SHAPING GENDERED IDENTITIES THROUGH VIOLENCE:
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF CLASSROOM INTERACTIONS IN A
HUNGARIAN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to address the research question: *In what way do social interactions in school shape the gender identity of students?* Through a school ethnography conducted in a Hungarian primary school located in Budapest, Hungary, I investigate the complexities of gendered violence and its influence on students' experiences in the school environment. The fieldwork took place between the end of May and beginning of June in 2022, focusing on an 8th-grade class consisting of 28 students. By immersing myself in their everyday lives, including observing lessons and breaks, and conducting semi-structured individual interviews with 9 students, I sought to gain insights into their experiences and perspectives. My findings highlight the interconnected nature of gendered violence and social interactions in school, emphasizing the role of systemic violence, gender stereotypes, power imbalances, and discrimination in shaping students' gender identities. The research reveals the impact of intersecting identity categories on students' social positioning and the types of violence they experience in school. It also uncovers the normalization and oversight of sexual harassment and verbal abuse in schools, shedding light on the importance of parental attitudes in perpetuating gender inequalities in school. Ultimately, the insights gained from this research contribute to the broader scholarship on violence, gender, and social interactions in schools.

Additionally, I want to thank my dear friends from Budapest, Lili Muraközi and Bica Borka, for their unwavering support, beautiful souls, and infectious laughter that have illuminated both the highs and lows of this journey.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; it contains no materials accepted

for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published

by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgment is made in the form of

bibliographical reference.

I further declare that the following word count for this thesis are accurate:

Body of thesis (all chapters excluding notes, references, appendices, etc.): 27419 words

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Signed: Janka Róza Novák

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Introduction

As many researchers before me have argued, school is a space where social inequalities are produced and reproduced. When reading scholarly works addressing this issue, I often felt a sense of disconnect between the adult researchers and the adolescents who were studied, myself strangely still feeling closer to the latter group. Despite the passage of five years since my own high school graduation at the time of writing this text, the emotions and memories associated with that period of my life remain vivid and have had a lasting impact on my self-identity. It is precisely due to these experiences and their enduring influence that I made the deliberate choice to focus my research on the intricate dynamics of gender identities within the school environment. As such, my research question is: *In what way do social interactions in school shape the gender identity of students?*

This question held personal significance for me, as I embarked on a journey to make sense of my own past experiences within Hungary's public school system. However, the issue became increasingly relevant in recent years, as a range of factors, including LGBTQ+ related matters, child protection concerns, and the unfolding crisis within the education system, have taken center stage in the Hungarian socio-political landscape. Under the leadership of Viktor Orbán, the Hungarian government has actively engaged in an anti-gender and anti-LGBTQ+ discourse. In October 2018, they removed gender studies from the list of accredited master's degree programs and prohibited the establishment of new courses on the subject, claiming that it was an ideology rather than a science. In March 2020, the government introduced a bill that effectively eliminated legal recognition for transgender and intersex individuals by prohibiting the changing of one's legal gender marker from their assigned sex at birth. In December 2020, they placed a ban on same-sex adoption, accompanied by an amendment to the constitutional

definition of a family, emphasizing that a mother is a woman, and a father is a man. In July 2021, the government enacted a law that prohibited the portrayal of homosexuality and gender reassignment to minors in media and sexual education in schools. This law, misleadingly referred to as the "anti-pedophile law," equated members of the LGBTQ+ community with pedophiles.

Alongside these anti-LGBTQ+ policies, Hungarian educators and schools have been facing numerous challenges. School violence has been a growing issue, to which the government has responded with the deployment of school guards in 2020. Criticism has been directed towards this policy since its establishment, as school guards rely exclusively on law enforcement methods to tackle the multifaceted issue of school violence (Czékmán, 2022). The National Association of Disadvantaged Families filed a complaint to the Ministry of Interior, highlighting the discrimination in the deployment of school guards in 288 primary schools, many of which had a considerable population of Romani students. However, the Office of the Commissioner for Fundamental Rights claimed that the selection process for deploying school guards was non-discriminatory (Juhász, 2023). Public schools have become increasingly dependent on governmental decisions, as the schoolbooks became government mandated and the school principals are appointed by governmental officials as well (Népszava, 2019; Népszava, 2021).

In March 2022, the Teachers' Union in Hungary initiated an indefinite strike, calling for several demands to be addressed. These demands included raising teachers' salaries, reducing the academic burden on students, implementing a modern curriculum for the 21st century, addressing social inequalities in education, ensuring unbiased and effective education and child protection, promoting the status and recognition of educators, and fostering meaningful social dialogue (PSZ, 2023). Despite more than a year and a half passing since these demands were

made, they remain unfulfilled at the time of writing, as, instead of addressing the demands, the government has resorted to intimidating tactics in an attempt to suppress the strikes. However, the situation of schools and teachers have continued to deteriorate. In August 2022, it was estimated that there is a shortage of approximately 4,800 teachers, and this number was projected to increase to 6,000 in the following year (Aradi, 2022).

The sociopolitical circumstances in Hungary have heightened the significance of examining the construction of gender in schools. The developments mentioned earlier have resulted in increased restrictions on how Hungarian children can experience and express their gender identity and sexual orientation. Given that adolescents spend a substantial amount of their time in school, an institution highly influenced by governmental decisions and discussions, it becomes crucial to understand the impact of these factors. Throughout my month-long fieldwork at an eight-form primary school in Hungary's capital city, observing a class of 8th-grader students, I had the opportunity to witness and understand the various challenges encountered by the students, the teachers, and the school as a whole. The gendered interactions within the school revealed systemic issues, prompting my shift in focus towards the intersections of school violence and gender. I argue that the school environment exhibits various forms of gendered violence, which perpetuate social injustices by reinforcing harmful gender norms, power imbalances, and discrimination.

In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of the theoretical and conceptual foundations of my study. I explore three key areas of scholarship related to violence in schools, including the manifestations of violence and their impact on gender identity, systemic violence within educational institutions, and the issue of sexual harassment. Each section offers a brief introduction to the respective field and highlights my contributions to the research. Additionally,

I discuss essential concepts such as theories on violence, gender performativity, intersectionality, and hegemonic masculinity, which form the theoretical basis of my analysis.

In Chapter 2, I describe the methodology employed in my study and discuss the ethical considerations that guided my research process. I begin by describing the unique context of the school and acknowledging the limitations of my research design. I delve into the details of my data collection methods, including participant observation, individual interviews, and the collection of data from relevant websites and policy documents. I provide insights into how I recorded and analyzed the data, including my process of writing fieldnotes, transcribing interviews, and coding. I also reflect my positionality as a researcher and address ethical dilemmas I considered and encountered during the research process.

In Chapter 3, I explore the forms of systemic violence in the school environment. I begin by examining the manifestations of the teachers' collective gendered stereotypes in the classroom and illustrate how the gendered expectations of teachers intersect with other aspects of the students' identity, forming intersecting hierarchies within the classroom. I also examine the connections between appropriate or inappropriate manifestations of gender expression and maturity as demonstrated by the teachers' language of discipline and scolding as well as the school policy document.

In Chapter 4, I highlight more direct forms of interpersonal violence and their connection with the patterns of systemic violence. I discuss interactions among male students characterized by sexualized and racialized banter, conflicts among female students negotiating different notions of femininity, conflicts between girls and boys and the impact of teacher intervention and parental involvement, and the presence of the 'grey area' of sexual harassment involving the PE teacher and some of the female students in the class.

In the Conclusion, I provide a summary of the main findings and arguments presented throughout my thesis. Furthermore, I emphasize the contributions that my research makes to the fields of scholarship it addresses, I offer suggestions for potential policies aimed at combating school violence and highlight areas for further research that could deepen our understanding of these issues.

Chapter 1: Theoretical Background

Introduction

This thesis investigates the ways in which social interactions in school shape the gender identity of students. Initially, I aimed to focus on the examination of how schools challenge or reinforce gender norms in the context of Hungary. However, during my fieldwork and data analysis, I realized the significance of exploring the various forms of violence that contribute to the shaping of gender within the school context. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the theoretical and conceptual foundations of my study. Specifically, I address three key areas of scholarship related to violence in schools: the manifestations of violence and their impact on gender identity, systemic violence within educational institutions, the issue of sexual harassment, and masculinity and bullying. Each section presents a brief introduction to the respective field, as well as describing my contributions. Additionally, I discuss several essential concepts that underpin my analysis, including violence, gender performativity, intersectionality, and hegemonic masculinity.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Theories on violence

> "The recent mobilization against gender-based and sexual violence offers a theoretical and practical opportunity: that of making this violence the very terrain on which to challenge patriarchal capitalism." (Vergès, 2022, p. 14)

As I aim to delve into the multifaceted nature of violence and its connection with constructs of gender, specifically focusing on systemic violence and its interconnectedness with interpersonal instances of harm, theories on the categories and manifestations of violence are highly relevant to my work. In recognition of the importance of a feminist lens in understanding

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and addressing violence, I draw upon the conceptualizations of Françoise Vergès' decolonial feminist theory of violence[1] and Judith Butler's theory of performative violence. By employing these theories, I aim to shed light on the complexities of violence while also valuing the lived experiences and perspectives of adolescents within the school context. With a particular emphasis on gender and its intersection with violence, abusive behavior, and harassment, my work seeks to provide an exploration of how gendered violence unfolds in the everyday lives of young people within the context of a Hungarian school environment.

Existing frameworks for understanding violence often rely on categorizations that offer distinct and separate classifications. One example used by Ylva Odenbring and Thomas Johansson in their exploration of violence in schools is Johan Galtung's (1990) categorization, which divides violence into three groups: direct, structural, and cultural. In his division, direct violence includes physical and psychological manifestations, structural violence operates within power dynamics and societal hierarchies, and cultural and symbolic violence relates to the legitimation of violent acts (Odenbring & Johansson, 2021a, p. 4). Though in my analysis I do not completely eliminate such divisions between different forms of violence, I aim to challenge and complicate these categorizations by examining the interplay between individual acts of violence and the structural and systemic levels of violence. I seek to explore how these different dimensions of violence co-constitute and intersect with one another, recognizing their

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[1] Coloniality in Eastern and Central Europe is a contested topic, as, according to an increasingly popular narrative employed by populist politicians, the region's lack of colonial history absolves its people from any moral or political responsibility for the consequences of colonialism, such as racism, colonial atrocities, and the aftermath of immigration, placing the responsibility solely on Western nations. I place my use of decolonial theory in line with Zoltán Ginelli's argument for the spatialization and deterritorialization of the concept "by not limiting its conceptualization to who had colonies or territories, but understanding its different actors in a global historical framework […] [as] Eastern Europe integrated into global racial-colonial capitalism from a semi-peripheral position (as a proximate periphery within 'Europe')" which led to it "both contesting and adapting to the global racial-colonial capitalist system" (Ginelli et al., 2020, pp. 7-8; see: Ginelli, 2020).

interconnectedness and the ways in which they shape and perpetuate violence in the school context.

In line with my desire to dismantle the rigidity between different categories of violence, I wish to rely on feminist theories of violence, as I believe that a theory on violence that lacks a feminist lens and disregards gender inevitably reinforces the dominant patriarchal perspective. A feminist perspective allows for a deeper comprehension of violence by exploring its connections to patriarchy, highlighting how gender norms both influence and are influenced by power structures (Cockburn, 2004). Violence is inherently intertwined with power relations that produce inequalities, and it can be argued that no act of violence exists without intersecting with gender. However, feminist theories that focus on gender-specific violence often confine themselves within the boundaries of the male-female binary and with an isolated focus on the patriarchy. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of violence, it is essential to broaden the feminist lens and include an analysis of violence targeted at individuals or groups whose gender identities do not conform to established gender constructions (Heyes, 2003). Additionally, as violence in schools can often be attributed to the enforcement and imposition of normative gendered and sexed identities, a gendered lens that considers heteropatriarchal power relations is essential (Bhana, 2016; Menzies & Santoro, 2018; Pascoe, 2007; Robinson; 2005, Tyner, 2012).

Vergès's feminist theory of violence presents a critical framework for examining the pervasive violence within the contemporary neoliberal political and cultural landscape. Moreover, it offers a pathway toward envisioning a future that centers on the politics of peacefulness. By advocating for a decolonial and anti-racist analysis of violence, Vergès highlights the interconnectedness of patriarchal violence with colonialism and capitalism. In

urging a decolonial anti-racist analysis of violence Vergés connects patriarchal violence to colonialism and capitalism, arguing that "[c]olonialism racialized sexualities and gender, and imposed male and female beauty norms" (Vergès, 2022, p. 15). Through the acknowledgment of interrelated systems of violence, Vergès emphasizes the need for an analysis that addresses their interconnected nature. Therefore, like numerous feminist thinkers preceding her, she asserts that the feminist struggle against these systems of oppression should encompass the fight against racism, colonialism, and all forms of systemic oppression (hooks, 1981; Mohanty, 1988; Davis, 1983; Anzaldúa, 1991). Additionally, she argues for perceiving violence as a structural element inherent in patriarchy and capitalism, rather than solely attributing it to men or masculinity (Vergès, 2022, p. 14).

