Article

The role of school social support and school social climate in dating violence prevention among adolescents in Europe

Barbara Jankowiak[1,], Sylwia Jaskulska[1,**], Belen Sanz-Barbero[2,*], Alba Ayala[3], Jacek Pyżalski[1], Nicola Bowes[4], Karen De Claire[4], Sofia Neves[5], Joana Topa[5], Carmen Rodriguez Blazquez[6], Maria Carmen Davó-Blanes[7], Nicoletta Rosati[8], Maria Cinque[8], Veronica Mocanu[9], Beatrice Ioan[9], Iwona Chmura-Rutkowska[1], Katarzyna Waszyńska[1],   Carmen Vives-Cases[10]**

[1] Faculty of Educational Studies, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan, Poland;
    barbara.jankowiak@amu.edu.pl, sylwia.jaskulska@amu.edu.pl, pyzalski@amu.edu.pl,
    ichmurka@amu.edu.pl, katarzyna.waszynska@amu.edu.pl

[2] National School of Public Health, Carlos III Institute of Health, Madrid, Spain & CIBER of Epidemiology
    and Public Health (CIBERESP); bsanz@isciii.es

[3] Profesor asociado, University Carlos III of Madrid and Research Network on Health Services for Chronic
    Diseases (REDISSEC), Madrid, Spain; arwen.alba@gmail.com

[4]   Department of Applied Psychology, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, UK;
    nbowes@cardiffmet.ac.uk, kjdeclaire@cardiffmet.ac.uk

[5]   Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences , Institute Universitary of Maia, Maia, Portugal;
    asneves@ismai.pt, jtopa@ismai.pt

[6]   National Centre of Epidemiology and CIBERNED Carlos III Institute of Health, Madrid, Spain;
    crodb@isciii.es

[7]   Department of Community Nursing, Preventive Medicine and Public Health and History of Science.
    University of Alicante; mdavo@ua.es

[8] Department of Human Sciences, LUMSA University, Roma, Italy; rosatinicoletta@gmail.com,
    m.cinque@lumsa.it

[9] Faculty of Medicine, Grigore T. Popa University of Medicine and Pharmacy, Iasi, Romania,
    veronica.mocanu@gmail.com, ioanbml@yahoo.com

[10] Department of Community Nursing, Preventive Medicine and Public Health and History of Science.
    University of Alicante & CIBER of Epidemiology and Public Health (CIBERESP); carmen.vives@ua.es

   * Correspondence: bsanz@isciii.es
   ** Equal main contribution

Abstract: (1) To analyse the potential association between school social support CECSCE and school social climate CASSS and experiences of dating violence among adolescents in Europe; (2) Cross-sectional design. We recruited 1,555 participants age 13-16 from secondary schools in Spain, Italy, Romania, Portugal, Poland and UK. The analysis in this text concerns student with dating experience (n=993) (57.2% of girls and 66.5% of boys). The association of the exposure to physical and/ or sexual dating violence, control dating violence and fear was measured by calculating the prevalence ratios (PR) and their 95% confidence intervals (CI), estimated by Poisson regression models with robust variance. All the models were adjusted by country and by sociodemografic variables; (3) The results show that the average values of all types of social support are significantly lower in young people who have suffered any type of dating violence or were scared of their partner. The likelihood of suffering physical and/or sexual dating violence decreased when CECSCE increased [PR (CI95%): 0.96 (0.92; 0.99)]. In the same way, the likelihood of fear decreased when CASSS classmates increased [PR (CI95%): 0.98 (0.96; 0.99)]; (4) There is an association between school social support and school social climate and experiences of dating violence among adolescents in Europe. Our results suggest that in the prevention of dating violence, building a

supportive climate at schools and building / using the support of peers and teachers should be important.

1. Introduction

Dating violence amongst teenagers is a behavior that occurs in the context of an intimate relationship between young people. It can be manifest in various forms: physical, emotional, and sexual, and can be driven by manipulation, use of power, or control [1]. Most studies on aggression in young romantic relationships indicate that both boys and girls may be victims of this kind of violence, although girls are reportedly more likely to experience victimization than boys, also the severity and types of violence can be different due to gender [2].

