight countries, but more so it focused on the participatory and creative research methods utilized to gather these insights. In outlining both the methods and the findings, four areas came to the fore inviting further discussion. The first is the relevance, utility, and effectiveness of creative and participatory approaches with children and young people to better understand challenging issues they experience in their lives and to identify possible interventions. The second is that the methods and how they are applied matter. In this case the importance of a relational approach was critical in building the trust in the participants to meaningfully share their insights. The third area was the importance of considering the relational ethics involved in carrying out this kind of research which goes beyond what is procedurally required by research ethics boards and incorporates how to create safety for children and young people and honoring their experience and expertise. As the research occurred during a pandemic, it illustrated the importance of being nimble when challenged, while also keeping to the central principles of the research process. Fourthly, the findings from the research highlight the prevalence of violence and potential ways to disrupt the social and gender norms that perpetuate violence against children and young people in schools.

The team of researchers working on this project had worked individually and collectively on a range of projects across diverse settings and countries with a focus on progressing creative and participatory approaches to research and practice with children and young people. As such, it is unsurprising that they found that these approaches are beneficial. However, this research reiterated the multi-pronged value in working with and alongside populations that experience the phenomena that researchers are studying. In this case, the young people in schools had an unparalleled knowledge of what kinds of violence exist in and around their schools and yet their opinions, and perspectives are undervalued and rarely heard. While the participants shared findings that were consistent with other research on gender-based violence in schools, such as the prevalence of shame, victim blaming and rape myth acceptance that limit reporting and exasperate harm (Angelone et al., 2021; Mayeza et al., 2022), as well as harmful gender norms that perpetuate gender inequality (Mayeza et al., 2021; Jewkes et al., 2019; Lilleston et al., 2017), they also presented inherently novel, specific, and innovative ideas, highlighting the travesty of failing to take their views into consideration. The process of asking and acting upon these insights can also be a critical and transformative approach of the research process. However, as is noted in the literature, there is often a gulf between what is promised and what is delivered in

participatory processes (James, 2007; Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020). This puts additional onus on researchers to ensure that there are processes in place to act on the ideas shared during participative and creative research.

Participatory approaches can deliver innovative, impactful, and insightful data when they are designed, facilitated, and analyzed well, align with the research questions, and are acted upon. However, when done poorly, these can also produce ineffective and irrelevant data while also disempowering participants and leaving participants feeling helpless and/or frustrated. Part of this research supported identifying social and gender norms that perpetuate violence, but it also highlighted social and gender norms that perpetuated social constructions of childhood as ‘vulnerable’ and ‘becoming’ discouraging listening to young people in schools about violence or about other change-making processes they saw were needed. Read-Hamilton and Marsh (2016) suggest that communities that identify norms that perpetuate violence and see that change is in their best interest can draw on collective energy and motivation to make change. In keeping with this insight, this research sparked an interest in shifting norms in schools so that children and young people are more likely to be a part of processes to understand the system and make it stronger. This project gave birth to subsequent local and national projects to develop specific strategies to alter norms in schools across the eight countries, but particularly in four of the countries (see Currie et al., 2021).

Participatory processes can be messy. Taft (2015) suggests a need for ‘deeper, more textured analyses of the ways that adults and children co-construct spaces for [children’s] participation in democratic social life’ while at the same time highlighting how ‘ideals of collaboration, dialogue, and partnership is a highly complex and difficult endeavor’ in the context of unequal political and social power (p. 427). While the rights of children to contribute to areas that impact them are solidified under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), this individual-based right also recognizes relational rights that interconnect children with others in their communities. Although rights are interdependent, indivisible, and interrelated (UN, 1993), they can, and do, clash in different contexts and a relational approach provides an avenue for exploring synergies and tensions. This project gave us space to explore how participative and creative research approaches help make space to unearth and traverse those messy tensions.