Drawing on Vergés's perspective, it becomes evident that it is crucial to confront not only explicit instances of violence but also the underlying systemic and structural violence that pervades our interconnected oppressive power dynamics. In doing so, it becomes essential to identify and acknowledge the existence of this violence within curricula, disciplinary practices, and educational discourses. Moreover, this approach prompts us to recognize that systemic violence in schools, which is gendered, racialized, and class-based, is shaped by the enduring legacy of colonialism and the hetero-patriarchal capitalist system. By critically examining these influences, we can gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of violence within educational contexts as well as the possible pathways to eliminate violence from this social context.

In *The force of nonviolence* Judith Butler argues that violence is a non-static and non-definitive object, as the terms "violence" and "nonviolence" are employed in diverse and distorted ways (2020, p. 6). Moreover, they assert that how violence is defined "is subject to

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instrumental definitions that serve political interests and sometimes state violence itself" (Butler, 2020, p. 7). Throughout her work, Butler demonstrates that violence cannot be easily or definitively delineated, as it is constructed through various means by different actors, each with its own strategic objectives. This conceptualization holds particular relevance within a school environment, where disciplinary practices are established and enforced through institutional regulations. In such settings, it is not uncommon for certain forms of violence to be permitted or disregarded by those in positions of authority. As Victoria Rawlings argues,

> "As peers, teachers, school leaders and broader community members are faced with moments of violence, their behavioral and linguistic constructions of violence often most visible through their short- and medium-term reactions to violent moments- classify, define and (re)produce what violence is acceptable." (Rawlings, 2021, p.34)

Butler's conceptualization of hate speech as verbal assault highlights the role of language and discourse in the reproduction of systemic violence within educational settings. As such, verbal violence, should be recognized as a severe form of violence (1997). Engaging in name-calling and employing derogatory labels is a prevalent way in which such violence manifests, which is particularly relevant in a school context where banter and jokes are often used to regulate gender and sexuality. Butler offers a nuanced perspective on the relationship between speech and actions arguing that while name-calling is indeed an act of violence, it can also serve as a catalyst for counter-mobilization and acts of resistance. Recognizing the impact of harmful language and discriminatory practices on students' well-being, sense of belonging, and educational opportunities is crucial. By examining hate speech as a form of violence, the research can uncover how such speech operates as a mechanism of power, reinforcing oppressive norms and hierarchies within the school environment.

By incorporating these feminist theories on violence, my research acknowledges the interplay of power structures, gender dynamics, and intersecting forms of oppression within the school environment. It recognizes that everyday violence in schools is deeply rooted in systemic inequalities and social norms that perpetuate harm and marginalization and allow for the normalization and ritualization of harmful acts. Understanding violence through a feminist lens enables the recognition of how oppressive systems contribute to its perpetuation and shape the gendered experiences of students.

1.2. Gender performativity

> "[…] *gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes [...] gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed." (Butler, 1990, pp. 24-25)

In the examination of how gender and violence function in a school, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, as introduced in her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), becomes an essential framework. Butler's examination dismantles the notion of gender identity and expression as fixed entities, revealing them as performances shaped by regulatory practices. According to Butler, performativity is "not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (1990, xiv).

Through their work, Butler clarifies that gender is an effect rather than a cause, asserting that there is no inherent gender identity underlying the expressions of gender. Instead, identity is constituted through the very acts of expression (Butler, 1990, p. 25). Gender, rather than being a fixed state, serves as a means of regulating socio-symbolic norms. The performative aspect precisely involves the enforced repetition of norms, particularly those of compulsory and restrictive heterosexuality, which discursively uphold and perpetuate gender identity (Butler, 1993, p. 94). Butler also emphasizes the role of citation and repetition in the existence of gender,

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creating an illusion of an 'original' gender (1993). They further extend the understanding of performativity to encompass embodied actions, as gender is performed unconsciously through routine bodily rituals in everyday life (Butler, 1997, p. 152).

Butler's conceptualization came after Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman's theory of "doing gender", which emphasizes the notion that gender is not an inherent characteristic but rather something individuals actively perform in their everyday interactions. They argue that gender is a social construct that is continuously shaped and reinforced through individual actions and interactions. As described by them,

> "[…] it is individuals who 'do' gender. But it is a situated doing carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented in its production. Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society" (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 126).

In this perspective, gender is understood as a set of behaviors, mannerisms, and appearances that individuals adopt to conform to societal expectations of masculinity and femininity. These gendered practices, including speaking, dressing, and gesturing, both reflect and reinforce prevailing gender norms (West & Zimmerman, 1987, p. 134). As further explained by C. J. Pascoe, "people are supposed to act in ways that align with their presumed sex; people hold other people accountable for 'doing gender' correctly" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 13). Through the performance of gender, individuals contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality in society. However, it is important to note that while the "doing gender" theory provided a valuable sociological critique of biological essentialism, it largely overlooked the lived experiences of transgender individuals (Rubin, 1999; Namaste, 2000). This is where Butler's theory of "gender

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performativity" diverges from West and Zimmerman's perspective, as it expands on the performative nature of gender and challenges the fixed and binary nature of gender categories.

In my view, Butler's theory of gender performativity proves invaluable in comprehending the expressions and identities of adolescents as they navigate and regulate these spheres within the school environment. By understanding gender as a performance influenced by regulatory practices, we can recognize how violence operates within the construction and enforcement of gender norms. Butler's analysis highlights that gender performatives are not merely individual acts but are deeply embedded in the social fabric of educational institutions. The everydayness and repetitive nature of these performances, as well as the reliance on normative ideals, such as compulsory heterosexuality, contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of systemic violence in schools. By interrogating the performative nature of gender and its intersections with power dynamics in schools, we can gain insights into how systemic violence is sustained and perpetuated.

1.3. Intersectionality

> "Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them." (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149)

As Nira Yuval-Davis stated, gender moves across a "geography of injustice", through places and communities influenced by power dynamics (Berger & Guidroz, 2009, p. 63). Schools hold significant relevance within the realm of intersectional analysis as they often reproduce inequalities based on various aspects of one's social identity (Menzies & Santoro, 2018; Phipps & Blackall, 2021; Rédai, 2015; Wardman, 2017; Þrastardóttir et al., 2021). The interconnectedness of gender, race, class, and other social categories weaves a complex narrative that encompasses diverse experiences. It is crucial to unravel the intertwined threads of these

categories and examine the intricate braid they form, which reveals "ideological material, social and psychological oppression, and resistance" (Berger & Guidroz, 2009, p. 63). Understanding and acknowledging the multifaceted nature of these narratives is essential for addressing the complexities of social inequality and working towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

When Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality she used it as a metaphor to describe how Black women were positioned on the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. Since its conception, the term has traveled through time and space, acquiring diverse meanings and interpretations across various contexts, ultimately solidifying its position as a foundational element within feminist theory. As Patricia Hill Collins defines it "intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities" (Collins, 2015, p. 2).

When discussing the use of the term Yuval-Davis and Crenshaw both highlight the importance of avoiding "an additive approach" (Berger & Guidroz, 2009, p. 66) in intersectional research, as "just multiplying identity categories" (Berger & Guidroz, 2009, p. 70) does not fulfill the purpose of the concept. The classifications are not piled on top of each other; rather, they intricately intersect and shape one another, forming an ever evolving and dynamic concept of intersectionality, "something that lives, breathes and moves" (Taylor, 2011, p. 43).

These categories undergo transformation through their interactions and within the context of the encompassing power structures that influence them. Therefore, intersectionality calls for structural analysis and political critique beyond the surface analysis of identity markers (Berger & Guidroz, 2009, p. 63). However, this task can be challenging, as intersectionality is situated within the very power relations it seeks to understand and challenge. One potential approach to

address this inherent self-contradiction is proposed by Sara Salem, who advocates for the integration of intersectionality with Marxist feminism from the Global South. This integration can serve as a means to rejuvenate and reinforce intersectionality's focus on power dynamics, revealing the processes through which social categories are constructed and the reasons behind their intersections (Salem, 2018).

When considering intersectionality Yvette Taylor draws attention to the advantages of using it as a method. Her argument brings intersectionality beyond a theoretical paradigm to the lived experience of individuals, grounding it in empirical research (Taylor, 2011, p. 45). By highlighting these lived experiences, it is possible to gain a better understanding of the construction of social categories and the interrelated power structures that constitute them. The embodied material experience of individuals reveals the intercategorical complexity inherent in intersectionality, which helps to avoid the additive approach mentioned above. The gaps and silences of experiences can make the presence of oppression as well as the ordinariness of privilege visible. Intersectionality as a method also provides a tool for taking an individual's experience and bringing it to a broader social spectrum, fighting against the depoliticization of intersectionality alongside Salem's Marxist feminist approach.

Throughout my analysis, I aim to maintain a nuanced perspective that acknowledges both the advantages and potential limitations of engaging with intersectionality while balancing and incorporating an understanding of the broader systemic issues present in the examined school and their intersecting impact on the lived experiences of students. By looking at the lived experiences of students, as suggested by Taylor, I want to see what they experience and identify as influences on their lives within their school. I aimed to uncover identity categories that intersect with gender based on my interviews and participant observation rather than trying to fit

the students into my preconceived notions of them. Looking at what these events include or exclude I could gather a more accurate picture of what power relations are at play in the students' lives, how they are placed inside or outside certain categories, and how these inclusions and exclusions affect them.

Moreover, I recognized the need to go beyond the examination of social categories alone in my research and delve into the processes that shape them. By contextualizing personal experiences within a broader social framework, I aim to uncover the intricate interplay between different identity categories and the encompassing power dynamics. The school, as an institution, constructs internal categories influenced by external forces. Gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and age are ingrained within this institutional structure, which is shaped by Hungary's social and political landscape and is situated within a transnational context. To fully grasp the dynamics of power at play, it is essential to consider the interconnections between these elements and their influence on the school's power relations.

Relying on these approaches, I aim to develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Hungarian adolescent students in relation to how social interactions in school shape the gender identities and how violence can be traced throughout this process.

1.4. Hegemonic masculinity

> "The making and contestation of hegemony in historically changing gender orders is a process of enormous importance for which we continue to need conceptual tools." (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 854)

Hegemonic masculinity, a concept attributed to Raewyn Connell, plays a crucial role in understanding the dynamics of gender and violence in schools. It describes the prevailing highest accepted form of masculinity to which all individuals, regardless of gender, are expected to adhere to (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). The existence of dominant masculinities

establishes the criteria by which men position themselves within the hierarchy of masculinity, which, in turn, reinforces the existence of hierarchical power dynamics within gender relations leading to gender inequalities. The privileged status of hegemonic masculinity not only legitimizes but also perpetuates harmful power structures within society and is an essential frame of analysis regarding gender performance and violence.

At the local level, hegemonic patterns of masculinity are embedded within specific social environments, including formal organizations such as schools (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 839). Versions of hegemonic masculinities may differ from one another, reflecting contextual motivations and incorporating elements from alternative constructions of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 847). Given the inherent complexity and contextual nature of hegemonic masculinity, it is essential to embrace an analytical framework that acknowledges the existence of local, regional, and global masculinities. This approach allows for the recognition of the contextual significance of place, avoiding a simplistic understanding of independent cultures or discourses as isolated entities. A more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between different expressions of masculinities across various social contexts can be gained by embracing this multifaceted perspective. It also enables the recognition of the agency of subordinated groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 849).

Research has revealed the existence of nonhegemonic and otherwise diverging masculinities, which arise as responses to marginalization based on race, ethnicity, physical ability, social class, or stigmatized sexuality (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). One such category of masculinities is "hybrid masculinities," where privileged men incorporate subordinated styles and displays, whether masculine or feminine, into their identities. This

incorporation both secures and obscures their access to power and privilege, reflecting changes in the reproduction of gender hegemony. These hybrid masculinities may appear to represent a more flexible and progressive form of masculinity but can perpetuate underlying gender, race, and class inequalities (Messerschmidt & Messner, 2018, pp. 48-49). It is crucial to critically examine these masculinities, as they contribute to a functioning gender order without actively oppressing through discredit or violence. The understanding of violence needs to be broadened to acknowledge the collaboration between incorporation and oppression within the hegemonic system, which inflicts harm on those who resist conformity.

In addition to hegemonic masculinities, Messerschmidt introduces other categories of masculinities that offer a more comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics. 'Dominant masculinities' refer to the celebrated and prevalent forms of masculinity within a specific social context, while 'dominating masculinities' involve exerting control and authority over interactions. However, it is important to note that dominant and dominating masculinities do not necessarily qualify as hegemonic if they fail to culturally legitimize unequal gender relations (Messerschmidt & Messner, 2018, pp. 41-42). On the other hand, 'positive masculinities' contribute to the legitimation of egalitarian relationships between men and women and among various forms of masculinities and femininities, promoting more equitable and inclusive gender dynamics on various levels. Furthermore, Messerschmidt's research highlights the emergence of 'post-masculinities' among individuals assigned female at birth, where genderqueer constructions challenge the exclusive association of masculinity with overall gender identity (Messerschmidt & Messner, 2018, p. 45).

