



The Artistic Methods as a Way to Look at the Possibilities of Construction of Gender and its Relations

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ABSTRACT – The Artistic Methods as a Way to Look at the Possibilities of Construction of Gender and its Relations – Based on a collaborative action-research project with a high school class, we discuss the possibilities that artistic methodologies bring to collective analysis and reflections in order to promote youth political consciousness. Through moments of aesthetic-political exploration, in which the Theatre of the Oppressed and Photovoice were mobilised, the young people reflected on their everyday experiences and problems, with dating violence emerging as the most significant theme. Local actors were added to the joint reflection between the young people, and visual narratives made by two groups were discussed. This article recognises the potential of the arts to problematise gender relations and constructions, to emotionally and subjectively involve participants, and as a way of politicising an ‘apparent’ individual problem.

Keywords: **Photovoice. Dating Violence. Arts-based Research. Collaborative Research. Gender.**

RÉSUMÉ – Les Méthodes Artistiques comme Moyen d’Envisager les Possibilités de Construction du Genre et de ses Relations – Sur la base d’un projet de recherche-action en collaboration avec une classe de lycée, nous discutons des possibilités que les méthodologies artistiques apportent aux analyses et aux réflexions collectives en vue de promouvoir la conscience politique des jeunes. À travers des moments d’exploration esthétique-politique, dans lesquels le Théâtre de l’Opprimé et Photovoice ont été mobilisés, les jeunes ont réfléchi à leurs expériences et problèmes quotidiens, la violence dans les relations amoureuses apparaissant comme le thème le plus significatif. Des acteurs locaux ont été ajoutés à la réflexion commune des jeunes, et les récits visuels réalisés par deux groupes ont été discutés. Cet article reconnaît le potentiel des arts pour problématiser les relations et les constructions de genre, pour impliquer les participants de manière émotionnelle et subjective, et comme moyen de politiser un problème individuel ‘apparent’.

Mots-clés: **Photovoice. Violence Conjugales. Recherche Base sur les Arts. Recherche Collaborative. Genre.**



RESUMO – Os Métodos Artísticos como Forma de Olhar as Possibilidades de Construção do Género e suas Relações – A partir de um projeto de investigação-ação colaborativa com uma turma do ensino médio, discutem-se as possibilidades que as metodologias artísticas trazem para análises e reflexões coletivas com vista à promoção da consciência política juvenil. Por meio de momentos de exploração estético-política, nos quais se mobilizou o Teatro do Oprimido e o *Photovoice*, os/as jovens refletiram sobre as suas experiências e problemas quotidianos, emergindo a violência do namoro como o tema mais significativo. À reflexão conjunta entre os/as jovens, somaram-se atores locais e discutiram-se narrativas visuais feitas por dois grupos. Neste artigo, reconhece-se o potencial das artes na problematização das relações e construções de género, na implicação emocional e subjetiva dos/as participantes e como modo de politizar um ‘aparente’ problema individual.

Palavras-chave: ***Photovoice*. Violência no Namoro. Investigação baseadas nas Artes. Investigação Colaborativa. Género.**

Introduction

This article¹ stems from an intervention, facilitated by the first two authors, with a group of 27 young people attending vocational multimedia education, in a high school, in Greater Porto, Portugal. This study adopted the epistemological framework of action-research and is a part of the European project CATCH-EyoU – *Constructing Active Citizenship with European Youth*. The main goals of this project are the development of European Citizenship for young people, born after the construction of the European Union; promoting their critical thought; and strengthening their sense of belonging to a community that goes beyond national borders. European in its scope, this project took place simultaneously in eight countries and sought to reflect on local problems in their legislative and European dimension. The youth were invited to participate in a space outside the school curriculum, but within school hours, with the aim of discussing topics of their concern, in a participatory manner. Based on the premise that the arts can help with sharing in a large group and with the collectivisation of problems and ways of acting, we used artistic methodologies as tools for collaborative action-research. This article focuses on the possibilities created using artistic methodologies – Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2002) and Photovoice (Wang; Burris, 1997) – to reflect on and problematise gender relations and constructs, since the problem regarded as most urgent to discuss was dating violence. From a critical reading of the process, the comparison with the products created and discussions held during the intervention, we

seek to reflect and emphasise the contribution of artistic activity to the political/citizen participation of young people.

