

Preventing homophobic and transphobic violence through inclusion education programs

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Abstract

The prevalence of homophobic and transphobic (HT) violence is considered high in Greek schools. It is not only provoked by peers to peers but also by the educational staff to the students. Taking into consideration the above data, the Education Department of Organization Against Drugs (OKANA) in collaboration with the Rainbow school designed and wrote the educational material "*The school of inclusion*", which is aimed to raise awareness and empower teachers to prevent discrimination and exclusion, based on identity, gender characteristics or expression and erotic / sexual orientation within the school context. The program is methodologically based on the Systemic Synthetic Appreciative Inquiry Model (SSAIM). Our work confirmed that it is of major importance to enhance the visibility of vulnerable groups such as LGBTI. "*The school of inclusion*" seems to be rather effective in empowering teachers and preventing homophobic and transphobic violence in schools.

Keywords: homophobic, transphobic violence, inclusion, prevention, educational programs

Special Issue: "*Sociocultural understanding of violence*", Quest Editor: Konstantina Sklavou

Introduction

School violence is a global phenomenon. Every year 246 million young people may experience some form of school violence. In Europe bullying is the most common form of school violence: 1 in 7 (15%) girls and boys in Sweden aged 11, 13 and 15 reported being bullied. At the same time two in 3 (65%) are been bullied in Lithuania [1].

Violence in schools has been an issue of growing concern in Greece, too, during the past decade [2]. Public awareness on violence has been raised following alarming evidence both at national and international level, such as the 2006 UN World Report on Violence against Children and the 2011 General Comment no. 13 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child regarding the Right of the Child to freedom from all forms of violence. According to the UN report, *violence against children is 'a global problem', 'hidden', 'unreported' and 'underrecorded'.*

LGBT students are evidenced to be more vulnerable to school violence. According to the EU LGBT survey (2013) more than eight in 10 of all respondents in each LGBT group and in each EU Member State and Croatia witnessed negative comments or conduct during their schooling because a schoolmate was perceived to be LGBT. A large majority of all respondents hid or disguised the fact that they were LGBT while at school before the age of 18 years [3].

Teachers seem reluctant to help LGBT students, taking measures that will make schools safer and more friendly to this group of children. In the cases in which they are attempting to take anti-homophobic and anti-transphobic actions these usually lead to confrontations between them and other teachers or between teachers and students [4].

According to LGBT Survey in the EU (FRA 2014: 53), discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is very and fairly widespread as answered by more than 80% of respondents in Cyprus (85%), Greece (86%) and Lithuania (93%) compared to 75% of EU average. Around half of participants in all three countries (Greece – 48%, Cyprus – 56%, Lithuania - 61%) felt discriminated on the basis of sexual orientation in the past 12 months, compare to 47% of the EU average (FRA 2014, 26) [5].

On May 2019, Colour Youth [6] published the results of a survey assessing the school climate in Greek schools. The survey gathered responses from 2000 LGBT high school students. The LGBTQI Inclusive Education Report (IGLYO) ranked Greece among one of the least inclusive countries when it comes to LGBTQI issues in education. In July, a 14-year-old died by suicide because of homophobic bullying [7].

According to the Colour Youth [6] Greek National School Climate Survey, one in three children have received some form of verbal harassment due to their sexual orientation (32%), gender (31.1%), and/or gender expression (50.3%). About one in seven children have been subjected to some form of physical harassment and/or physical violence in relation to their sexual orientation (14.6%), gender (12.6%), and/or gender expression (19.3%). One in three LGBTQ children (33.0%) state that they have been sexually harassed. Of the people who have experienced violence at school, 27.9% have never mentioned it to teachers while the ones that reported it state that the way it was handled was a little effective (30.8%) or not at all effective (26.6%). It should be noted that 59.2% of those surveyed declare that they have attended or are still attending schools that do awareness campaigns on school bullying.

The prevalence of bullying is considered high in Greece with specific behaviors being more common, such as students being pushed by others. Several bullying behaviors such as primarily negative comments towards LGBTQI students and the LGBTQI community were more frequent. What is most surprising is that the number of respondents who had heard or learnt about negative comments directed to LGBTQI students by educational staff was larger than the one that had heard or learnt about such incidents being provoked by students. This suggests that homophobic and transphobic (HT) bullying is not only provoked by peers to peers but also by the educational staff to the students in Greece, something that was confirmed by the education professionals in the focus group discussion, who demonstrated a good understanding of some characteristics of HT bullying [8] (HOMBAT).