Although the term "hegemonic femininity" was dismissed as it cannot equate to the meaning of hegemonic masculinity due to the existing gendered social inequalities[2], femininity should not be dismissed when examining masculinity, as gender is inherently relational (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848). The construction of masculinity is intrinsically linked to femininity, and an exclusive focus on men's activities obscures the role of women in shaping gender dynamics (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 847). Masculinity is not a fixed entity confined to individual bodies or personality traits, but rather a configuration of practices that vary depending on the gender relations within a given social setting (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 836). As such, the interplay between bodies and social processes has long been a central theme in masculinity research. To address gender issues effectively, a consistently relational approach is needed, one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of gender, masculinity, and other social dynamics (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 837).

As such, understanding and examining the dynamics of gender relations and social interactions among adolescents within the school environment necessitate the framework of hegemonic masculinity. Its relevance in the school context is emphasized by the first proposal for its use in reports from a field study of social inequality in Australian high schools (Kessler et al., 1982). The concept of hegemonic masculinity has since proven essential in researching masculinity in schools, as demonstrated by Pascoe's work on the use of 'fag' as a gendered insult, and how it relates to perceived adherence to masculine norms (Pascoe, 2007). The hierarchy between expressions of masculinity and femininity is strongly regulated by teenagers who use such insults, illustrating the fluidity and enforcement of gender norms. Analyzing the local construction of hegemonic masculinity and noticing diverging or nonhegemonic

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[2] Instead "emphasized femininity" was coined as the counterpart to the term, signaling the "asymmetrical position of masculinities and femininities in a patriarchal gender order" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848).

masculinities provides insights into students' daily experiences and sheds light on the impact of these dynamics within schools.

2. Literature review

Gender identity is a complex and multifaceted construct that is shaped by a variety of factors, including social interactions in school. The school environment is a crucial site where students learn and internalize gender norms, values, and expectations that shape their identity development. However, the school environment is not always a safe and welcoming space for all students, particularly those who do not conform to traditional gender roles and expectations. As such, my research question investigates the ways in which social interactions in school shape the gender identity of students. Through an examination of relevant research studies and ethnographic accounts, I explore how previous works have investigated this topic with a specific focus on the presence and perpetuation of violence in schools and its impact on restricting gender identity experimentation and expression. Furthermore, I explore the ways in which my research contributes to the existing literature, highlighting areas of alignment and divergence from previous studies and how these connections, which span diverse contexts, can be interpreted.

2.1. Manifestations of violence in schools and their impact on gender identity

Research on gender and sexuality in schools often intersects with research on violence, bullying, and sexual harassment in the school context. This perspective is especially important regarding my thesis work, as different forms of violence were interwoven in the gendered interactions between teachers and students and among students as well. As Ylva Odenbring and Thomas Johansson argue, "[s]chool is a place where young people spend much of their time and one of the places where they are at great risk of being exposed to harassment and violations" (2021a, p. 2). This violence seems to be present in the majority (if not all) researched schools across various countries at various years, which demonstrates an unsettling pattern. As James A. Tyner argues, in the early 1900s, the modern public school aimed to enforce capitalist

conformity, teaching students their societal roles and cultivating productive citizens. Initially emphasizing reform and rehabilitation, disciplinary practices gradually became more punitive and vengeful. When students violate school rules, punishment is expected, but its administration reflects societal attitudes toward children and youth, often overshadowing educational goals (Tyner, 2012, pp. 78-79). As such, the school system has been built on the ideas of creating 'normal' students through regulatory practices "and, by extension, 'normal' boys and girls. Children are expected to conform to a set of administratively defined normative standards" (Tyner, 2012, p. 83). Though I did not experience extreme forms of punitive measures in the school I researched, the threat of punishment was similarly ever-present in the classroom, as well as the expectation of a certain definition of a 'good student'.

Violence in schools has been researched from various perspectives, including systemic and structural violence, direct and interpersonal violence, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment, all of which co-constitute each other in the school space, reinforcing discrimination and gender hierarchy. In the book, *Violence, Victimisation, and Young People: Education and Safe Learning Environments* (Odenbring & Johansson, 2021b) many forms of violence and victimization are explored in a contemporary context, such as sexual harassment, epistemic violence, online sexual victimization, masculinity, and bullying. The authors found that these forms of violence in schools often target certain groups based on different identity variables such as gender, sexuality, race, or ethnicity (Nekvasil & Cornell, 2012; Odenbring & Johansson, 2021b).

In James A. Tyner's book titled *Space, Place, and Violence* (2012), he explores the origins of structural and direct violence, mainly focusing on the North American context. Though there were regional specificities in the school violence he unraveled, especially due to

the USA's high emphasis on militarization and military ideals (Tyner, 2012, pp. 90-92), the conclusion that "school violence is a mirror of societal norms and expectations" rings true to the Hungarian context as well (Tyner, 2012, p. 88). The influence of colonialism and Westernization on accepted gender norms links these contexts, highlighting the transnational persistence of gender inequalities alongside the presence of specific variations in normative masculinities and femininities shaped by nationalist ideologies. Furthermore, an important commonality among these studies is the impact of intersecting identity categories on students' social positioning and the types of violence they experience in school. This aspect is a significant focus of my research, as in Chapter 3, Subchapter 2 I found that the ethnicized construction of a half-Arab girl's identity was influenced by colonialist and Westernized thought, complementing the wide scope of literature on violence, as well as demonstrating a variation on the prevailing racist attitudes in Hungarian schools against Romani students (Rédai, 2015, p. 164).

2.2. Systemic violence in school

The literature suggests that systemic violence within schools perpetuates gender inequalities and reinforces harmful gender norms. Studies have shown that violence against gender-diverse and non-heterosexual students, as well as cultural cisgenderism, are prevalent issues within school environments (Lehtonen, 2021; Phipps & Blackall, 2021; Bower-Brown et al., 2021). Furthermore, gendered biases in expectations of performance and responsibility, based on binary gender norms, have been identified as contributing to the (re)production of gender inequality in schools. Teachers' perceptions of girls as more mature and responsible than boys, and boys as silly and immature, perpetuate a gender hierarchy in the classroom (Jones & Myhill, 2004; Allard, 2004; Francis, 2000; O'Conor, 1993; Wardman, 2016). As Fiona G. Menzies and Ninetta Santoro argue, "gendered pupil–teacher interactions and expectations, where girls and

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boys are constructed in binary terms, may have the effect of constraining pupils' educational experiences" (Menzies & Santoro, 2018, p. 438). Furthermore, while the examined studies may not always explicitly emphasize violence as a factor or outcome, it is crucial to recognize the extent and nature of the harm caused by the examined power structures within the school environment. In my research, I contribute to this expanding field of study by identifying and conceptualizing gendered systemic harm as a form of violence in schools. Additionally, in Chapter 3, Subchapter 1, I discuss that the basis of the gendered differentiation in assuming girls as more mature than boys was in line with the existing literature, however, the maturity of girls was often constructed as a negative attribute which led them to question the authority of teachers, instead of leading to higher academic achievement.

Some research has been focusing on the restricting presence of epistemic violence in schools. According to Jón Ingvar Kjaran and Brynja Elísabeth Halldórsdóttir Gudjonsson, epistemic violence constitutes "silencing gender and sexuality outside of the predefined norms within educational settings and in the curriculum" (2021, p. 175). The literature on the Hungarian educational context also sheds light on the presence of systemic and, more specifically, epistemic violence in schools. Dorottya Rédai's scholarship is particularly relevant in this regard, as it provides insight into the gender regime present in Hungarian schools and the intersections of gender, sexual orientation, and gender-based violence. Her dissertation (Rédai, 2015) highlights how the gendered division of labor is reinforced through various means such as the curriculum, teacher attitudes, and school policies, both inside and outside of schools. Her later scholarship shows how attitudes toward gender-based violence further support patriarchal power structures and maintain gender inequalities (Rédai, 2020). I am grateful to have the opportunity to build upon her work in the Hungarian context, examining a different Hungarian

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school that continues to exhibit similar attitudes on gender-based violence despite the years that have passed since Rédai's original study. I exhibit my findings related to this topic in Chapter 4, where I describe how sexual harassment and abuse is normalized and overlooked in schools, complementing the existing literature on the topic. I also demonstrate how responsibility and reflection regarding these issues is avoided in a chain, from students and teachers to parents, revealing the significance of parental attitudes in perpetuating gender inequalities in the school context.

Based on the available literature it is clear that there is a connection between gender inequalities in school and systemic violence, which is why I focus on the different manifestations of structural violence and systemic inequalities in the school, and how they restrict gender expression and experimentation for the students. In the first chapter of my work, I argue that the collective approach of the teachers toward misbehavior and discipline is based on gender stereotyping and is restrictive towards the students' gender identities. Through the examination of the interconnectedness of discipline, expectations, gender, and violence, I offer a unique perspective on the challenges faced by students within the school environment. Furthermore, I emphasize the significance of intersectionality in understanding gendered violence, illustrating how the teachers' collective biases permeate social interactions and adversely affect the students' construction of their identities. I aim to connect the systemic and gendered patterns that are often explored separately or with partial links in the literature, into a comprehensive and synthetized overview of manifestations of violence in schools with the awareness that what is considered violence is especially relational and contested in the school context.

2.3. Sexual harassment and abuse in school

Another aspect of gender and violence in educational environments that has been explored in the literature is sexual harassment and abuse. Sexual harassment is a pervasive issue in schools that disproportionately affects female students (Odenbring & Johansson, 2019). However, the risk of experiencing sexual harassment increases even further when considering how intersecting identities based on race, ethnicity, social class, and sexuality compound the issue (Rahimi & Liston, 2011; Smith et al., 2022; Rawlings, 2021).

In her article *Intersections of gender, sexual orientation, and gender-based violence in Hungarian secondary schools*, Rédai delves deeper into the intersections of gender, sexual orientation, and school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) in Hungarian secondary schools. Her findings indicate that different types of GBV were approached differently and mostly on an individual basis, reflecting a lack of awareness and an ambivalent mixture of ideas among staff and leadership about gender inequalities in general, and a lack of understanding of the intersections of gender and sexuality with school violence. My research aligns with these findings, as I observed that faculty and staff did not have a unified approach to teaching about and addressing sexual harassment and abuse it. Jokes and banter surrounding sexual harassment and abuse in the school environment were normalized in the everyday lives of students, however, individual students varied in their level of critique towards such behavior. Notably, within the group of female students I studied, there was a greater awareness and a tendency to advocate for themselves by expressing discomfort to their teachers.

Although there is existing research on male students engaging in sexual harassment towards female teachers (Keddie 2009; Lahelma et al. 2000; Robinson 2000) and on sexual harassment among students in schools (Harris & Kruger, 2020; Robinson, 2005), the scholarly attention directed towards the issue of teachers engaging in sexual harassment towards students

has been limited. As Dorottya Rédai argues, "[t]his scarcity indicates the challenges associated with investigating this specific issue, particularly in primary and secondary schools, where power dynamics play a significant role" (Rédai, 2015, p. 171).

In her dissertation, Rédai unraveled two cases of sexual abuse of students by teachers in a Hungarian combined secondary vocational-technical-grammar school. Both stories address sexual power abuse by teachers, with a distinction in power dynamics; the heterosexual male teacher benefits from institutional heteronormativity, while the lesbian teacher lacks such support. The male teacher relies on implied consequences, assuming the student understands the risks. In contrast, the lesbian teacher openly threatens to fail grades and expulsion due to the potential scrutiny of her nonnormative sexuality (Rédai, 2015, pp. 175-176). Though the position of power in which the male teacher I discuss was in line with the male teacher Rédai wrote about, his actions were less direct, as he operated in a 'grey area' of sexual harassment as a physical education (PE) teacher.

While the topic of sexual harassment and abuse in sports activities and coaching has been extensively studied (Bjørnseth & Szabo, 2018; Hartill, 2016; Johansson & Lundqvist, 2017; Strandbu et al., 2022; Vertommen et al., 2016), the issue of sexual harassment by PE teachers within schools, under the pretense of touching and controlling students' bodies, remains relatively unexplored, and my work contributes to this area of investigation. In my research I found that PE teachers in addition to abusing the existence of a 'gray area' in physical harassment, actively exercise violence through a discourse about gendered bodies, disciplining and shaping gender performance. These findings complement and connect the existing literature on the influence of teachers in the gender construction of students as well as the research on sexual harassment in schools and coaching.

2.4. Masculinity and bullying in school

Conflicts, violence, or abuse among students have often been examined and categorized as 'bullying' in school research. As Odenbring and Johansson argue, in the field of bullying research acts of violence and mistreatment are frequently portrayed as individual actions, without taking into account social contexts, power dynamics, or social inequalities (2021a, p. 2). Their work has attempted to counteract this viewpoint, and I hope to do the same by offering my experience of violence in school.