The article is structured as follows: we begin by clarifying our epistemological positioning on the relationship between education and citizenship; subsequently, we explain the intervention process at two levels (group A and group B) and the analysis of the participants; we then bring up some risks and tensions inherent to emancipatory practices in the school environment; we discuss the body as a territory of resistance; and finally, we draw some conclusions from the process.

Epistemological positioning: education and citizenship

Historically associated with territoriality, with belonging to or being excluded from the borders of nation-states, the concept of Citizenship has been the target of major disputes, with the expansion of an exclusivist, restrictive and static vision that dominated it. Its “dialectical, conflictual [and] relational” character exposes the plurality of visions – agendas, strategies and concrete practices – that it encompasses, reflecting the possibilities of meaning both a “[...] verifiable practice of accommodation to a norm [...] or, on the contrary, [a] potentially dissonant manifestation of a previous order” (Monteiro, 2022, p. 37).

Étienne Balibar (2001, p. 211), French critical philosopher, considers Citizenship as a practice and unfinished process, or in his expression, “always in the making”. By defining citizenship as “imperfect”, Balibar (2001, p. 211) helps us to consider multiple ways of being a citizen, forcing us to look for connections between local, national and global elements, in an attempt to reconcile them (Scott; Lawson, 2002). In fact, the way the construction of citizenship is included in schools has been the subject of discussion, with Giroux and McLaren (1994) suggesting four guidelines, which are oriented towards pluralism and empowerment: i) students and educators must be active agents in their relationship with society, by taking a stand; ii) conflict and pluralism must be understood as part of society; iii) it is possible to build new ways of living together; and iv) schools can be spaces where these acquisitions/practices are possible. Based on these four guidelines, education for citizenship gains a political impetus, as it embraces the conflict between different worldviews, problematising them in dialogical

and committed ways, based on relationships with others and on the construction of the self.

In his seminal work, *A pedagogia do oprimido* (The Pedagogy of the Oppressed), Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (2018) emphasised dialogue, praxis and education as basic elements to overcome the myths that shape social relations, in a process he called conscientisation. He proposed that, through dialogue, it is possible to co-construct knowledge, supported by the concrete experiences of people who, collectively, discuss their worldviews. The education Freire (2018, p. 29) talks about does not need to take place within schools, but rather, these institutions can be inspired by the principles of dialogue, praxis and experiential knowledge, and build themselves in such a way as to “generate acting and thinking that are correct in and about reality in order to transform it”. Thus, sociocultural norms and systems inevitably shape the relationship between individuals and the world, the way they conceive and build their place in the world, and the margin of freedom they recognize in their civic practice. Different ways of doing citizenship circulate and are reconfigured in contexts such as school, which is one of the most important spheres of qualification and socialization, but also, as Gert Biesta² (2020) reminds us, of subjectivisation.

With the construction of a system centred on the liberal economy, a culture of competition and individualism was normalised (e.g., Stiegler, 2010), which has distanced citizens from “understanding and decision-making processes [...] [having been] reduced to a passive social role, as consumers of material and cultural goods” (Silva, 2019 p. 66). It was in the fight for the transformation of this system of domination that Freire (1989, p. 48) proposed “[...] an education through work, which encourages collaboration rather than competition, [which] values mutual help rather than individualism; which develops critical thinking and creativity, not passivity”. Along these lines, the concept of “cultural citizenship” has been proposed, supported by some fundamental ideas (Rosaldo, 1994): citizenship is an act of construction/production and not of consumption; citizenship does not involve the acquisition of knowledge and norms, but includes the practice and overcoming of these norms through actions more oriented towards social justice and the collectivisation of goods and knowledge; citizenship, under a supposed aura of inclusion and proximity, can and should have its

restricted and exclusionary aspects re-examined, with artistic and creative production being capable of helping to break through the limits imposed by exclusion and conceptual restriction, by giving voice and space to alternative views.