Methods

Taking into consideration the above data, the Education Department of Organization Against Drugs (OKANA) in collaboration with the Rainbow school, the General Secretariat for Gender Equality, the Centers for Drug Prevention and Promotion of Psychosocial Health of the municipalities of Glyfada, Athens, Kifissia, Agia Paraskevi and Papagou - Holargou as well as the Head of Health Education of Primary Education of the 2nd Regional Directorate of Athens, Mrs Siafarika designed and wrote an educational material. The handbook, titled: *"The school of inclusion"* [9] is aimed to raise awareness and empower teachers to prevent discrimination and exclusion, based on identity, gender characteristics or expression and erotic / sexual orientation within the school context. It also aims to empower school community leaders to move in their gaze, language and practices regarding students, who experiencing exclusion due to gender, gender identity, gender characteristics and erotic / sexual orientation. The evaluation of this program is being conducted by the National Documentation and Information Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EKTEPN). Our educational program has been approved by the Institute of Educational Policy of Greece.

We consider the teachers' role central to the prevention of discrimination and gender-based violence in the school environment. At the same time, the professional group of teachers, according to research data [10,11,12], have one of the highest burn out rates. This fact in combination with the social economic crisis in Greece which had a direct impact on both the professional and personal lives of teachers, makes the need for their empowerment, through adequate educational programs, inviolable [13].

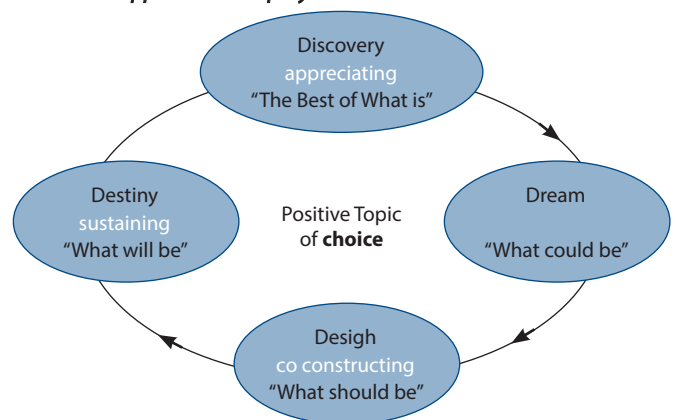
The program is based on the Systemic Synthetic Appreciative Inquiry Model (SSAIM). SSAIM [14] is theoretically based on Systemic Epistemology and particularly on the following:

► *Social Construction (sc)*: According to *sc*, the self is continually socially constructed within relationships [15, 16]. The basic principles of social constructionism are: a) the way we see the world and our self is based on social constructions, products of historically and culturally limited exchanges be-

tween people, b) the maintenance of a worldview in time is not determined by the objective and its reliability, but from the transitions of social processes and c) language creates realities.

► *Systemic Appreciative Inquiry Approach (SAI)*: An approach that focuses on conversations about people's desires and dreams, instead of the problems and their effects. It invites individuals and groups to conversations that highlights stories and experiences that are characterized by strengths, skills, dignity and pride. Utilizes questions and dialogue as a way to facilitate the emerge of alternative aspects of identity [17, 18, 19]. According to *SAI* methodology the procedure follows 4 major stages: Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny, the well known 4D Model. These stages, as well as the guiding principles of AI, can be used with one person, families, or large groups--within the therapeutic environment, community gatherings, or organizations--in order to generate "commitment to change" that flows from the foundation of caring conversation [20].