Gendered bullying and violence focusing on and reinforcing a specific form of masculinity in schools are prevalent. Research has demonstrated the importance of hegemonic masculinity in bullying among male adolescents, with the fear of being branded as non-masculine or a 'fag' (Pascoe, 2013; Plummer, 2001; Rosen & Nofziger, 2019). The homophobic and violent notion of masculinity has been revealed to be present among children as early as primary school (Bhana, D., & Mayeza, E., 2016), showing that the issue cannot be fully understood by only focusing on older age groups, like high school students. The heteronormative pressure ignited by hegemonic masculinity has been shown not only as a cause of violence among male students but as a cause of sexual harassment toward female students (Robinson, 2005).

Cases of direct interpersonal violence between students are often built around the acceptable ideas of femininity and masculinity, and even though there has been some progress regarding these concepts, the core of normative gender roles remains highly relevant in the Hungarian school context I examine. My research continues along the line of investigating different forms of violence in school, with an additional perspective on teacher-student interactions, intersectionality, and the highlighted consideration of the effect of different social structures and power relations. In line with the literature, my findings highlight the presence of

gender norms and hierarchies, which are imposed on the students by both teachers and their peers. However, I draw attention to the interconnectedness of these structures and attitudes on various levels of school violence. Ultimately, my work contributes to a more nuanced understanding of violence in schools by highlighting its situatedness within interlocking systems of oppression.

By shedding light on the multifaceted nature of violence and its ties to gender roles and power dynamics, I hope to contribute to the development of strategies and interventions that address the root causes of violence and promote safer and more inclusive learning environments for all students. Based on the literature, gendered interactions in school are highly influenced by various layers of structural and interpersonal violence that co-constitute each other. Gendered violence perpetuates social injustices by reinforcing harmful gender norms, power imbalances, and discrimination. These forms of violence can manifest through school policies, the curriculum, the collective attitude of the school staff, school culture, and interpersonal relationships between students. By exploring the ways in which social interactions in school shape the gender identity of students, it becomes clear that gendered violence is a prevalent and complex issue that cannot be viewed in isolation. Rather, it is essential to examine the interconnections between gender, violence, and different forms of oppression to fully understand and address its manifestations, causes, and effects.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Research Ethics

Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the methodology employed in my study and discuss the ethical considerations that guided my research process. I begin by discussing the unique context of the school I did my fieldwork in and acknowledging the limitations associated with my research design. I delve into the details of my data collection methods, including participant observation, individual interviews, and the collection of data from relevant websites and policy documents. I also provide insights into how I recorded and analyzed the data, exploring my process of writing fieldnotes, transcribing interviews, and coding. Considering the significance of positionality in research, I reflect on my role as a researcher and the subjective perspective I brought to the study. I explore the ethical considerations that guided my study, with the special consideration of the sensitivity of my topic and the involvement of minors in the research process. I discuss the steps I took to gain informed consent from the respondents, ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality when sharing information. Additionally, I navigate the ethical dilemmas I encountered as a feminist researcher.

For my research, I adopted an ethnographic approach and conducted 1-month-long fieldwork at a public school in Hungary between the end of April and the beginning of June in 2022. This involved immersing myself in the school environment and employing various methods to gather data. Through classroom observation during lessons and observation of school spaces during breaks, I gained valuable insights into the dynamics of student interactions. Additionally, I conducted individual interviews with some of the students and collected relevant data from the school's website. Given the central role schools play in the lives of adolescents, I was compelled to place the focus of my research on the school context. Adolescents spend a

significant amount of their time within the school environment, making it a crucial space where they not only acquire knowledge but also develop essential social skills and engage in interactions with their peers. Moreover, schools are recognized as institutions that can perpetuate and reproduce various forms of inequality, such as those based on sex, gender, sexuality, race, and other factors (Apple, 2019; Aronowitz & Giroux, 2003). My fieldwork material consists of observation fieldnotes of lessons and breaks and transcripts of individual semi-structured interviews with students.

1. *The context of the school*

The school I obtained consent from to conduct this research is in Budapest, the capital city of Hungary, which means it is situated within the prevailing political discourses of the government. I focused on one class of 8th grader students, who were between 13 and 15 years old. In my view, this is an ideal age to observe constructions of gender, as adolescents usually start to explore their gender and sexuality in social ways around this time in their life. Dating, relationships, and sexual exploration are often central issues and topics among students this age. I conducted my fieldwork from the end of April until the beginning of June 2022, right before the summer holidays started in Hungary. This was the only time I could do it due to my academic schedule. This proved to be an interesting time in the lives of the students, as they were already finished with their exams and the bulk of their studies nearing their graduation after 8th grade. This meant that these were their last few weeks together as a group before going off to different schools after 8 years of being together. They were also affected by the online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had just ended in that academic year. Based on the accounts of teachers this meant that they were less restricted and unrulier, which leads me to believe that even though I might not have experienced the most standard month of their school

years, it likely has helped me in gaining more insight into their thoughts and feelings since some of them felt freer to express them.

2. Consideration of limitations

Though in 2022 the COVID-19 pandemic still highly influenced the everyday lives of people in many countries, in Hungary, at the time of my fieldwork, there were no restrictions or no mask mandates in place anymore. During my time at the school, there were instances of students and faculty falling ill, but none of the cases were related to COVID-19, and my own health was not affected. Due to the constant occurrence of illnesses, there was never a time when the entire class was present at once. As a result, there was one student whom I did not have the opportunity to meet at all during my month-long fieldwork. Unfortunately, this prevented me from fully experiencing the dynamic of the class with all students present.

Another possible limitation I considered before finalizing my topic was Act LXXIX of 2021, a law in Hungary that prohibits the popularization of homosexuality and gender non-conformity in schools. The anti-LGBTQ+ provisions of the Act include amendments to five laws, related to the protection of children, families, advertising, media, and public education. The amendments introduced provisions, which restrict minors' access to "pornographic content and content that depicts sexuality for its own sake or promotes or displays deviation from the identity of the sex of birth, gender reassignment, or homosexuality" (Act LXXIX, 2021, p. 6). In the case of the Public Education Act, the law only prohibits the "popularization/promotion" [népszerűsítés] of homosexuality and transgenderism, not their portrayal. According to Article 9/A of the Public Education Act, apart from teachers and professionals providing school health services, only those professionals and NGOs registered by the body designated by law may carry

out sex education activities in schools. Sex education is broadly defined to include any activity related to sexual culture, sex life, sexual orientation, sexual development.

I discussed this issue with the principal of the school who said that my research would not be affected by this and that the parents of the students at the school are largely accepting and open-minded as well. None of the faculty or staff brought this issue up at any point during my fieldwork. As far as I am aware, some NGOs still hold sessions on sexual education in schools without any repercussions, as there was no body designated to register the NGOs that are officially allowed into the schools but the fear of backlash from governmental entities and parents has been enough to restrict the presence of these topics in schools. Thankfully, I never had any issues during my fieldwork because of this law and I believe I will not have any problems with it later either.

I find it important to acknowledge the limitation inherent in my research design that comes from the focus on observing a single class of 8th-grader students within a limited timeframe. By solely observing one class for a duration of one month, the generalizability of findings to a broader student population in Hungary or across different contexts is constrained. The dynamics and interactions within this particular class cannot fully represent the complexities and variations that exist among other classes or schools. Furthermore, the short duration of observation limits the depth of understanding that I could attain regarding long-term patterns and changes over time.

3. *Data collection*

Ethnographic studies focusing on gender and sexuality in schools provide valuable insights into how these aspects shape the experiences of students and teachers in educational settings. School ethnographies have provided insights into how gender influences teacher-student

interactions, revealing that teachers' interactions with students are often biased and contribute to the traditional gender socialization process (Davis & Nicaise, 2011). For example, research by Einarsson & Granström (2002) found that boys receive more attention than girls in the classroom, with male teachers increasing attention to girls as students get older, while female teachers consistently give more attention to boys. C. J. Pascoe's school ethnography focusing on American adolescent boys and masculinity argues that the continual rejection of a 'fag' identity is central to their construction of masculinity, with this identity having primarily gendered but also sexualized and racialized meanings (Pascoe, 2005). In upper-primary school contexts, gendered discourses of biological determinism and peer pressure contribute to the misconception that violence and irresponsibility are 'naturally' masculine traits, as revealed in the everyday discursive practices of policymakers, teachers, and students (Wardman, 2017). Furthermore, research on gendered school space and school practices and events demonstrated the restrictiveness of the school environment, reinforcing gender stereotypes and inequalities, and discriminating against gender-diverse students (Neary, 2021; Þrastardóttir et al., 2021).

School ethnographies have the ability to uncover contradictions between formal educational policies and the actual practices in schools, exposing the contrast between stated values and reality in terms of gendered and racialized ideologies. Furthermore, some ethnographies also reveal discrepancies between data obtained from interviews and participant observation findings (Davis & Nicaise, 2011; Guerrini et al., 2021). These works highlight the significance of school ethnographies in understanding gender and sexuality in educational settings, as they provide insights that may have been partial if only quantitative methods or interviews were utilized. Considering these factors, the multifaceted nature of the research question, and the significance of the school environment in the lives of adolescents, conducting

school ethnography emerged as the most suitable method for obtaining diverse perspectives and insights.

In the course of my fieldwork, I used four methods of data collection: classroom observation during lessons and breaks, informal conversations during breaks, individual interviews, and information collection from the school's website, such as school policy documents and quantitative data on students and teachers. I recorded and transcribed verbatim all the interviews and during the classroom observations, I took fieldnotes in a notebook and on my phone. I did not take fieldnotes during informal conversations in breaks and interviews only after as soon as I had the chance to do so. During interviews, I took brief notes on my laptop to capture key points or topics mentioned by the respondents, which served as reminders for further exploration later. I deliberately avoided extensive note taking during to maintain a comfortable atmosphere for the interviewees and to ensure my full attention was focused on them and their reactions.

3.1. Classroom observation

As Carole McGranahan argues, "ethnography is not just something to know, but is a way of knowing" (McGranahan, 2018, p. 3). Participant observation is the main tool for gaining this knowledge, which positions me, as the researcher, as "the instrument of knowing" (Ortner, 1995, p. 1). Being aware of the responsibility of this position I aimed to keep myself to Judith Stacey's account of writing an ethnography, which is enhanced by feminist perspectives, and conduct research that is "rigorously self-aware and therefore humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other" (Stacey, 1988, p. 26). This is especially important since I had to interact with and write about minors. I worked towards gaining ethnographic sensibility, as explained by McGranahan so that I could focus on "the

conditions and experiences of life as actually lived" (McGranahan, 2018, p. 7) through my participant observation. Thus, I did not limit myself to just thinking of my research question, I paid attention to what the school community considered relevant to their lived experiences and was open to shifts in my research focus based on my fieldwork and its analysis.

During my research, I focused on observing the 8th-grade class of a primary school in Hungary, consisting of 14 girls and 14 boys, with one girl being absent throughout my entire fieldwork. The classroom observations took place between late April and early June of 2022, spanning almost until the end of the academic year. To immerse myself in the students' everyday experiences, I attended school almost every weekday, taking part in their regular schedule from 8 am to 1.45 pm. Typically, I occupied an empty chair towards the back of the classroom among the students, as some of them were frequently absent, so I could take their place.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I introduced myself to the class as a master's student at Central European University, I explained that I am doing research for my thesis and I provided an overview of my research focus, saying that I want to investigate gender roles in the school, for example how boys and girls might behave differently. To ensure clarity, I used the term "nemi szerepek" (gender roles) instead of the English term "gender[3]," which is used in Hungarian but carries negative connotations and may not be well understood due to anti-gender discourses in the country. I did not go into more detail at that moment, as my focus on violence only emerged during my analysis of the collected material.

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[3] As explained in a report on gender in educational policy documents, "there are no separate words in Hungarian for sex and gender, the word "nem" can refer to both, and sometimes the English word "gender" is used in Hungarian. […] The Hungarian equivalent of "gender" is "társadalmi nem" (i.e. social sex), which term is mainly used by gender experts in texts which recognize the distinction between sex and gender" (Hodická et al., 2019, p. 6).

During my introduction, I expressed my intention to spend a month observing their everyday lives and later conducting interviews to learn about their thoughts and experiences. I assured them that their participation in the interviews was entirely voluntary, and I encouraged them to feel comfortable and behave as they normally would, as if I were not present. I expressed gratitude to the students and their teachers for allowing me to be there and emphasized that they could approach me with any questions, either immediately or at a later time. Throughout this interaction, the students appeared receptive but also exhibited a sense of suspicion and doubt. Despite this, they seemed genuinely interested in the topic and they never talked over me as they did with most of the teachers. They did not have any questions and they did not seem to mind my presence or expressed any discomfort. Afterward, one student approached me to express her desire to participate in an interview.

My novelty in the classroom waned quickly, and by the end of the first week, the students appeared to be largely unbothered by my presence. Throughout the lessons, I took fieldnotes, observing the students' behavior and noting how the teachers' language and conduct incorporated gendered ideas and discourses. These observations allowed me to discern both collective and individual perspectives, as reflected in the teachers' attitudes. During breaks, I mostly remained in the classroom, but occasionally visited the teachers' lounge after informal conversations with them. While jotting down observations during breaks, I opted to use my phone instead of a notebook as in the breaks no one was writing in their notebooks, and I thought it would be too distracting for the students. As the weeks progressed, students grew more comfortable with me, some even initiating conversations during breaks and asking some questions about my research, to which I always responded as precisely and understandably as I could.