Dating violence affects not only the current functioning of young people, but it has long-term consequences related to their development, affecting how they learn to cope with difficult situations and negatively impacting on their health in a number of different ways [3, 4]. Researchers have highlighted the long-term health consequences including; suicidal thoughts, mental illness, psychoactive substance abuse disorders, auto-aggression, depression, eating disorders, [1] as well as short-term reduced academic performance and injuries requiring medical care (partner aggression, self-aggression) [5].

As the research results suggest, both peer [6] and school [7] social contexts are just as important in the prevention of dating violence as the extremely significant factor of family social context is. There are fewer studies that explore school climate and student development and whilst these are becoming more frequent [8, 9] and research on behavior related to violence and school climate is emerging [10], it lags behind the research on family social context. The impact of different aspects of the school context, individual characteristics, and dating violence are not clear and require further attention and analysis [11].

Our study is based on the assumption that social environment may affect human behavior and human development, as research indicates that relationships with peers, parents, teachers and school staff may significantly affect the way romantic relationships are shaped [12]. This can explain the relationship between the school climate (which is largely relational 13]), the support of people at school, and dating violence. Research results indicate a link between dating violence and various aspects of the school environment [14]. For example, increased school bond, being recognized, and having caring relationships with adults at school are associated with lower level of physical abuse among teenagers [13]. School belonging prevents teenagers with adverse childhood experiences from becoming dating violence perpetrators [15]. School support is a protective factor for both physical and verbal teenage dating violence victimization [16].

Although the idea that school climate and school support can protect or increase the risk of dating violence may seem simplistic, there may also be more complex relationships between these variables. For example, victims of violence may respond to this negative experience by generalising social anxiety and because of this, may wrongly assess relationships with other people at school, perceiving greater threats etc. As the results of the research show, experiencing violence weakens ties with school, for example teens who experience online partner violence report lower school bonds [17]. Those who experienced different forms of victimization (e.g. psychological and physical dating abuse) report a lower sense of school belonging [18].

Research shows that teenagers who experience dating violence seek informal rather than formal help, but if it is formal, the people they turn to are school staff [19]. Supportive atmospheres at school, defined as teacher support perceived by students, is associated with shaping the skill of seeking help in cases of bullying, dating violence and other forms of intimidation. Students who saw their teachers and other school staff as supportive were more likely to favor positive attitudes towards seeking help when they were exposed to intimidation and threats of violence. In schools with more tangible support, there were fewer differences between girls and boys in attitudes

towards seeking help. The findings suggest that school staff efforts to provide a supportive climate are a helpful strategy to prevent bullying and violence [20].

Therefore, it is necessary to create not only preventive programs that raise awareness of teen dating violence and build the skills inherent to active and participative citizenship which leads them to assume the respect for democratic and human rights [21], but also the programs that make students feel that this topic is noticed by adults, recognized as important and that the adults are ready to support their students whenever they need it [6]. An example of such a program is 'Lights4Violence' (L4V) [22], a longitudinal quasi-experimental educational intervention addressed to boys and girls aged between 13 and 17, enrolled in secondary education schools in Alicante (Spain), Rome (Italy), Cardiff (UK), Iasi (Romania), Poznan (Poland) and Matosinhos (Portugal).

The project was focused on promoting adolescents' capabilities to improve their intimate relationships with their peers through different activities that aim to: enable adolescents to acknowledge IPV-related protective factors that are present in themselves, their families, the school and other closed settings, and to know how to properly use them; contribute to education and awareness-raising about the importance of positive interpersonal relationships based on self- esteem and trust; endorse adolescents in challenging sexist and tolerant attitudes towards gender-based violence and dating violence; promote skills to manage problems and conflicts through interpersonal communication, mediation and negotiation among youth, and empower young people to claim their rights and those of their peers to be held in esteem and to protect themselves from at-risk or abusive relationships.

Lights4Violence project gave us the opportunity to identify how socioeconomic characteristic, personal experiences, resources, both personal and environmental, and competencies are associated with experiences of dating violence. This study explores the relationship between school climate, school social support and exposure to dating violence (physical, sexual and emotional).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Design

The study is a cross-sectional design. Data was gathered from adolescents at the baseline stage of their engagement in the 'Lights4Violence', before their participation in the workshops and film classes mentioned above. Data was collected using an on-line questionnaire distributed to the schools of each country. The data was gathered in 12 school settings between October 2018 and February 2019.