Scheme 1: Appreciative Inquiry: 4D



► *Polyphonic ideas(pi)*: Bakhtin's ideas of polyphony, pluralism and interactivity allows us to recognize, respect, and empathize with the different inner and external voices that emerge, exploring the new fields they are inviting us, facilitating, in this way, the dialogue and leading in a new meaning creation. Dialogue and dialectic procedures are key elements in the polyphonic ideas. [21, 22, 23]

› *Narrative Approaches*: According to the narrative perspective, we constantly construct ourselves (not only in childhood, but until the end of our life). A sense of continuity, meaning and purpose are core elements for an essential existence. Ourselves are the construction of our autobiography. [24, 25, 26]

› *Cooperative and Dialogical Approaches*: According to Anderson [27, 28], the therapeutic relationship is defined as a collaborative-dialogical guidance, a dynamic collaboration between client and guide that utilizes and is based on the inherent generative nature of collaborative relationships and generative dialogues. A guide is responsible for creating a space and facilitating a process for that kind of relationship and dialogue, through which new meanings and actions emerge in relation to the purpose for which a client seeks guidance.

The approach is characterized by a process where the guide exists, acts, speaks, thinks, acts and “forms” **with** the client: “withness”. It is a collaboration where the guide appreciates the knowledge that a client brings, believing that everyone has the opportunity to be creative and imaginative. Together client and guide produce results according to the circumstances, context and the present needs of the client. The process provides an opportunity to enhance client effectiveness, satisfaction and success, regardless of whether the focus of the guidance is on the personal, professional or operational range of their needs or on organizational issues such as leadership or team building in the work field.

“Together” guiding relationships and discussions become more participatory and reciprocal and less hierarchical and dualistic. “Together” means to participate and to invite the other to participate on a more equal basis, in a collaboration. In our perspective the pedagogical relationship and practice is primarily an action of care, which includes therapeutic elements and is governed by the collaborative-dialogical principles.

› *Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM)*: According to B. Pearce and V. Cronen [29] communication is a primary social act that creates a space for dialogue and understand-

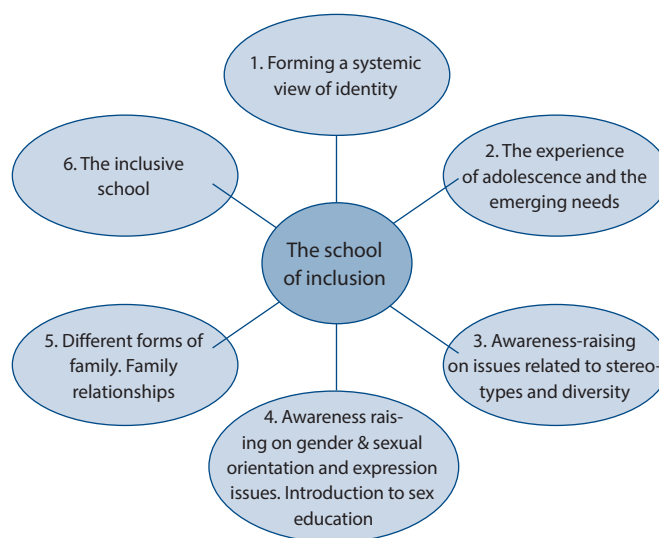
ing regarding the forms of connection and communication with each other. Thus, they focus on the event of communication itself, exploring it as a social act. They also see communication as an entity that creates a social reality among communicators. Communicating in their perspective, at the same time, produces a series of meanings through wider social interactions. Five are the basic elements of any communication act: Culture, Self, Relationship, Episode and Message.

The basic assumption of this program is that we all carry internal voices of discrimination and violence. Connecting with them in a context of respect and inviting them to dialogue we can create an inner space of security and inclusion and at the same time through inclusion, we can expand our identity, accommodating different versions of ourselves and others.

Our educational program consists of a theoretical part and a part of 12 structured workshops, as well as a follow up meeting.

It includes six basic thematic units and 12 weekly experiential meetings lasting 2.5 hours each, plus one follow up meeting.

Scheme 2: Thematic units of the program: “The school of inclusion”



The first unit is focusing in *Forming a systemic view of identity*. The second in *The experience of adolescence and the emerging needs*. The third in *Awareness-raising on issues related to stereotypes and diversity*. The fourth in *Awareness raising on gender and sexual orientation and expression issues. Introduction to sex education*. The fifth in *Different forms of family. Family relationships* and the sixth in *The inclusive school*.