This participant observation was essential in answering my research question, but my research greatly benefitted from conducting individual interviews as well, which in this case were semi-structured ethnographic interviews. I did not want to limit myself only to what I can notice and experience, I wanted to learn about the students' perspective on their own gender identities and the gender identities of those around them. I was curious to understand how they perceive and describe these identities, expanding my research beyond what is observable.

3.2. Individual interviews

The initial focus of my research was on gender identities in school as experienced by and expressed from the students' perspective, so I conducted 9 semi-structured interviews out of the 28 students in the class. I recorded these interviews on my phone and transcribed them in Hungarian for analysis. The interviews all took place on school premises during school time in a room or area designated by the head teacher of the class. The location changed around based on the availability of the rooms, which sometimes meant that my interviews got interrupted and had to be moved to a different location in the school. These disruptions usually did not bother the students too much, those who were more talkative continued to share their thoughts unbothered in the new location, while those who were less talkative did not change their style in giving their answers.

The interviews were conducted during school hours, usually during the time of PE lessons, which was a class they had every day. Additionally, some teachers were open to letting the interviewed students miss one of their lessons, as some classes were more casual because of the impending summer holidays and graduation ceremony of the class, which gave me and the students more options for different time slots for the interviews. Sometimes the teachers would get sick and since the substituted classes did not always entail work for the students, these

instances also offered time for interviews. The interviews were usually around 50 or 60 minutes, the time of one class (45 minutes) and the additional break time added together.

The interviews were completely on a voluntary basis. In my introduction at the beginning of my fieldwork, I told the students that I would like to interview some of them who are open to it. After that a student immediately told me that they would be open to it, but most students became more open to the idea the more time I spent in the school and the more interviews I conducted with their peers. Overall, I interviewed 6 girls and 3 boys. The girls, in general, seemed to be more open to being interviewed about these topics and sharing their thoughts with me in general. Some students changed their minds multiple times about their possible participation in interviews, in these cases I was always very clear that it is no issue so they would never feel pressured to do it. I did not force or coerce anyone into answering my questions. Due to the vulnerability of the underage interviewees, I paid careful attention to getting their parents' and their own written informed consent before the interviews. Sometimes, this proved to be a difficulty, as many students forgot to make the parents sign the forms, left them at home, or lost them. I always had extra consent forms with me so if they lost them, they could ask for another one (and I offered it multiple times so they did not have to come to me themselves if they were not comfortable), however, these hang-ups caused that some interviews could not happen, even though the students were open to it.

In the beginning of the interviews, I took care to explain who I am, the purpose of my research, why I want to talk to them, and how I will use the collected data. I also gave a more detailed explanation of the consent forms. I emphasized that they could refuse to answer questions and can withdraw their consent at any point during the interview and my research process. If they had any questions, I made sure to answer them thoroughly and in a way that they

could fully understand it. A question that came up a few times was if their voices really had to be recorded during the interviews. Once I explained that I will be the only one with access to the recordings and I will delete them after my thesis work is over, they consented to the recording comfortably. I also offered that I could take notes instead of a recording, but they agreed to be recorded instead. There was one instance when I had to take notes instead of recording when an interviewee said that their parents were not comfortable with the voice recording, even though they signed the consent form that included the agreement to the recording in it. I complied with their wish, but this meant that I missed some information during the interview, as I could not write down everything that was said word for word.

For preparing and conducting my interviews I used what is outlined in Robert Stuart Weiss's *Learning from Strangers*, keeping my questions as open as possible and helping to develop information when needed (Weiss, 1994). During the interviews, I aimed to strike a balance between allowing the interviewee to express themselves without interruption, while also ensuring the discussion stayed focused on the research topic. While my interview guide covered various topics such as gender identity, gender roles, and gender relations both within and outside of school, it was notable that most interviewees naturally addressed the majority of the questions within the context of gender identity in the school environment. I relied on my interview guide to keep the focus of my topic and have comparable interviews, but I did not ask every question during every interview as I tried to adapt to the interviewee's judgment of what is more or less important for them.

3.3. Data collection from website, policy documents

To gather quantitative data and access official documents regarding school policies, I used the school's website. In order to protect the anonymity of the school, I am unable to

disclose the URL address so hereafter I refer to it as 'school policy document' in my citations. Through the website, I obtained valuable information such as the school's pedagogical program, policies, official records of lessons and timetables, and details regarding students and teachers. During the interviews, I collected additional data on the respondents, such as their age and ethnicity, which I organized in a Word document where I also kept track of the pseudonyms assigned to ensure confidentiality.

4. Fieldnotes, transcribing, coding

During my fieldwork, I recorded my observations and reflections through handwritten notes during lesson observations and on my phone during breaks. This allowed me to immerse myself in the students' environment and capture their experiences more authentically. At the end of each day, I supplemented my notes with additional observations and reflections, providing context and highlighting significant moments that I had initially jotted down. Verbatim transcriptions of the interviews were crucial, in which I captured not only the words spoken but also the hesitations and gestures that left an impression on me.

To organize and analyze the data, I used the NVivo software, coding the emerging keywords and topics identified in my fieldnotes and transcripts. I coded discourses and behavior related to gender, such as the use of gendered slurs, gendered space, and mentions of traditional gender roles alongside some more generic categories, such as language about sexuality, conflicts, appearance and clothing, discipline, and maturity. The specificities and overlaps among these codes led my attention to the pattern of violence and its connection with gender. As part of the analysis process, I created initial memos to document the significant themes and topics that emerged, laying the foundation for later analysis. For each topic or theme, I collected relevant quotes from both the fieldnotes and transcripts. To facilitate analysis, I translated the selected

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quotes into English and edited them to include only the relevant portions pertaining to the point I was making. I gave careful attention to preserving the original meaning and intention expressed by the respondents. Some excerpts contain explicit language, which I present unchanged in the text to maintain accuracy and authenticity.

5. *Reflecting on my positionality*

Reflecting on my positionality as a student at a private university in Europe and as a researcher is essential in understanding the power dynamics inherent in my study. As Katharine Sarikakis (2003) emphasizes, self-reflection on subjectivities and positioning is crucial in feminist research. It is important to recognize that as an observer, I was not neutral or impartial, and my fieldnotes cannot be considered objective data. My identity as a researcher, my position in the field, and my style and methods of observation inevitably influenced the notes I took (Fish & Rothchild, 2009, p. 272). This acknowledgment promotes continual self-reflection, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of my research process (Fish & Rothchild, 2009, p. 272).

The various aspects of my identity that were relevant in the field included my age, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, diet, researcher status, and being an outsider in a small and closed community. Negotiating and deciding when and how to disclose or conceal these aspects of my lifestyle and identity became an ongoing process during the research.

Regarding age, being 22 years old during the fieldwork allowed me to establish rapport with the students. I believe that they felt more comfortable discussing their lives with someone who appeared closer to their age. Similarly to C. J. Pascoe, I experienced multiple instances of misidentification (2007, p. 177), teachers sometimes mistook me for a student and generally treated me as somewhat inferior to them based on my age, due to my lack of life experience. Students, on the other hand, did not perceive me as a teacher but were occasionally unsure about

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my role, referring to me as a journalist or mistaking my thesis for a book, thinking I am an author.

To establish rapport with the students and minimize my sexualization and objectification as a woman, I aimed to adopt a "least-gendered" subjectivity (Pascoe, 2007, p. 180-183). In my approach in striving towards this perception, I attempted to stay as neutral as possible from the perspective of both the girls and the boys in the class. I aimed to maintain this neutral identity by avoiding being 'too' masculine or feminine by the standards of the context. I chose to wear simple pants and shirts that did not accentuate my figure, and I also wore a bra to prevent potential sexualization and to avoid upsetting more conservative teachers. Though I attempted to work towards a 'least-sexual' identity as well (Rédai, 2015, p. 52), a few instances occurred where students made comments about me as a potential girlfriend, which I handled by laughing it off and deflecting or redirecting the conversation.

Regarding sexual orientation, I chose not to disclose it to most respondents due to the heteronormative nature of the school environment. Remaining undisclosed allowed me to avoid potential remarks on my identity and allowed the students to not reconsider their language and discourses on sexuality. Having a male partner conveniently allowed me to navigate discussions about my personal life without lying. During an interaction with one of the girls who confided in me about questioning her own sexuality, I provided reassurance and support, indirectly revealing my own sexual orientation. Furthermore, in conversations with the same girl and two others, we discussed the possibility of attending the pride walk in Budapest. While they initially expressed reluctance and stated they would never attend, they asked for my perspective. I openly shared my positive experiences of participating in the event, which initially surprised them. I believe our

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conversation prompted them to reflect on the significance of pride and challenge their own biases.

In the context of my research, I encountered unexpected controversy surrounding my diet as a vegan within the school environment. Veganism became a recurring topic during class discussions, with most students expressing a strong dislike towards it and dismissing it as an "idiotic" choice, while considering vegetarianism somewhat more acceptable, though still seen as "stupid". I believe that the students' attitudes towards food were influenced by notions of hegemonic masculinity, particularly in relation to the consumption of meat (see: Sobal, 2005). The association between meat consumption and masculinity appeared to be deeply ingrained in the school culture. This observation highlighted the need for caution in disclosing my veganism to the students. By opting not to disclose my diet, I aimed to maintain a neutral position and avoid potential biases in the research process. When offered snacks that I could not eat, I employed various maneuvers to avoid disclosing my veganism directly. I would often state that I was not hungry or simply not in the mood for certain foods, which the students seemed to understand without further questioning.

The teachers were generally curious and enthusiastic about my research topic, which prompted them to openly share their thoughts on the behavior of girls and boys without me directly asking them or interviewing them. My ethnicity, being white, was unmarked, enabling teachers to express covertly racist thoughts as well (and also avoiding racist remarks made by the students). Despite their interest in the topic of gender, the teachers had difficulty understanding my research process and expressed sympathy towards me as they said that the students did not care about my presence and did not change or improve behavior. When I stated that I found their feedback reassuring they did not seem to believe me.

Throughout the study, negotiating my positionality was an ongoing process, requiring careful consideration of disclosure, balancing different aspects of my identity, and navigating power dynamics within the field. By recognizing and reflecting upon these factors, I sought to confront and reduce my personal biases and ensure the credibility of my research.

6.   *Ethical considerations*

6.1. Anonymity and sharing information

An important ethical consideration I had to address was the need to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the school, its staff, and the students involved in my research. While the school was not explicitly identifiable, certain characteristics could potentially reveal its identity. Therefore, I carefully assessed the level of detail I included in my research to ensure the anonymity of all participants and interviewees. Given the involvement of minors in my study, I approached every aspect of my research with utmost care. This encompassed my conduct during fieldwork, the formulation of my questions, and the content included in my thesis. In line with Farhana Sultana's perspective, I recognize the significance of incorporating ethical considerations throughout the entire research process, from conceptualization to dissemination, with a particular focus on navigating ethical complexities in the field (Sultana, 2007, p. 375).

6.2. Ethical dilemmas as a feminist researcher

When conducting feminist research in educational settings, it is essential to consider the ethical implications of the power dynamics involved. Jennifer Fish and Jennifer Rothchild (2009) highlight the significance of recognizing privilege and vulnerability in relation to location and research circumstances. Schools are not neutral spaces; they inherently embody power relations that shape the experiences of students and teachers. However, based on Fish and Rothchild's

argument, I aimed to disengage from my preconceived expectations and assumptions in order to comprehend the interlocking layers of social power present more accurately at the site of research (Fish & Rothchild, 2009, p. 272). Recognizing and understanding these power relations is crucial to conducting ethical research (Fish & Rothchild, 2009, p. 270).

Building upon Barrie Thorne's perspective, I view children as competent social actors actively shaping their daily experiences (1994, p. 12). Thorne also argues that studying children can be seen as "studying down," where adults seek to bridge differences and inequalities (Thorne, 1994, p. 12). However, this approach still positions children beneath the researcher, which raised concerns in me about the possibility of epistemic violence when researching vulnerable social contexts. Gayatri Spivak's work in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1994) sheds light on this concept, highlighting how dominant discourses and knowledge systems perpetuate violence by silencing marginalized voices, particularly women in postcolonial contexts. She argues that dominant Western discourses and knowledge systems perpetuate violence by misrepresenting or silencing the voices and experiences of the subaltern, those who are socially and politically marginalized. This constitutes a form of violence that I was actively working against in my research practices.

My desire to engage in feminist research also raised ethical concerns in connection with the potential exposure to sexist, homophobic, or racist comments, which I did encounter during my research. While I aimed to avoid perpetuating inequalities, I also wanted to maintain the integrity of my observations and interviews by minimizing my influence on their outcomes. To address these instances, I attempted to navigate them without showing offense or anger. In certain interview situations, when appropriate, I posed follow-up questions to prompt interviewees to reflect on the implications of their statements.