All the information gathered by the Project partners and beneficiaries was confidential. The participation of the target groups was voluntary and required the permission of the ethical committee of each university and a signed informed consent document from the school, headmasters, parents and students.

The Lights4Violence Project protocol was approved by the ethical committee of the University of Alicante, Instituto Universitário da Maia/ Maieùtica Cooperativa de Ensino Superior CRL. Maia, Universitatea de Medicina si Farmacie Grigore T. Popa and Adam Mickiewicz University. Waivers were obtained from the Libera Universita Maria SS. Assunta of Rome and the Cardiff Metropolitan University. These ethics approvals/waivers covered the individual schools where the intervention was performed. It was also registered in ClinicalTrials.gov by the coordinator (Clinicaltrials.gov: NCT03411564. Unique Protocol ID: 776905. Date registered: 18-01-2018).

2.2. Participants

We recruited 1555 participants between 13 and 16 from secondary schools in Alicante, Spain (130 girls and 125 boys), Rome, Italy (206 girls and 79 boys), Iasi, Romania (214 girls and 129 boys), Matosinhos, Portugal (125 girls and 134 boys), Poznań, Poland (135 girls and 55 boys) and Cardiff, UK (112 girls and 92 boys). The analyzes in this text concern student - with dating experience (n=993) (57.2% of girls and 66.5% of boys). A statistical power analysis was performed for sample size estimation, based on data from a previously published random-effects meta-analysis of 23 studies

about school-based interventions aimed to prevent violence and negative attitudes in teen dating relationships [26].

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Dependent varibles

In this study, the dependent variable was the exposure to dating violence and this was measured across three aspects; physical, sexual and control   dating violence. We also analysed the feeling of "fear" as a proxi of violence.

Those who had been in a dating relationship were asked:

Physical dating violence: "Has anyone that you have ever been on a date with physically hurt you in any way? (For example, slapped you, kicked you, pushed, grabbed, or shoved you)";

Sexual dating violence: "Has the person that you have been on a date with ever attempted to force or force you to take part in any form of sexual activity when you did not want it?";

Control dating violence : "Has the person that you have been on a date with ever tried to control your daily activities, for example, who you could talk with, where you could go, how to dress, check your mobile phone etc.?".

Fear: "Has the person that you have been on a date with ever threatened you or made you feel so in any way?";

2.3.2. Independent variables

In this study, we considered two independent variables collected by the School Social Climate, Factor 1 (CECSCE) and Student Social Support Scale (CASSS), subscales teachers and   classmates.

Student Social Support Scale

The Student Social Support Scale subscales teachers and classmates,   assesses the student's perceived emotional, appraisal, informational, and instrumental social support from two areas: teachers and classmates. It includes 12 items each subscale with 6 Likert-type response categories, that range from never to always. A higher score indicates greater social support. Students rate each behavior on two dimensions: availability (6-point rating scale) and importance (3-point rating scale) [24]. For this study, we only analyzed the results of the frequency subscale because the trend of both dimensions related to dependent variables and co-variables was very similar.

Questionnaire for evaluating school social climate (CECSCE)

The CECSCE is a questionnaire that assesses school social climate. It is made up of items from The California School Climate and Safety Survey. The CECSCE displays a stable factorial structure in two social climate factors: 1) relative to the school and 2) relative to the teaching staff. In this project we will use factor 1 only. The 8 items that saturate the first factor are indicative of the capacity for assistance, respect, safety and comfort, as perceived in the school center. Items are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale, from strongly agree to strongly disagree [25].

2.3.3. Covariates

Adjustment demographic and socioeconomic variables collected including: sex (male; female; other sex -1.2% of the "other sex" category was considered as lost/missing value-), age (continues variable), father employment status (paid work /other) and country (Poland, Portugal, Spain, Italy, Romania and United Kingdom).

2.3.4. Statistical analyses

A descriptive analysis of the sample was carried out for each of the variables included in the study. We described the mean and the standard distribution of our independent quantitative variables and percentage distribution in qualitative variables. We describe the prevalence of

different types of dating violence (physical, sexual and control) and fear, in the whole sample and stratified by sex. Differences between girls and boys prevalences were estimated by Chi –square test. The mean differences on social support (CASSS subscales and CECSCE) by different types of dating violence and fear were estimating using the Student's t-test and analysis of variance.