Artistic Methodologies and Knowledge Production

Equally capable of producing knowledge, Art and Science can be seen as a *continuum* where it is possible for each researcher to assume a position on the way they approach social reality (Leavy, 2017). Therefore, the use of artistic methodologies in research – arts-based research – can involve artistic practices as methods to generate data or analysis, but also as final products (Hernández, 2008). In the case here presented, the role of the arts was two-fold: on the one hand, to question reality and, on the other hand, in the creation of a visual narrative as a product of this questioning process. The questioning of reality began with the use of the Theatre of the Oppressed, a methodological choice made by the facilitators, and later evolved, in a joint decision with the young people, to the use of Photovoice. The Theatre of the Oppressed was used in the first year of intervention, in a large group, to discuss experiences of oppression through the body, raising awareness about the different forms taken by the processes of oppression and how they intersect. In the second year of intervention, having chosen a theme for more in-depth observation/research – Dating Violence – the Theatre of the Oppressed and Photovoice were used to answer the research questions of two participating groups (in this second year of intervention, the class was divided into four groups of researchers). Photovoice was the method chosen to answer the question of Group A and used to support the Image Theatre technique to answer the questions asked by Group B.

Photovoice and intervention in the world

Developed in 1992 by Caroline Wang, from the University of Michigan, and by Mary Ann Burris, from the University of Beijing, this method uses photography, based on Paulo Freire's theories, when transferring authorship to the participants, as they decide how to publish and share information. Specifically, Photovoice has 5 steps: i) photographic capture; ii) development or digitisation; iii) selecting significant images; iv) group discus-



sion about the images and v) conclusions and ways of dissemination. As power and control are placed in the hands of participants, the results of interventions using this method can be very different. Given its utopian purposes and its power to provoke actions for social justice (Holm; Sahlstrom; Zilliacus, 2018), Photovoice can be considered an arts-based action research method (Chilton; Leavy, 2014, p. 313). By “provoking critical questioning, challenging stereotypes, and encouraging individual and collective action”, it can be used not only for research purposes but also for organising social transformation. In fact, the objectives of Photovoice are to encourage: i) self-reflection on community issues by identifying and capturing needs; ii) critical dialogue and collective reflection; and iii) the production of changes in the community through contact with bodies of political power (Wang; Burris, 1997). In this action-research, Photovoice was used to guarantee a vision of citizenship as creation, culture and process. It was through relationships with others, through different views put into dialogue, that we sought to access the uniqueness of each young person, their subjective side, connecting critical reflection to their unique experience.

Action-research as an intervention process

The collaborative action-research on which this intervention is based sought to provide a space, within the school environment and within school hours, where young people could discuss the problems of their community and their everyday lives and decide on their relevance. With this study, young people were invited to examine their local problems, delve into their structural dimension, both local and European, and propose changes and transformations, including legislative ones, that could contribute to solving the problem.

The intervention lasted two school years. In the first year, we explored the real everyday problems of these young people, through the Theatre of the Oppressed, which resulted in the identification of two major themes: dating violence and inequality of power within the school. During this year, we prioritised *being together*, seeking to promote a convivial, horizontal and intense interaction space (Rovisco, 2020). When the group solidified, the meetings became more intimate and also political, making it possible for the group’s most urgent problems to emerge. The theme of analysis chosen

by the young people themselves to begin the second year was dating violence. Grouped by their interest or peer affinities, they built four groups that identified different questions. In this article, we analyse the two groups (Group A and Group B) that decided to use arts-based methods to answer different research questions:

Group A

- How do people react to depictions of dating violence?
 - What emotions and thoughts are provoked by viewing images of violence in public places?

Group B

- What factors trigger violent behaviour?
 - What are the contradictions inherent to violent acts and decision-making for action?

Group A (composed of 5 members: 2 females and 3 males) used Photovoice, capturing 21 photographs about dating violence and providing subtitles for them based on the SHOWeD acronym (what is Shown here? what is really Happening here? how does this relate to Our lives? Why are things this way? how could this image Educate people? what should be Done about this? (Wang *et al.*, 2004)). As a group, they discussed the multiple meanings of their representations about Dating Violence, mimicking a focus group discussion, and transcribed the discussion, capturing the most significant dimensions.

Group B (composed of seven male members) used, in a first phase, Image-Theatre, one of the “weapons” in the arsenal of the Theatre of the Oppressed (cf. Boal, 2002), to analyse a situation of dating violence experienced by one of the members of the group (see Cruz *et al.*, 2019). In a second phase, they chose to include the Photovoice method – following the example of group A – to understand male socialisation in school.