Until now we have completed the first pilot phase of training of the Health Professionals of the Prevention Centers (PC) in the educational material, following a training the trainer model. We have trained around 40 executives of Prevention Centres (PC), running two educational programs of "The school of inclusion", one held in Athens and one Thessaloniki, in which twenty-nine (29) Prevention Centers have participated, three (3) Secondary Health Education Directorates, one (1) Primary Health Education Directorate, a Regional Center for Educational Planning (PEKES) representative and a Child Psychiatric Department. At this time, follow-up training is expected to be completed. The program has been implemented from PC executives to secondary education teachers with very positive feedback in Rhodes and Kilikis. It was also successfully implemented on the initiative of the Directorate of Secondary Education in cooperation with the Education Department of Organization Against Drugs to a group of teachers in Western Attica. The results from the implementation of the program in Salonica are very encouraging. Due to corona virus pandemic our actions have stopped temporarily and we have to reconsider the way we are going to implement our program.

Evaluation

The process of evaluation of the pilot phase of the program's implementation has not yet been completed, due to corona virus pandemic. The feedback we have received so far from both the executives of the prevention centers from Athens & Salonica and the teachers from Rhodes, Kilikis and Western Attica is very positive and encouraging.

Only the evaluation of the seminar that took place in Thes-

saloniki, in which 12 people participated, of which 11 participated in the evaluation, has been completed. According to the evaluation data, the seminar is considered satisfactory by all participants. Indicatively, some comments of the participants are given: *"The most important things I think I learned in the seminar are basic concepts about sexuality, exclusion, discrimination and gender identity". "I came closer to all the students in the school of inclusion". "I worked a lot with myself and got a lot of knowledge on gender issues". "What I can not stand, understand, or comprehend doesn't mean it can not be included". "There are so many versions of truth both in the school community and in our own (polyphonic) selves... sometimes we resist through stereotypical perceptions and ideologies and sometimes the spirit of acceptance and inclusion dominates"*

As one participant vividly described it, one title for our Program could be: *"Building a bridge and a secure pacing to avoid the minefield, which is set up by the deep-rooted perceptions leading us to the choice of exclusion instead of the inclusion in so many cases of "invisible" and "visible" people!!!"*.

Discussion

We found that both health professionals in prevention centers and teachers needed basic knowledge about gender identity and sexual orientation, discrimination and exclusion. We also found that both the executives of the PC and the teachers, complying with both the research data of the Colour Youth [6] and those of the HOMBAT Program [6], have stereotypical perceptions which, without realizing it, lead them to discriminative and exclusive attitudes.

As evidenced by the research data from IGLYO (2017) [5], it is also confirmed from our work that it is of major importance to enhance the visibility of vulnerable groups such as LGBTI.

We also found that by challenging, being aware and getting into a dialogue with our inner voices that exclude in a context of security and respect we can take care and soften these voices and through this care we can soften our fears which lead us to exclusions, discriminations and violence.

We have also seen that inclusion helps not only those who are excluded, but especially those who exclude. As through the experiential work they do, teachers are given the chance to take care of themselves, accept them and expand their own identity. Also, that people need to feel safe and empowered before they can change and move. Isomorphically, the empowerment and the inclusion which teachers are getting is offered back by them to their school community and their students. We have also seen that the inclusion program has not only an impact on this particular group of students but on the entire school community, which in this way becomes more democratic and inclusive at all levels.

Finally, we found that homophobia and transphobia are still strongly and deeply entrenched in our culture. It is indicative that in one municipality, despite the success of the implementation of the program to teachers, this was stopped after an intervention which is connected with ecclesiastical circles. This finding complies with the LGBT Survey in the EU (FRA 2014: 53) [3], according to it discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is very and fairly widespread in Greece (86%).

Conclusions

Preventing homophobic and transphobic violence through inclusion education programs, such as “The school of inclusion” seems to be a very effective policy. As we identified implementing this program, inclusive interventions in education could create positive difference [5]. Training of teachers’ and other education staff on LGBTQI issues for the creation of a safe environment of love and support to LGBTQI students for better and effective inclusion is of major importance. These programs should be designed according to a human rights perspective and include collaborative work among teachers, among teachers and parents and other stakeholders and among students.

Working with the local communities regarding discriminations, exclusion, homophobia and transphobia is of major importance in order the implementation of such programs can be feasible.

Awareness campaigns at a national level could also help. Finally, it is of a great importance the adoption and implementation of inclusive policies from the government.

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