The association of the exposure to physical and/ or sexual dating violence, control dating violence and fear was measured by calculating the prevalence ratios (PR) and their 95% confidence intervals (CI), estimated by Poisson regression models with robust variance. In order to avoid biases due to erroneous classification, the regression analysis considered women exposed to IPV in comparison to women who had never suffered any type of violence. All the models were adjusted by sociodemografic variables previously described and by country.

3. Results

3.1. Descriptive analysis of the sample

Table 1 shows descriptive analysis of the sample. In the research sample, 56.5% are girls and 43.5% boys. Most of the fathers of the respondents have paid work (89.4%). 10.6% have no paid job (homemaker, unemployed, pensioner, student). Mean respondent's age is 14.3 years (SD=1,50). Mean for school climate is 27.5 (min. 8, max. 40, SD=6.04) for teacher support 49.8 (min. 12, max. 72, SD=12.95), classmates support 48.5 (min. 12, max. 72, SD=12.80).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the sample (n=993).

	N	%
Sex		
Girls	551	56.5
Boys	424	43.5
Father's employ		
No paid work (homemaker, unemployed, pensioner, student)	98	10.6
Paid work/freelance	826	89.4
	Mean	SD
Age	14.3	1.50
CECSCE	27.5	6.04
CASSS teacher	49.8	12.95
CASSS classmates	48.5	12.80

3.2. Prevalence of dating violence

The obtained data show that the 20.5% of girls and 18.7% of boys that were or have ever dating, reported that they had suffered dating violence. The most common type of violence experienced by young people is emotional violence consisting in controlling the daily activities of a partner (23.1%). The 25.1% of girls and 19.6% of boys experience this form of violence. The sense of threat caused by the partner's concerns 7.9% students. Regard to physical violence in relationships, it affects 8.8% young people, sexual violence 10.9% of girls and 6.1% of boys. There are statistically significant differences between boys and girls in being a victim of sexual (p=0.009) and emotional abuse in terms of partner's control of daily activities (p=0.043). In both cases, girls are more likely to be victims of violence than boys (Table 2.).

Table 2. Prevalence of dating violence victimization.

Dating violence	Total n=993		Girls n=551		Boys n=424		p-value*
	N	%	N	%	N	%	
Physical	87	8.8	51	9.3	31	7.3	0.278
Sexual	92	9.3	60	10.9	26	6.1	0.009
Control	229	23.1	138	25.1	83	19.6	0.043
Fear	78	7.9	45	8.2	23	5.4	0.096

*Differences by sex chi-square

3.3. School social support and school social climate

Table 3 shows the differences in means in different types of school social support according to the exposure of dating violence. The results obtained show that the average values of all types of social support are significantly lower in young people who have suffered any type of dating violence or were scared of their partner.

Table 3. Means of support school by dating violence victimization.

Dating violence	CECSCE Mean (SD)	CASSS teacher Mean (SD)	CASSS classmates Mean (SD)
Physical			
Yes	25.0 (6.6)	44.8 (13.7)	45.5 (12.9)
No	27.7 (5.9)	50.3 (12.8)	48.8 (12.8)
p-value*	<0.001	<0.001	0.020
Sexual			
Yes	25.0 (6.2)	44.3 (13.0)	43.4 (14.1)
No	27.7 (6.0)	50.4 (12.8)	49.0 (12.6)
p-value*	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Control			
Yes	26.6 (6.1)	46.1 (12.9)	45.6 (12.2)
No	27.8 (6.0)	51.0 (12.8)	49.4 (12.8)
p-value*	0,010	<0.001	<0.001
Fear			
Yes	24.7 (6.3)	43.5 (14.0)	40.8 (13.6)
No	27.7 (6.0)	50.4 (12.7)	49.2 (12.5)
p-value*	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001

SD: Standard deviation; *difference Student t-test

Table 4 shows the regression analysis of the association between school social support and the different types of dating violence/fear and. Once we adjusted by sociodemographic variables and country, the likelihood of suffering physical and/or sexual dating violence decreased when CECSCE increased [PR (CI95%): 0.96 (0.92; 0.99)]. In the same way, the likelihood of fear decreased when CASSS classmates increased [PR (CI95%): 0.98 (0.96; 0.99)]

Table 4. Poisson regression with robust variance. Association between school social support and the different types of dating violence/fear.