The entire process entailed the effective and collaborative involvement of young people: the feature of co-researching reality and co-creating artistic objects gave meaning to a process that culminated in the collective production of political recommendations at the local, national and European levels. Throughout the process, interactions with peers and other agents, as well as with social organisations, were decisive for the construction of a



more complex and comprehensive view of the “problems” identified as relevant. Our relationship with local associations, NGOs and activist groups was a great ally during the politicisation of students on gender issues. Indeed, there is a permeable relationship between the school and other social agents that – even if temporarily, as was the case here – occupy the school space.

Risks and Tensions

The use of artistic methodologies has been common in attempts to build collaborative research practices, as they involve different forms of knowledge (Wakeford; Rodriguez, 2018). With roots in popular education (Freire, 2018), both artistic methods mobilised by the facilitators – the Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 2002) and Photovoice (Wang; Burris, 1997) – fostered the engagement of young people, bringing theatrical and/or artistic language into the meetings and into the school space.

Simultaneously artistic and emancipatory, some tensions in the use of these methods are to be expected when used in more institutional/hermetic contexts, such as the school context. By contributing to a critical reading of the world and of the power relations that exist within this space, and by introducing another way of communicating about inequalities, this choice allows the emergence of conflicts that must be addressed and welcomed as sources of plurality and growth. Tensions such as: dissimilarities between institutional priorities (ours and the school’s) and the desires of the participants; differences in power between adults and young people, which contains the double risk of influencing the group towards our interests and/or limiting ourselves to a “neutral” role of facilitation (cf. Kirshner, 2010); the use of non-verbal communication, different from the communication prevalent in school settings; or the dominant view of young people as immature and ill-prepared for decision-making, were dilemmas that the facilitators were faced with and continually pondered. In fact, the idea of considering young people as producers of knowledge, experts in their problems and legitimate participants in the institutions of which they are a part has not been the norm even in projects that claim to be participatory (Gessner, 2017; Kirshner, 2010).

In more institutional contexts, such as schools, it is also important to reflect on the ability of emancipatory methods to maintain their developmental and transformative character, rather than adapting and reproducing the functioning of the system (Monteiro; Ferreira, 2011). This is not, however, the focus of this article (cf. Cruz *et al.*, 2019)

Our role

Our role, as adults and facilitators of the intervention, was, therefore, to collaborate with young people as intergenerational partners, supported by principles of reciprocity, joint participation and joint decision-making (Camino, 2005). In line with Martin-Baró, the co-creation of knowledge led to the production of critical interpretations and readings of reality that are accessible and understandable by everyone involved, thus allowing action. We resorted to theories and models of community intervention that recognise the inevitability of an ideological positioning (Prilleltensky, 1994), because “[intellectuals], upon becoming aware of their belonging to the society and world of their time, relinquish the position of simple viewers and put their thoughts or their art at the service of a cause” (Fals-Borda, 1970, p. 66). Thus, the facilitation was done from a place of commitment and action, understanding that “taking sides may well be what rescues us as professionals and as citizens” (Menezes, 2007, p. 110).

Group A: Dating Violence as a process

Facilitator: What do you think is the difference between yours and Tiago's [photograph]?

André: The filter... the point of view.

Visual narratives can be a form of “narrative imagination”, enabling a critical and empathetic understanding of the actions of other people, i.e., “[...] the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have” (Nussbaum, 2002, p. 299). Through the acceptance of different ways of life and different degrees of involvement – universes experienced or imagined by the participants – there is a common understanding of a theme chosen because it belongs to the experience of some. From a