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Another ethical dilemma I encountered was a potential case of sexual harassment of students by a male teacher in Chapter 4, Section 3. Some of the girls opened up to me about the story towards the end of my fieldwork. Though they did not ask for my help, I validated their position and feelings and offered to talk to someone in the school on their behalf. As a feminist I did not want to allow sexual harassment to happen without interference, so even though they said the teachers knew and that they think it would make no difference I told them I would raise the issue again with the principal if they want me to, leveraging my position as an adult and researcher to potentially influence the situation. They agreed and thanked me for this offer. Since it was not a unique experience of one person, I could bring up the issue without naming anyone and without a fear of bringing retaliation to anyone, since the girls said they already brought this to the attention of teachers. At the end of my fieldwork, I had a discussion with the principal who said that she knew about some issues with this teacher, and she seemed to take my concerns seriously, though I did not receive any indication of concrete action to be taken against the teacher. Unfortunately, due to the rampant problems in the education system in Hungary, as explored in my introduction, the reporting or firing of a teacher is highly unlikely, especially since his actions were within a 'gray area' that can be easily explained away. Sharing and documenting the story brings it to light but does not give it due justice, because of the research ethics of anonymity.

Chapter 3: Unpacking the Manifestations of Systemic Violence in School – Gender Stereotyping and Discipline

Violence is deeply ingrained in the structural, social, and cultural layers of schools and the everyday life within them. Noticing and analyzing the presence of the different manifestations of violence in this context is crucial in understanding the social interactions taking place in the school environment. Gender stereotyping, gendered expectations, and gender-based discipline in schools, although not forms of physical aggression, are manifestations of violence, due to the resulting harm caused. Such gendered biases and the actions based on them perpetuate social inequalities and reinforce gender-based power imbalances, which can lead to restricted opportunities for students based on their gender and contribute to broader social and economic disparities.

Certain aspects of school organization, school culture, and pedagogy demonstrate discriminatory, harmful, and therefore systematically violent patterns (Odenbring & Johansson, 2021b; Tyner, 2012). The interactions between teachers and students play a significant role in reinforcing gender roles and gendered expectations in school (Allana et al., 2010; Dee, 2005; Einarsson & Granström, 2002). While teachers hold the authority to either challenge or reinforce social hierarchies and gender-based inequalities, their lack of understanding and their consequent insensitive behaviors can legitimize and perpetuate anti-LGBTQ+ bullying, creating an unwelcoming environment for students with diverse gender identities (Bower-Brown et al., 2021, p.10).

Through my argument for the strong presence of different forms of violence, I wish to gain a new perspective on violence in school as an interconnected phenomenon that appears in many different ways, affecting the gender identity and expression of students. In this Hungarian

primary school, despite some efforts made by teachers to promote acceptance, progress in this area appeared to be superficial, with teachers continuing to rely on cisnormative language and reinforcing heteropatriarchal hierarchies[4]. In the subchapters below I examine how the teachers' collective gendered stereotypes and expectations manifest in the classroom and how their position of power contributes to the intersecting inequalities experienced by students. Focusing on the pattern of the teacher's behavior and exploring its correlation or lack of correlation with school policies, I look into how their position of power and authority can influence and possibly harm the students' gendered experiences.

In the first subchapter, I argue that teachers contribute to systemic violence in schools by imposing gendered expectations and hierarchies on students, reinforcing harmful gender norms, power imbalances, and discrimination. In the second subchapter, I provide an example of intersectional hierarchy reproduction by teachers through their construction of a half-Arab girl's gendered and ethnicized identity. In the third subchapter, I connect the themes around appropriate manifestations of gender expression and maturity as demonstrated by teachers' language of discipline and scolding, as well as school policy documents. All of these exemplify the presence and scope of the manifestations of systemic violence in the examined school environment.

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[4] In the definition of bell hooks, "[p]atriarchy is a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence" (hooks, 2014b, p. 1). Additionally, in my view, patriarchy includes heteronormativity, as the acceptable forms of masculine or feminine performance are strongly connected to heteronormativity.

Playful boys and problematic girls – gender stereotyping and behavioral expectations

The presence of systemic violence can be seen in the pattern of behavior of the teachers in schools, which reinforces gender hierarchies by perpetuating binary gender norms and expectations. Teachers often view students through a gendered lens that assumes certain qualities are inherently associated with boys and girls and constitutes them as opposite groups with innate differences. This perpetuates gendered expectations and hierarchies, with girls often being positioned as inferior to boys. This argument is supported by an analysis of how teachers' assumptions about gender impact their interactions with students, particularly in how they discipline and reward different genders. In this section, I demonstrate how these gendered expectations and hierarchies are a form of systemic violence that reinforces gender inequalities in schools.

Jones and Myhill (2004) emphasize that teachers' positioning of boys and girls in relation to academic achievement is influenced by the two "norms" of underachieving boys and high-achieving girls. Allard (2004) and Francis (2000) found that teachers perceive girls as mature, sensible, and responsible, while boys are often viewed as silly, immature, and prone to taking risks. More recently, Wardman (2016) has observed gender stereotyping among both teachers and students, where girls are seen as hardworking, responsible, and mature, while boys are characterized as lazy, irresponsible, and immature (Menzies & Santoro, 2018).

Though I found that the basis of the gendered differentiation in assuming girls as more mature than boys was relevant in my case as well, the maturity of girls was often constructed as a negative attribute which led them to question the authority of teachers, instead of leading to higher academic achievement. As such, the girls' behavior was collectively condemned by most teachers and defined as worse than the boys'. During informal conversations, multiple teachers

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expressed their frustration to me that the girls are "worse", "harsher", or "more difficult" (fieldnotes, 04.2022). The boys' male PE teacher was even more explicit in his dislike of the girls stating that "they are horrible, it must be horrible to teach the girls" (fieldnotes, 04.2022). In other instances, he made comments such as "the boys take it very seriously, they play well, the girls bothered them a bit" and "the boys are cool, there are some issues with the girls" (fieldnotes, 05.2022). As such, the teachers either explicitly or implicitly perpetuated a gender hierarchy in the classroom, branding the girls as bad and the boys as good. This difference has been noted by the students as well, as explained by two 14-year-old boys from the class:

"More and more I hear that girls behave worse than boys. I think this might've just turned around now or something because in our class it's really the case that we boys obviously, apart from minor pranks, behave relatively better than girls. So really, I did pranks, I was not the only one, obviously, for which I was scolded, but the girls who misbehave, I see that there is really nothing, no, how do you say it, no restraining force." (Interview with Ferenc, 14)

"Well, Aunt Kati said, for example, she thinks that in the current class, boys behave much more, even though they are naughtier, or I don't know, even though they act more stupid a lot of times, Aunt Kati said that she thinks boys are better than girls in terms of behavior. For example, what Peti does is uncomfortable but entertaining but what Anna does is simply unacceptable." (Interview with Gergő, 14)

This gender-based distinction has been noted by both girls and boys in the class, so it can be assumed that it has been communicated to the students by the teachers. Since this was not an isolated opinion or action of one teacher, it reveals a pattern of negative connotations and expectations from all teachers. In contrast, my experience during my fieldwork did not show such a discrepancy between the 'bad' behavior demonstrated by the boys and the girls. Both groups exhibited similar levels of disruptive behavior during classes, as both groups had to be

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scolded for talking during classes around the same amount, and people who talked back more often or more harshly could be found in both groups. In line with bell hooks' argument, talking back often just "meant speaking as an equal to an authority figure. It meant daring to disagree and sometimes it just meant having an opinion" (hooks, 2014a, p. 5). Instances of discussions initiated by the female students on the point of learning certain things were usually taken as an act of questioning authority and therefore an offense, even if the language they used was not harsh. As such, the tendency to constitute the girls' behavior as much worse seems to come from different social expectations teachers have in connection with binary and patriarchal gender norms. Since girls are expected to behave more submissive and perform better in school than boys, their misbehavior is perceived as more unacceptable and inappropriate by the teachers (and consequently the students) in the school. These gendered stereotypes place additional pressure and scrutiny on the girls' behavior, as they are expected to conform to notions of maturity and 'ladylike' behavior.

The prevalent thought that "girls mature faster than boys" have been expressed by multiple girl students during our interviews. This perception also led to a certain level of understanding regarding the boys' misbehavior, as one of the 14-year-old girls explained:

"Well, because women mature so much faster than men, I'm not saying …, but sometimes they're so stupid actually that they'll call you a name or something. But not always on purpose, sometimes they just can't help it." (Interview with Luca, 14)

Another 14-year-old girl from the class also noticed this pattern and expressed frustration in this difference of expectations:

"I feel like boys are forgiven for more things and stuff because they mature later, and they say, oh well, you can't expect anything, they're just boys. I think that to be like "oh he's just a boy, that's the way it is, you can't change that" from a very early age, I think if

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I was like "well you did this, I don't care if it's a boy or a girl, you did this and it's your fault" then boys would feel a lot less like they are allowed to do things because they're just boys and they mature later." (Interview with Fanni, 14)

Here the boys' immaturity is framed as an inherent part of their sex, which was usually referred to as a biological difference by most teachers and students. However, there were students like Fanni who attributed this difference to societal factors and acknowledged the difference in expectations placed on girls and boys related to this notion, demonstrating a keen awareness of these dynamics. This prevailing notion of boys' immaturity provided them with an implicit justification for potential insults, without the need for them to offer any excuses. Despite witnessing boys engaging in "harsh" jokes that included elements of racism, sexism, and sexual abuse more frequently than girls, they were still generally perceived as better behaved. As Bergljót Þrastardóttir, Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson, and Sirpa Lappalainen point out, teachers often tolerate boys' misbehavior, viewing them as "innocent and fun guys, and not always in control of their actions" (Þrastardóttir et al., 2021, p. 9). This perspective absolves boys of responsibility for their negative actions, while girls, assumed to possess greater maturity, are expected to always know better.

In conclusion, this section has illustrated how teachers apply a binary gendered lens when assessing students and impose gendered expectations and hierarchies on them, contributing to the systemic violence present in the school that reinforces harmful gender norms, power imbalances, and discrimination. The teachers' gender stereotypes position girls as more mature and responsible than boys, imposing higher expectations on them in the school environment, which creates a gender hierarchy in the classroom. This section also reveals how different gender stereotypes influence expectations towards the genders unequally, and the belief that "girls mature faster than boys" provides boys with an excuse for their possible insults. Ultimately, this

gendered differentiation in behavior expectations creates an unequal and unfair learning environment that perpetuates existing gendered power relations, reinforcing a gendered manifestation of systemic violence.

From labels to lived experience – intersectional identities and discrimination

The educational system has been producing many forms of systemic violence, with the perpetuation of social hierarchies based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender being a perpetual and significant problem. Among the marginalized groups, Romani students face significant challenges as they encounter discrimination and prejudice from both their peers and teachers. A prevailing issue is the ethnicized identity constructions imposed upon Romani students by non-Romani teachers. These teachers tend to attribute racial and cultural values and behaviors to Romani students, effectively shaping their class positions and reinforcing harmful stereotypes. This perpetuates the marginalization and inequality experienced by Romani students within the educational system (Rédai, 2015, p. 164).

While conducting my research within the 8th-grade class, I did not encounter Romani students within this specific group. However, I observed a disturbing prevalence of prejudice towards Romani people among the students, as racial slurs and negative stereotypes targeting the Romani community were common in the students' everyday conversations. Furthermore, it is important to note that racism and racial prejudice were not limited to targeting Romani people alone. I observed multiple instances of racist remarks made against other racial and ethnic identities, highlighting a broader pattern of discrimination and bias towards people of color within the school community. In the following example, I will demonstrate the teachers' intersectional hierarchy reproduction, through their construction of a half-Arab girl's gendered and ethnicized identity. I argue that teachers constructed raced and gendered hierarchies to

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constitute her identity and explain her 'bad' behavior, thus reinforcing the systemic violence present in the educational system.

Anna was regarded as the worst behaved student in the class by most, if not all, teachers. Anna frequently exhibited behaviors such as openly challenging teachers, discussing her romantic interests aloud in class, and occasionally sleeping through lessons, leaning her head on her desk. While her actions were not necessarily unique among her peers, one notable aspect was her use of explicit language when engaging in arguments with teachers[5]. In my view, the perception of all girls being categorized as "worse" was partially influenced by the teachers' attitudes towards Anna, generalizing her behavior based on her gender while associating its perceived "severity" with her ethnicity. This suggests that biases and stereotypes about gender and ethnicity intertwine, contributing to the treatment and labeling of the girls as a whole.

Some teachers explicitly expressed resentment towards Anna and her behavior, with two of them separately admitting to me that they believe her 'problematic' behavior to be a consequence of her "mixed parenting", as "her mother married an Arab man" (fieldnotes, 04.2022). As such, Anna was constructed as the bearer of her 'culture' (Yuval-Davis, 1997), her father's ethnic identity positioning her on a lower 'cultural' level, giving her the tendency to act out. These constructed hierarchies of cultures have been present during other class discussions, such as when a teacher called her own moral judgment part of her "European perspective" while discussing how "some cultures" allow girls to marry very young, or the students' recurring racist remarks towards Romani people and people of color (fieldnotes, 05.2022).

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[5] Despite this being a difference, many other students engaged in arguments with teachers, with one boy often making sexual remarks loudly during classes and even going as far as to threaten a female teacher with physical violence. He was never highlighted to me as especially bad behaving by any teachers and his remarks were often brushed off as just being cheeky.