These participative and creative approaches are further critical in building relational space where participants feel safe to participate and share difficult, emotive, and challenging information, feel their contributions are valuable and trust the researchers will respectfully analyze and share their insights to provide recommendations for action to improve children, young people, and adults’ lives. The variety of tools used carefully balanced various approaches to engaging different ways of thinking, knowing, being and expressing. They also allowed participants to unpack and think about issues of violence and the behaviors that led to, curtailed, or came after violence in distinct ways. These types of tools and facilitation encourage relational practice.

The size and scope of the research sample limits the ability to generalize the findings. There were challenges associated with a large international study that included different implementing teams using different languages and embedded in different cultures. We were also hampered by COVID-19 physical distancing protocols and school closures. The project’s approach drew on research, but also practice. This progresses the fuzzy line

between interweaving practice and research while also forefronting the voices of children and young people. Tying research to action builds a cyclical approach of research-practice-research which supports a strong learning environment (see, for instance, Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Kolb, 1984). In exploring a topic like violence, the creative approaches allowed researchers to leverage methods that indirectly encourage discussion on issues that are sensitive and allows researchers to ask indirect questions which may elicit information about what is occurring that participants may not categorize as violence. The creative approaches also fostered space for the participants to free themselves from worrying about providing the answers that researchers are seeking and instead focus on the activities, contributing to the group discussions, and sharing their thoughts.

The use of data was also an important ethical consideration. The importance of acting on or being clear on what could be acted upon once data was collected, was important for participants. In retrospect, this could have been further emphasized by researchers. This project led to changes made at the national level, but the international team, led by Terre des hommes, initiated a secondary project in four of the countries that focused on training teachers to work with young people in schools to shift destructive social and gender norms and augment protective norms (Manion et al., 2021). Teams in the eight countries also pursued additional projects building on this project. While it is fantastic to know that this research was acted upon, having this as a requirement at the beginning could have also supported the trust in the process for participants. Research integrity should ensure clear communication about the possibilities and uncertainties of how the findings will be used going forward and that the researchers are actualizing what the participants are saying wherever possible. The ability to do this is not always clear or easy but questioning how research outcomes will be acted upon should be a core ethical question asked at the outset of a research project.

Finally, in looking at the findings of the research, it was clear there was a considerable and prevalent level of violence in schools perpetrated by teachers, parents, and peers. It was also clear that social and gender norms played a significant role. While participants did not feel they had agency to call for or make change themselves, they did feel that social and gender norms could be nudged into different directions to make the levels of violence better known, to increasingly call out violence as violence, to cease minimizing the prevalence or impact of violence, and to increase rates of reporting of violence. Small steps in these directions could support moving toward reducing violence and gender-based violence in schools and this was the basis of subsequent work (see Currie et al, 2021).

6 Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has reflected on the ways that participatory and creative research methods with young people may be used to explore social and gender norms that perpetuate violence in schools. Questions and areas to further explore have arisen in the process. Methods matter. What matters is not only that children and young people are engaged, but *how* they are engaged in research processes. In recognizing the ‘messiness’ of participatory methods and the possible clashes in interconnecting relational and individual rights

of children, how can methods be co-designed to acknowledge, explore and address these tensions? In future studies, we suggest asking how children can be invited to actively engage in messy intergenerational methods conversations in a co-designed process? With the importance of a relational ethical procedure emerging, we ask, how can methodological and ethical procedures consider the needs to 1) ensure the safety for children and young people; and 2) the need to honor experiences and the information, even amid unplanned events and crises such as a pandemic? We invite researchers and practitioners to reflect on what it means to respectfully honor experiences of young people across contexts and co-contextualize methods. Finally, as this study has sought to unearth and highlight the prevalence of violence in schools, and the social and gender norms that perpetuate violence from children and young people's perspectives, we ask how can children and young people be meaningfully engaged in efforts to disrupt the social and gender norms? This research illustrated an approach to work with young people to identify social and gender norms that perpetuate violence in schools and to take the learnings from the process to develop protocols in each setting to redress local concerns. When engaging in any research, but particularly research of sensitive and challenging subject matter, we reflect on our ethical responsibilities to have research connected with policy and practice. These questions point to the need for further opportunities for dialogue between adults and children and young people to explore ways that findings can be practically actualized.

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