heterogeneous group, in terms of gender and proximity to the problem, was born a visual narrative capable of conveying a complex process, which involves suffering, survival and decision. This narrative was compared to the study by Felgueiras *et al.* (2017) with women and young people who were victims of violence, and there was a very clear similarity in how processes of violence occur in intimate relationships. This similarity made us think about the possibility that emotions and processes of oppression arise from identical mechanisms which gradually act and disempower the participants in the relationship, particularly women. Awareness, for both boys and girls, of the existence of a structural gender bias in our society, and the practical consequences of their actions and words, was one of the main objectives and successes of the project, which clearly interrupted their everyday views on gender (im)balances (Rancière, 2004). To recognise the structural influences on practices and discourse about intimacy and love (Neves, 2008), it was necessary to discuss naive readings of the world with the young students who often regarded the problem as a matter of will and hierarchies of “individual forces”. This phase of de-ideologisation, rooted in the educational theory of Carr and Kemmis (1986), is crucial to any emancipatory action-research work. To this end, different exercises about “power” were intentionally mobilised, from the beginning and in a large group (see Cruz *et al.*, 2019), to de-individualise the readings on oppression, which arise from the individualised society in which we live (Bauman, 2003), understanding it in its structural dimension (Boal, 2010). Some of the concluding discussions by this group of young people are in line with those of other authors: fighting the idea that the victim is to blame (Ryan, 1971), violence as a process (Neves, 2008), and the importance of institutional and relational support networks to face the problem. This comparison with existing literature was done with our help: we took small excerpts or some selected pages about the issues they were analysing, which facilitated articulation with scientific production in this field. After transcribing the discussions about the photographs, the students were able to look at the data from the group discussions and identify the categories that emerged from their statements. The focus was mainly on the victim, on their emotions and on the process of violence in which they were passively entangled. Some key topics were:



- Emotional exhaustion of the victim: [...] *she must have been fed up with the violence in her relationship, so she wanted to end it all and committed suicide, because maybe she was unable to ask for help and thought it the best option / sadness, fear / it symbolised the woman falling apart / The worst side of the abused person is showing itself, due to the abuse.*
- Feeling of Imprisonment / Difficulty leaving the situation: *because here, since it was in colour, she was trying to escape the violence but she couldn't, so she switched to black and white which was supposed to symbolise sadness, darkness, to commit suicide for example...*
- Perceived/real isolation: *She looks pretty, right, everything is beautiful, but like there aren't so many flowers, which symbolises that she's losing communication with people.*
- Emotional/personal boundaries: *Because in the end there is always... when a person is not okay there are some that decide to change their lives / Or end it / Or end the feelings, they stop feeling anything, right, they die, or they do something about it...*
- Resilience of the victim: *well, because she managed to get out of the abusive relationship she stood out from the others who are still in it... if you look at this flower, it's on the ground, but this one is already higher than all the others.*
- Oppression Techniques: *he is intimidating her; he is taking control; confusing her... she is confused and can't decide what she'll do, either the "good" or the "bad".*

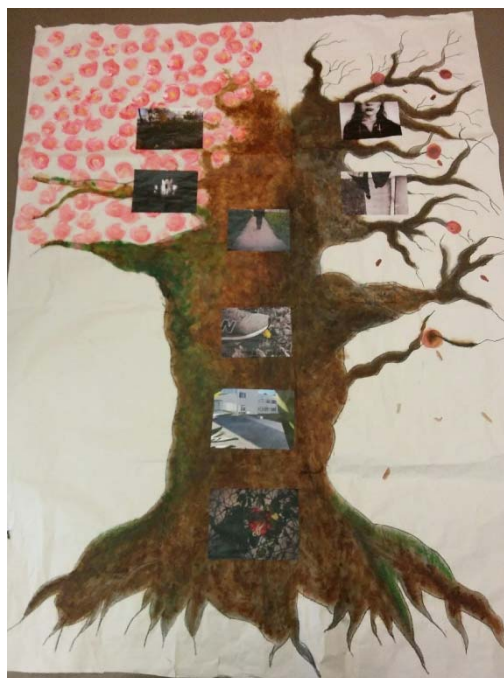


Figure 1 – The Tree of the Process of Dating Violence.
Source: Authors' collection.

During this process of analysing the transcript of the discussions about the photographs taken, the young people arrived at three key understandings that appear illustrated in Table 1, and which reveal a more complex, less individualistic and more contextual view of the phenomenon of gender-based violence.