The pedagogical program of the school emphasizes the development of students' national

consciousness, patriotic education, and understanding the history and present of Europe and

Hungary. The inclusion of patriotism aligns with the government's nationalist influence on

educational institutions. On the other hand, the school appears to independently prioritize the

cultivation of a European identity. While the school policy document mentions the importance of

respecting all cultures, there is no explicit mention of efforts to learn about or address racial or

ethnic inequalities. Additionally, although the document does not explicitly establish a

hierarchical relationship between Hungary, Europe, and other countries or geographical areas,

there is a lack of consideration for students who may come from outside Hungary or Europe. My

fieldwork experience revealed instances where certain teachers expressed moral judgments based

on the non-Europeanness of individuals or concepts, revealing the influence of colonial thought

of the cultural superiority of the "Western way of life" (Vergés, 2022, p.8)

Though the teachers only referred to it privately to me, both Anna and her classmates

jokingly mentioned her Arab identity as a semi-sarcastic explanation for her behavior among

themselves. As Yuval-Davis (1997) argues, the racialized construction of the other involves

sexualized and gendered imagery. This perspective on Anna's identity was outlined to me by one

of the female teachers of the class:

> "I like them very much, they are nice, intelligent, it's just Anna who speaks up once and
> spoils it. [...] The boys hate her and ask why she hasn't been expelled yet, but they laugh
> at her. [...] She's the woman. The woman. She makes everyone stupid. Even smart kids
> like Tomi, you see her wrap him around her finger. [...] How nice would it be if she
> stayed at home." (Fieldnotes, 04.2022)

In this comment all of the teacher's assumptions are spelled out, blaming Anna for ruining

classes and corrupting other students, even "smart" (white) boys. The boys are perceived as

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innocent, a victim of her 'overtly' feminine gender performance, even if they encourage it by laughing at her jokes. Branding her as "the woman" adultifies her and reduces her to her gender, constituting her in a dangerous sexualized and feminine subjectivity. The teacher's suggestion that it would be "nice" if Anna stayed at home further illustrates the resulting harm of the teacher's attitude, as it shows that rather than helping her, she would prefer for her not to be there, placing her below the other students who are deserving of a proper learning environment. This is in line with Vergés' argument that "protection is understood in the colonial tradition" where discrimination and segregation based on perceived cultural hierarchies is justified by "artwashing, politics of bourgeois respectability and white feminism" (Vergés, 2022, p. 8). The intersectional constitution of Anna's identity as an Arab female student, though not explicitly mentioned in this quote, is a factor that contributes to her image as constructed by the teachers.

Anna's stereotyped identity as someone who talks back to teachers, uses curse words, and insults and manipulates the boys in class was continually reinforced by the teachers through their remarks, as exemplified by this excerpt from my fieldnotes during a lesson:

> "During the lesson, Anna is called upon multiple times, but she admits she cannot answer the questions.
> Anna: I swear I could not even recall a sentence.
> Female Teacher, sarcastically: You could remember it if it was a curse word or an insult."
> (fieldnotes, 05.2022)

This collective reinforcement from figures of authority, whether in a sarcastic or serious manner, made it exceptionally challenging for Anna to break free from the role that was collectively assigned to her. She conformed to the gender expectations imposed upon her by acting in an exaggeratedly feminine manner, openly discussing her romantic interests (often prompted or entertained by some of the boys) and engaging in sarcastic discussions about her perceived

"stupidity" and "crudeness," particularly during classes. Anna's case illustrates how the gendered expectations of teachers intersect with other aspects of identity, forming intersecting hierarchies within the classroom. It also emphasizes the need to confront and challenge deep-rooted biases and discriminatory attitudes that persist within the educational environment.

"Be more ladylike" – appearance, maturity, and discipline

So far, I explored forms of systemic violence that manifested in the collective attitude and pattern of behavior of the teachers, thus representing an aspect of school culture that restricts the students based on their gender. In this section, I will connect the themes I explored around the appropriate or inappropriate manifestations of gender expression and maturity as demonstrated by the teachers' language of discipline and scolding as well as the school policy document. As James A. Tyner argues, "through regulatory practices, schools attempt to produce 'normal' students and, by extension, 'normal' boys and girls. Children are expected to conform to a set of administratively defined normative standards" (Tyner, 2012, p. 83). These practices include disciplinary measures, student-teacher interactions, school events, and the curriculum, which "convey and regulate sexual meanings", normalizing heteronormativity (Pascoe, 2007, pp. 26 –27) as well as regulating gendered meanings, normalizing cisgenderism, the gender binary, traditional gender roles, and patriarchal hierarchies.

Tyner explains that "notions of proper gender and sexual behaviors and expectations may literally be codified in rules and regulations. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the imposition of school dress codes, designed in part to impress upon children ideals of 'acceptable' or 'normal' gendered and sexual identities" (Tyner, 2012, p. 89). Appropriate appearance in school was an issue that surfaced multiple times throughout my fieldwork. It quickly became apparent to me that the girls in the class were more experimental and expressive with how they dressed

and used makeup than the boys. Multiple girls expressed a feeling of social pressure to look beautiful, as described by one 14-year-old female student from the class:

> "I think it's very bad that you have to live under such a pressure to conform, that you have to be smart, you have to be pretty, you have to be thin, you have to dress like this, you shouldn't dress like a boy, because that's not good, you have to wear make-up, you shouldn't have ugly skin, you shouldn't have hairy hands, you have to smell like roses, you can't be a smelly, nothing. I think it's a very bad thing that everyone has to dress nicely, and you really have to meet expectations with everything, and I think it's a very bad thing that your own classmates judge you for who you are. And of course, there's a lot of adults who tell you off for the way you dress." (Interview with Brigitta, 14)

Her line of thought highlights the pervasive pressure to conform to societal expectations and standards, even at her young age. The expectations placed on students to be smart, pretty, thin, and well-dressed reflect harmful gender norms and reinforce power imbalances that discriminate against those who do not conform. Additionally, the quote exposes how students are judged and criticized by their peers and adults for their appearance and identity, perpetuating a culture of violence and discrimination.

Combined with this pressure to meet the expectations of appearance there was a specific gendered pressure in the school to look appropriate for the school environment. As it is stated in the school's policy:

> "The students' appearance at school should be clean, neat, simple, and natural, the extremes of fashion (e.g. dyed or gelled hair, make-up, painted long nails, body jewelry, tattoos, provocative clothing) should be avoided!"

The language used in the quote, particularly the use of the phrase "extremes of fashion", suggests that there is a narrow definition of what is considered acceptable or appropriate appearance for students and that anything outside of this norm is seen as undesirable or even unacceptable. This

reinforces harmful gender norms and can lead to discrimination by the school administration against students who do not conform to these narrow expectations. The use of terms like "provocative clothing" further perpetuates harmful gender norms by implying that certain types of clothing are inherently "provocative" and therefore inappropriate. This places the responsibility on young students, implying that if they wear certain types of clothing, they are inviting sexualization, rather than holding accountable those who would objectify them regardless of their clothes and appearance. This policy largely affected the girls in the class I was observing, as they felt pressured to look a certain way but were also scolded if they were 'too extreme'.

During the interviews female students said that teachers used to scold them for wearing eyeliner or for painting their hair a different color. Some of them also made remarks on their clothing, especially if they wore crop tops or torn jeans. This was explained to me by the 14-year-old Luca:

> "Aunt Kati kept telling me, "Oh, you're wearing those pants again, oh, those pants." And this, if someone comes in wearing shorts it's not a problem, but if I wear jeans that show my legs so much it's a problem" (Interview with Luca, 14)

This quote highlights the arbitrary and gendered expectations and double standards that are often imposed on students by teachers. The fact that Aunt Kati singled out the student for wearing the same pants repeatedly suggests a fixation on the student's appearance and a desire to control it. Moreover, the teacher not having an issue with other students wearing shorts but had a problem with this student wearing jeans that show her legs further reinforces the gendered expectations that female students are subjected to regarding their dress and appearance. As explained by Timi, a 13-year-old female student from the class:

"Actually it also depends on the teacher but for example Aunt Lilla, everything is wrong for her, if your tummy is showing then "cover your tummy" and stuff like that […] and they could respect that whatever they say I'm going to wear that top or pants or whatever […] I don't understand why there's a thing about what's appropriate for school and what's not. So, the point of school is to learn things and I don't understand why the way they look is part of what they are so it's completely unrelated to what we wear. So, because of my piercing they gave me a warning from the principal and I don't understand because it's just a ring in my nose and it doesn't make me a different person and I'm not going to learn differently I don't understand and why if I take it out then it's better for them […]" (Timi, 13)

This highlights that while teachers may vary in their attitudes towards students' appearance, the school policy empowers them to enforce punishments based on their subjective judgments, such as in the case of Timi's nose ring. Timi also expresses confusion over why this policy would help her in learning or why anyone would care about what she wears, showing an awareness and critical thinking of a vague, subjective, and selectively enforced rule.

During my fieldwork I noticed multiple remarks made by teachers regarding the appearance or clothing of girls, though I never saw anyone giving punishments for it, despite the presence of the dress code in the school policy. According to the interviews, some teachers used to care more and were very upset whenever someone presented themselves in a way that they did not categorize as appropriate, but they had to get used to it over time, as more and more (mostly female) students kept experimenting with their looks, and by now they do not mention it as much, aside from making some passing remarks. On the other hand, there were also other expectations presented for the girls about their appearance, such as when a female teacher asked the girls after they took their class photos, if they were pretty on it and if she would like them on the photos. As such, the girls were expected to maintain a certain appropriate level of prettiness within the regulations of the school. These expectations resulted in strengthening of gendered

social pressures while also restricting the self-expression of all genders. When asked if the teachers ever made remarks on the boys' appearance, the interviewees said no, as 14-year-old Luca explains:

> "No. Not at all. Well, dressing for boys is basically just sweaters and pants. So, for them, not so much, they're not so much. It's sweatshirts and T-shirts or whatever, T-shirts and pants." (Interview with Luca, 14)

Therefore, those who did not belong to the group of the girls were not expected to be pretty and were not regulated in their appearance, but they also did not have room for experimentation since the heteropatriarchal gender norms regarding clothing were reinforced in the school.

Another important aspect of discipline in school was the notion of appropriate behavior and maturity.

> "In order to keep the good reputation of the institution, all participants are expected to behave in a civilized manner, avoiding all forms of prohibited behavior; students are required to keep themselves to the age-appropriate standards of behavior." (School policy document)

This quote from the school policy document implies that there are certain standards of behavior that students are expected to conform to in order to maintain the good reputation of the school. The use of the term "age-appropriate" suggests that there are specific expectations for behavior based on the students' age, which can vary depending on cultural and societal norms. However, this notion of "age-appropriate" behavior can also be used to reinforce gendered expectations and norms, as certain behaviors are deemed appropriate or inappropriate based on gender. As I mentioned in the previous sections, girls were expected to be more mature, and the notion of "girls mature faster than boys" was prominently present in the students' and teachers' discourses. Age and age-appropriate behavior were mentioned

many times when teachers were disciplining the class, with statements such as "it won't be acceptable to act like this in middle school", or "really, do I need to rearrange the seating, are we in nursery school" (fieldnotes, 05.2022).

One specific case was told to me during an informal conversation with a student. She said that one time she was asked to do a task out loud during one of the lessons, but she could not do it and she started crying. After this she was sent out of the classroom and the head teacher told her that at her age as a 14-year-old she should not cry during a lesson. This implies that expressing strong emotions is not appropriate in school, especially during lessons. Crying is seen as a form of weakness and is not considered age-appropriate behavior for a 14-year-old student. By sending the student out of the classroom and reprimanding her, the teacher stigmatized emotional expression and vulnerability, which can have a negative impact on students' mental health and well-being and contributes to a culture of emotional repression and detachment. Additionally, the teachers' expectations of maturity are largely limited to disciplined behavior from the students, as questioning certain tasks or trying to find the meaning and use of certain topics is often branded as a form of 'talking-back' (hooks, 2014a), questioning the teachers' authority, which is not acceptable.

Lastly, the language used for disciplining or scolding girls in the classroom often contained gendered words and expressions, while I did not notice similar tendencies in the language used with boys. Teachers often addressed students as "ladies" when girls were chatting during a lesson or asked them to be more "ladylike" when they used an inappropriate word or talked back. This can also be tied back to the inherently gendered expectations of maturity and the adultification of girls in school. However, during my interviews with the students there were disagreements on who got punished more based on gender, as some

students said that the boys got formal punishments, such as written notes, more often than girls, while some girls insisted that the girls are disciplined more in general. In my view, the manner of discipline varied based on specific situations, but the boys' misbehavior was usually viewed more as acts of playful misbehavior while the girls' was often a sign of moral corruption that, even if not formally punished, was judged more harshly.