	Crude			Adjusted*			
	PR	CI 95%		p-value	PR	CI 95%		p-value
Physical and/or sexual								
CECSCE	0.94	0.92	0.96	<0.001	0.96	0.92	0.99	0.008
CASSS teacher	0.97	0.96	0.98	<0.001	0.99	0.97	1.00	0.132
CASSS classmates	0.97	0.96	0.99	<0.001	0.99	0.98	1.00	0.158
Control								
CECSCE	0.97	0.96	0.99	0.002	1.00	0.97	1.02	0.724
CASSS teacher	0.98	0.97	0.99	<0.001	0.99	0.98	1.00	0.173
CASSS classmates	0.98	0.97	0.99	<0.001	1.00	0.99	1.01	0.449
Fear								
CECSCE	0.93	0.91	0.96	<0.001	0.96	0.92	1.02	0.165
CASSS teacher	0.96	0.95	0.98	<0.001	1.00	0.97	1.02	0.740
CASSS classmates	0.95	0.94	0.97	<0.001	0.98	0.96	0.99	0.034

*Adjusted by age, sex, country, and socioeconomic variable; PR: prevalence ratio; CI: confidence interval at 95% level.

4. Discussion

The school's climate has been shown to be a really important consideration when exploring physical, emotional and sexual violence within teenage dating relationships. Our study demonstrated that participants who rated school climate more positively were less likely to experience physical and sexual violence within dating relationships. Good school climate can be seen as a generalized sense of security at school. This is an important consideration for schools, improving the climate in a school may be an important means of supporting children against entering into relationships where their physical and sexual well-being are threatened.

Our results are consistent with previous studies. A high level of identification and bond with the school, as well as the perception of one's own agency and security in school relationships were significantly associated with lower chances of adolescent relationship abuse [13].

The results of previous studies also show that a good school climate protects students from premature sexual activity, reduces the risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases [26]. A safe climate at school is probably conducive to conversations on any topic, also related to sex education in a broad sense, including the topic of sexual abuse. The opportunity to protect oneself against abuse and sexual violence is anchored in a cultural message of e.g. your own rights, and in a sense of security. Building such a safe climate at home and at school is a protective factor [27], which is also confirmed in relation to the school by our analyses.

According to the results of previous studies on school climate, it can also be said that it generally counteracts aggression at school [28], including sexual and physical aggression in intimate relationships, which are often perpetrated by peers attending the same school and, largely, perpetrated on school premises.

Research results indicate that the importance of support from teachers and classmates in experiencing dating violence should be considered, because those who have no experienced physical, sexual and emotional abuse perceive higher support at school than those who have experienced violence. According to the regression analysis, the support of colleagues has particular importance for fear, as a proxi of violence.

Relationships with classmates at school protect in the non-physical but more discrete sphere, the emotional one. One of the more common conclusions from previous studies, including those dealing with women experiencing violence in intimate relationships, is that social support prevents or alleviates the psychological effects of being a victim of violence - for example, greater social support reduces depression and anxiety of victims [29]. Conclusions from previous studies show also that social support serves as a mediator of the relationship between dating violence victimization and psychological well-being [30]. Peer support can help to protect, above all, from emotional abuse by mobilizing one's own psychological resources.

The effects of buffering social support are also reported to be strongest, or more influential at lower levels of abuse in intimate relationships [31]. In the light of research results, social factors are a potential protection for abused women against the development of anxiety and depression, but they prove to be less effective in protecting them from becoming a victim during their lifetime [32]. Therefore, they change the way they live through the experience of being a victim and prevent them from becoming a victim of discrete violence, but they do not prevent physical and psychological violence. This explanation is supported by our results, supportive relationships with peers are protective against fearing and a sense of danger in the relationship.

In interpreting our results it is necessary to consider some limitations. The sample size does not allow us to generalize the study results to the population of each country because the sample size was small. The sample size was calculated to have enough statistical power to analyze the results as a whole. It should also be mentioned that some information related to sociodemographic characteristics was lost, because the adolescents declined to provide this information. The information lost was related to parents' education level, because they didn't know this information about them, so a high percentage of the answers were marked as "don't know".

5. Conclusions

There is an association between school social support and school social climate and experiences of dating violence among adolescents in Europe. Despite of the limitations we can say, that school climate and the support of peers are factors that protect against dating violence. The anti-violence atmosphere of school prevents the experience of dating violence by providing a sense of security, flow of knowledge and support [13].

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