– **The victim should not be blamed**

“Compared to the rest of the photograph, this colour [of the victim] is very happy, she wants to be happy, she wants to be somebody in life, free, but she cannot” (Antônio)

– **The isolation and fragility of the victim**

“She is becoming smaller than him because she is closing herself off from the world: she is becoming more fearful and more isolated! She is getting smaller and the aggressor bigger... She is being dominated by him!” (Augusto)

– **The importance of a support network**

“If near the flower [victim] we had some colourful elements that represented a feeling of freedom and willingness to help the flower”/ “If the photograph changed and the leaves gained some colour, she could ask for help from the people around her...” (Patrício)

Table 1 – Key-Understandings of Group A. Source: Created by the authors.

Group B: Dating violence as a product

In the case of Group B, the fact that it is a group composed only of male members led to the need to look at the problem of dating violence

from various angles, including various artistic techniques/methodologies. In addition to the Image Theatre process – the way chosen by the group to answer their research question – they also used Photovoice. Although we recognise the patriarchal basis on which dating violence is based, we used the experiences lived by these young people as a starting point – a clear condition for using TO – to understand their urgency and desire to work on this theme. The need to add a female lens to the theatrical research process quickly became evident, so we invited a mixed group of people to serve as an audience for the first theatrical experiment, in which they reported an experience of violence, suffered during a relationship, by one of the group's members. Given the richness of the discussion that emerged in a mixed group through the Image Analysis exercise (see Cruz *et al.*, 2019) – revealing, along with the myths of romantic love (De Roda *et al.*, 1999), stoicism and lack of emotional sensitivity and empathy towards the other (of female gender) (cf. Wall; Kristjanson, 2005) – the group decided to pay attention to the specificities of male socialisation, particularly in the school environment. This observation was made after understanding the privileged place they occupy in the social structure, which included romantic relationships (in this case, heterosexual). They took photographs, inside the school, about the male socialisation process and their experiences of “being a man” (Figures 2, 3 and 4), and discussed them in group. Then, they transcribed and analysed part of the discussion (given the volume of data, the first author transcribed and analysed the rest).

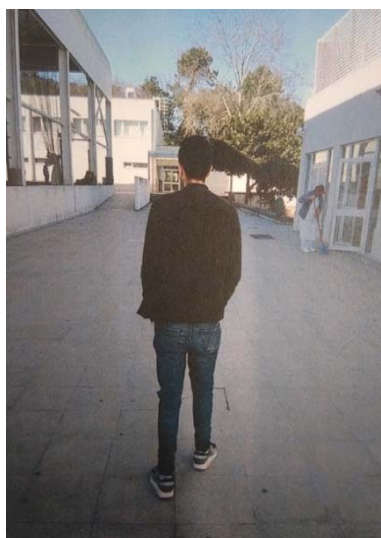


Figure 2 – Walking alone.
Source: Authors' collection.

Rui: Every man goes through a phase where he wants to walk down the street in style... he chooses a way of walking, you know, walking with his hands in his pockets and looking serious, walking in a way that attracts attention, to put it this way.

António: Everyone has their own style...

Luís: For example, the hoodlums walk with their hands in their pockets, like this, swaying from side to side.

José: I think this has to do with adolescence in which, sometimes, we try to be someone who, sometimes, we are not, in order to get what we want.

We followed and encouraged their discussion of the photographs, with parts of works by some authors. Maria do Mar Pereira (2012), in *Fazendo Género no Recreio* (Doing Gender in the Playground), demonstrates the genderisation of behaviours and mentions, in one of the chapters, a male categorisation identical to that of the students. This chapter was shared with students. The process of entering a group, where the man rehearses a certain way of acting, reflects the idea, proposed by Butler (2017), of gender performativity. It becomes clear there is a possibility of training, rehearsing, modifying, performing behaviour/styles related to gender, which demonstrates how much one can rehearse and, therefore, modify it to be “accepted” as a man belonging to a certain category of masculinity.

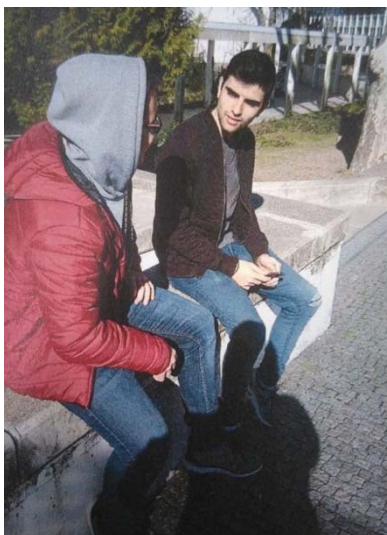


Figure 3 – Socialisation. Source: Authors' collection.

António: They are talking about girls.../ Football / Day-to-day life / Life in school / Problems...

Filipe: We talk about things that only we know about.



Figure 4 – The provider. Source: Authors' collection.

Rui: I think it represents the characteristics of men or, at least, what society sees... because they have to be strong and support women...

António: The man has to be the link between the two people... he has to be the one who can maintain, despite everything...

André: So... he has to be the most patient, I don't know! He has to be able to maintain a good relationship between both of them...

Rui: I also think the man feels a need to protect his woman, even if she doesn't need it... but he feels this need so he can prove himself to other men...

Joana: physically?

Rui: And psychologically too. Men, for example, start fighting straight away, regardless of the subject.

The second part of the process was questioning why there are different expectations for the female and male genders, revealing dating violence as part of a differentiated power structure between the female and male genders, which is a consequence of a specific socialisation, marked by patriarchal society. The existence of predefined and reproduced characteristics in the male construction, to meet the patriarchal “ideal”, became evident. More than biological, the concept of gender, and associated roles, appears to be a set of ideas that are socially and psychologically constructed and, therefore, malleable (Levant; Wilmer, 2013). In fact, as Butler (2017, p.

111-112) postulates, “[...] locating the mechanism whereby sex is transformed into gender is meant to establish not only the constructedness of gender, its unnatural and non-necessary status, but the cultural universality of oppression in non-biologicistic terms”.

The participants summarised their results, revealing dating violence as a product, as represented in Table 2.

Male privilege

– Men are privileged in today’s society and have a place of power in the structure. This gives them several advantages, not only on an emotional level, but also on a professional, economic or even physical level.

Gendered socialisation

– Being a man includes a very different socialisation process that gives him different possibilities of interacting and acting in the public domain.

Performative construction

– There is a pressure for ‘gender performativity’ that also restricts men. This social pressure conveys pre-determined formats for men to engage with: they must be protective, determined, active.

Restricted possibilities

– This socialisation process encompasses different ‘categories of masculinity’ (for example, the ‘bad boy’, ‘macho man’, ‘casual’) to which one can choose to belong.

Table 2 – Key-Understandings of Group B.

Source: Creation of the authors.

They decided to integrate the findings with Image Theatre and Photovoice and put on a performance about the “social construction” of the man, at a time when the project was presented to the school community, showing the differences between education and the process of social growth of men and women (Figure 5).



Figure 5 – The performance of the students: final result of the research project.

Source: Authors’ collection.

The body as a territory of resistance

Despite all the structural constraints, the body can be seen as “[...] a territory of resistance [with] the power to act and transform itself [...] as a limit to exploration” (Federici, 2020). Despite the “[...] mechanisation, the conversion of the (male and female) body into a machine was one of the goals that capitalism tirelessly pursued” (Federici, 2020, p. 176-177). Its control seems to be associated with the idea that “[...] another instance in which reason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine, awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject” (Butler, 2017, p. 110-111). However, all the ancient learning that we have internalised in our body – about the desire and need for reproduction – can be rescued and serve a transformative purpose. This was one of the basic premises of this project, which began with the Theatre of the Oppressed to make the body speak, remembering not only this ancient knowledge, but restoring its ability to communicate and store lived experiences. The re-appropriation of the body is, therefore, a form of resistance, and its revaluation may recall previously forgotten individual and collective powers (Federici, 2020). António Damásio (2020, p. 201) spoke of the “ancient world within us”, the “evolutionary junk”, such as the heart, lungs, stomach or intestines, capable of originating feelings. We are, at the same time, the body, which feels, and the mind, represented by images to which we give qualities and value. It is these feelings – variable image patterns – that allow us to experience and become conscious: with them “we know immediately that what we have in our mind at that moment belongs to us and is happening to us” (Damásio, 2020, p. 213). Thus, they bring us “the power to affect and be affected, to move and be moved” (Federici, 2020, p. 180), making life a creation. In the body “resides an immanent political quality: the ability to transform oneself and others and to change the world” (Federici, 2020, p. 180). This understanding of social structures as structures of domination and violence can lead to the understanding of freedom as the denial of a fatality. The struggle of the oppressed, to leave their place of suffering, seems to be a possible choice revealed by our visual narrative. It is likely to provoke imagery – in this case, dating violence and contact with its reality – and, therefore, new ways of looking at reality.

During the process, participants acquired basic knowledge about scientific research processes, as well as tools for critical analysis of reality, by socially and politically discussing the theme. They also produced four posters reporting their results, which were presented at two dissemination events (one at local level and the other at European level).

Working with research, as a tool for accessing and questioning reality, constituted both a challenge and an opportunity:

Susana: We researched something that is very present in our lives, but we didn't know it was that big! João: It was really tiring and a lot of work, but it was cool: we reached conclusions that surprised us and discovered new things.

Luis: We got results that left us happy and surprised.

Concrete proposals then emerged, capable of addressing this problem:

- Creation of a subject in school to address issues related to citizenship and human rights, in which topics such as dating violence and gender discrimination can be taught and discussed.
- Creation of an office in all schools where students, who have experienced or witnessed situations of dating violence, can discuss and receive advice on the issue.
- Creation of advertising campaigns aiming to draw attention to dating violence, with mandatory circulation on social media, YouTube, cinema and TV, targeted towards young people.

Concluding Reflections

Being able to politicise our pain, turn it into a source of knowledge, into something that connects us with other people: all of this has a healing power (Federici, 2020, p. 183).

The refusal of the passive role, even as a spectator, in the Theatre of the Oppressed is a clear application of the Freirean principle that rejects the passivity of students and stimulates their imaginative and creative capacity, in an educational process based on dialogue. In the case of TO, dialogue transposes the Body-Mind dichotomy (Dewey, 2001), present in traditional pedagogies.

We made the decision to begin the action-research process by mobilising the Theatre of the Oppressed, given the need to access the specific expe-



rience of young people. The images that the body produces, because they precede the word, are less conscious and reflected, allowing more immediate access to each person's representations and learning. This decision made it possible to access each person's feelings, their experiences and their affective and emotional memories inscribed in the body. The universality of feeling meant that all students could have something to say, since we all feel, despite the difficulty we sometimes have to understand and express what we feel. This listening enabled one of the decisive propositions for the learning process, according to Maturana (1999a): the *conversation*, because it is the language process that brings together the rational and emotional dimensions. This necessary and permanent *conversation* must be done within the school and in the society/school relationship. Thus, it becomes possible to break the dominant duality in the production of knowledge and learning, which is based on the separation of body/mind, individual/society, culture/nature, emotion/reason.

The artistic methods mobilised in the collaborative action-research, on which this article is based, proved to be fundamental in the complexification of an issue that significantly permeated the everyday lives of young people, which was regarded by them as a problem, but was not, in fact, *problematised*. The transition from the individual to the collective level, the reconfiguration of a personal problem into a social and political problem, was made possible by creating spaces and opportunities to reframe lived and embodied experiences. The body, as a place of gender construction and performance, but also as a vehicle of agency, power and resistance (Butler, 2017), is regarded here as a central element in questioning unequal relationships, learned norms, and normalised stereotypes and emotions.

If "every rational system has an emotional foundation" (Maturana, 1999b, p. 15), it is necessary and urgent to bring into schools spaces like this, where emotion and experience can be seen and discussed. The young people were included in the project as co-researchers, taking part in some of the project's decisions: the problem they wanted to address, the research questions they wanted answered, the research methodologies used to answer them, the way of disseminating results, the spokespeople to disseminate project results, among others. This involvement and co-participation led to the dissipation of more hierarchical power relations that are present in more

traditional research formats: here, the participants were called upon to make decisions about some aspects of the research (Sutton-Brown, 2014) and get involved in the process of transforming their problems. Community involvement, the dilution of boundaries between the school and the community through proximity and continued presence of third sector institutions are important to build a “structural us” (Martins *et al.*, 2022). We recognise the positive contamination of the school during the process which proved to be, particularly in the final meeting to disseminate the results at the school, a great source of learning and dialogue: between peers, guardians and various agents of the educational, associative and political community, raising awareness, among all those involved, about gender-based violence³.

Notes

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