Conclusion

In conclusion, different forms of systemic violence are deeply ingrained in the school environment, perpetuated by school policies and teachers' collective attitudes and behavior. This is especially alarming as this particular school is one that leans towards more liberal values, such as acceptance, sustainability, and inclusivity. These values are also emphasized in the school policy document, sustainability being one of the school's most detailed goals, however the policy and the discussions about acceptance are vague and subjective. Neither the document nor the teachers made an attempt to address the different forms of inequalities present in the students' everyday lives based on their gender, race, ethnicity, religion or other factors. The lack of policies regarding social inequalities and the presence of gendered expectations, discipline, and intersectional discriminatory attitudes are contributing to the systemic violence present in the school and are socializing students to accept and perpetuate harmful gender norms, power imbalances, and discrimination. Thus, it is crucial for schools to critically examine their policies and practices and take active steps towards promoting gender equality and creating a safe and inclusive environment for all students.

Chapter 4: From Jokes to Harassment – Sexualized Banter and Gendered Violence

The prevalent presence of violence in schools manifests not just in the collective attitudes of the authority figures and the systemic inequalities but in seemingly isolated harmful and direct interpersonal interactions between students as peers, and the specific instances of violence coming from individual teachers. In this chapter I analyze cases that exemplify the different forms of violence among students and how they carry and recreate gender-based inequalities as well as the presence of sexual harassment in school. These cases highlight and perpetuate the impact of implicit and explicit systemic inequalities within the school, particularly in the conflicts among students and their encounters with abuse. In examining these cases, my intention is not to view them in isolation from the systemic violence discussed in the previous chapter. On the contrary, I aim to explore the connections, similarities, and differences in the dynamics that perpetuate these instances. I wish to contextualize and examine instances of conflicts, harassment, and different forms of abuse in the framework of power dynamics and social positioning (Odenbring & Johansson, 2021a, p. 2).

The cases I chose to include demonstrate more direct forms of violence than the previous chapter, such as interactions among students characterized by sexualized and racialized banter, as well as verbal and physical abuse, and interactions involving the PE teacher and some of the female students in the class. The conflicts among students contribute to the ongoing discourse on masculinities and femininities within the school setting. The boys' engagement in sexualized banter aligns with existing research and reflects the construction of masculinities (Pascoe, 2013; Plummer, 2001; Rosen & Nofziger, 2019), while also demonstrating a notable absence of

physical aggression, which has been observed in other contexts (Olweus, 1993; Sullivan, 2011). On the other hand, the conflicts among girls exhibit a more confrontational nature, yet still underscore the pattern of normative gender regulation. Furthermore, my findings are in line with the literature that points to discipline not being solely enforced by teachers on students, but rather students actively participating in this process and exert agency (Tyner, 2012, p. 84; Pascoe, 2013). In addition, I incorporate the perspectives of students who share their experiences of increased pressure within the school environment, which ultimately contribute to a common sense of inauthenticity.

Gender regulation and same-gender violence

Interpersonal violence in schools is a complex and nuanced issue that often goes beyond the established framework of bullying. As defined by Olweus, "[a] student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (1993, p. 9). In the existing literature on school violence, instead of terms like 'violence,' 'sexual harassment,' or 'sexual assault,' there is a prevalent usage of the term 'bullying' (Rawlings, 2021, p. 32). According to Nan Stein (2005), this term serves as a more acceptable label that conceals acts of violence and illegal incidents, deflecting the responsibility and potential liability of schools. Victoria Rawlings refers to this phenomenon as part of the essentialist discourse of bullying, which places greater emphasis on the behavioral characteristics of those involved, rather than considering how specific situations and contextual cultures contribute to acts of violence (Rawlings, 2021, p. 32).

During my fieldwork, conflicts and instances of verbal aggression more often happened in a way where there was no obviously superior participant, despite previous research showing relying on the notion that the bully and victim could be clearly identified and separated. While

both girls and boys experience violence in school, it can take different forms and have different dynamics depending on the gender of the individuals involved. Without a clearly identifiable perpetrator and victim, identifying and addressing instances of violence in schools has to be placed in a wider framework that surpasses the individualized perspective on bullying.

Previous research on gendered violence in school often focused on patterns of bullying. Male students were observed to be more aggressive than female students (Espelage, Mebane, & Swearer, 2004) and also more often participating in bullying either as victims or perpetrators (Olweus, 1993). The literature also found that physical bullying, such as hitting, kicking, choking, spitting, or hair pulling, is more commonly used by boys (Olweus, 1993; Sullivan, 2011), while girls are more likely to employ indirect bullying tactics such as name-calling, spreading rumors, and other forms of psychological bullying. These clear distinctions might be helpful in thinking about violence in schools, however they maintain a binary and individualized view on bullying. During my fieldwork I did not witness any conflict among the students beyond verbal aggression, as such, this division in the existing literature could not fit the variations in my case study. However, a discernible pattern emerged in the acts of violence carried out by the students, highlighting a strong correlation with societal expectations regarding acceptable gender performance within both the boys' and girls' groups.

The violence between the boys often appeared in the form of banter and pranks. The use of sexualized humor was a way of bonding as well as regulating other boys through a heteronormative framework. Though there was not one boy who would have been the clear group leader, there were some of them who relied more heavily on sexual puns than others in an attempt to place themselves in the most acceptable form of masculinity (Pascoe, 2013; Menzies & Santoro, 2018). Undermining other boys' masculinity through these jokes was a way to

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establish the hegemonic masculinity that all boys had to strive towards. These interactions were frequent, they often happened during lessons with teachers hearing and usually ignoring the sexist or homophobic remarks. The following excerpt is from my fieldnotes I wrote in the classroom during one of the breaks:

> "A girl leans out the window. Máté remarks "hey, Gergő, won't you go there? She is leaning forward". Gergő responds "I don't want it". Another boy asks Máté "why don't you go there?" to which Gergő says "because he's gay" (fieldnotes, 05.2022)

This excerpt exemplifies the connections between sexism, masculinity, and homophobia among the discourse of the male students. Máté's comment objectifies and sexualizes the girl, reducing her to a sexual object existing for the boys' pleasure, who have the option to consider engaging with her sexually due to her physical position. Gergő's response suggests that he is not interested in the girl, however it also establishes that the implied sexual act will not happen, not because the girl has no knowledge of it and could refuse, but because he does not want the girl. This setup reinforces the gender stereotype that men should be sexually aggressive and pursue any opportunity for sexual gratification, which the other boy's question reinforces further. Gergő's use of "gay" as a derogatory term to insult Máté's perceived lack of masculinity perpetuates the idea that being gay is something negative and unmanly, which corresponds with the existing literature on masculinity in schools (Menzies & Santoro, 2018; Pascoe, 2013; Plummer, 2001; Rosen & Nofziger, 2019).

Sexualized jokes also operated around inanimate objects, such as calling a stick a boy was carrying a "fake dick". Usually, this sort of banter had to be taken lightly by the boys it was aimed at, as showing too much offense would also be perceived as un-masculine by the other students. However, sometimes the implied weakness that comes from being branded as gay was received with a stronger rejection, such as when Máté was called gay because of his sandwich,

after Gergő asked "what's on your sandwich, cum?". After this Máté, in a half-joking tone, told the boys who mocked him that he would kill them. Gergő's behavior perpetuates the stigmatization of homosexuality contributes to the creation of a hostile school environment for those who do not conform to gender norms or stereotypes. Máté's reaction of half-jokingly threatening to kill the boys who made the comment can also be seen as a sign of the harmful effects of this type of violence and harassment, as it can lead to a cycle of aggression and retaliation fueled by the need for the boys to prove themselves as masculine. As Odenbring and Johansson argue, "[m]aking fun of each other becomes a normality, even though it is not appreciated equally by all participants. As a result, students often have difficulties deciding what should be seen and defined as violence or harassment" (2021a, p. 3).

Frequently, instances of sexualized jokes intertwine with racist jokes, particularly targeting Romani people. However, as observed during one of the breaks, Máté expressed, "We all like racist jokes but we beat up racist people" (fieldnotes, 05.2022). This type of banter conceals the underlying objective of establishing an acceptable form of masculinity, defined by whiteness and heteropatriarchal standards. The statement suggests a lack of seriousness towards racism, normalizing discriminatory behavior with the excuse of humor, however it also indicates an awareness among the students of liberal norms, as they recognize on some level that being racist is unacceptable. Similarly to how C. J. Pascoe found that students claim they would not use 'fag' in front of an 'actually' gay person, distancing themselves from homophobia (Pascoe, 2005, p. 337), these students distance themselves from racism and construct a masculinity that is aggressively against racism while still incorporating acceptable forms of it into their everyday lives. Not being able to use or take racist jokes is still considered unmasculine. Such an attitude

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contributes to a hostile and unsafe environment for students of color and non-Hungarian students, perpetuating racism as a norm in everyday interactions within the school.

This sexualized and racialized banter is both harmful towards the boys who use it to regulate each other's gender performance and the girls who are being objectified and sexualized in the process of the acceptable male gender performance. It becomes normalized as part of the school environment and most boys participate in it even though they might not enjoy it. As Thomas Johansson and Ylva Odenbring argue, "the tendency to trivialize different forms of everyday violence makes it difficult for most boys to actually discern when they have crossed the thin line between fun and harassment" (2021b, p. 70).

Multiple boys expressed to me during our interviews that they feel like they act differently in the school environment, and they are less authentic in their identity. This is exemplified by quotes from two interviews I conducted with boys from the class:

> "G: […] but a lot of times I can't decide if I'm feeling good or uncomfortable [in school] so I have this duality of laughing my ass off but not feeling like everything is quite right.
>
> […]
>
> J: Is it different outside school?
>
> G: Yes.
>
> J: How is it different?
>
> G: Well, they behave differently, and I behave differently because everyone influences each other in how they behave and practically everything is different in terms of behavior. […] in school I do things more thoughtlessly or I say things or I think things and so I don't really think through anything, at home I have time to think about things like what is right, and not just about people but I don't know, if I've seen something on the internet or a movie I can process it better, here I can't do it, I just can't do it, it's almost like something is specifically stopping me from doing it here at school. My head is completely empty.

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J: So, you think it's not just that you don't have time to think about it but in this environment you don't...?

G: [cutting me off] Yes. I can't do it." (Interview with Gergő, 14)

"J: So, at home you feel you can behave in the way that's most comfortable for you?

R: Mhm. Here at school, I'm completely different.

J: In what way?

R: Well, here I'm shouty, and at home I'm not at all. And at home I don't joke at all, I'm not even funny, they don't want to hear my jokes.

J: Which one do you feel is more like you?

R: I think the me at home reflects me more. The school me is much colder."

(Interview with Robi, 14)

Both Gergő and Robi express a sense of discomfort and duality in their experiences at school. Gergő mentions feeling a lack of alignment between his actions and thoughts, indicating a disconnect between his behavior in school and his ability to process and think critically. He feels that something specific in the school environment hinders his ability to engage in thoughtful reflection and introspection. This suggests a restrictive atmosphere that limits his intellectual and emotional growth. Similarly, Robi highlights the contrast between his behavior at school and at home, as he describes himself as shouty and colder at school, while feeling more comfortable and truer to himself at home. This implies that the school environment, with its social dynamics and expectations, influences Robi to adopt a persona that is not in alignment with his authentic self.

These quotes reveal how the systemic issues within the school environment shape students' behavior and hinder their ability to express themselves authentically. The pressure to conform to the hegemonic masculinity, the influence of peers, and the lack of space for

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individuality and introspection all contribute to a disconnect between the students' true selves and their behavior within the school system. The school environment's enabling and encouraging of sexist and racist jokes normalizes their behavior, as teacher's exempt them from responsibility and sometimes even enjoy or partake in their banter, expecting less maturity from boys.

Based on my observations, the girls in the class were involved in fewer but more direct confrontations with one another. While I did not personally witness any instances of physical abuse, I became aware of past incidents where girls resorted to acts of violence such as pushing each other or throwing balls at each other during PE exercises. During conflicts between different groups of girls the central gendered factor was not focused on sexual orientation, as in the case of the boys, but attractiveness, sexualization and the connection of these factors to what the proper feminine expression and gender performance was. However, criticizing these aspects during the conflicts implicitly led to the judgment of different sexualities.

In the observed conflicts, it was most often four girls who found themselves in confrontation, with Anna and Erika on one side and Virág and Réka on the other. These conflicts exposed a dichotomy between the labels of "too good girls" and "too bad girls". Anna, who was considered a "too bad girl," exhibited behavior that was deemed unacceptable, which she associated with her perceived attractiveness and maturity. On the other hand, Réka and Virág, seen as "too good girls," displayed behavior deemed unacceptable by others due to their perceived higher levels of morality and intelligence. This division highlights how different aspects of behavior and identity are assigned value and contribute to the social dynamics within the group. The conflicting expectations and feedback they received regarding their gender performance compelled them to regulate and challenge each other, as their behaviors did not fit

into the accepted norms of their respective groups. As explained by one of the girls from the class during our interview:

> "Well, let's say, it's very strange, because if we look at why Réka is hurt by Anna, then it's because she's boyish, so if I don't know, I say that why is it that Virág is hurting Anna, then it's because Anna is a whore, so it's different with everyone, how they hurt people. Virág thinks it's not normal if you're like Anna, and Anna thinks that if you're like Virág and Réka that's not okay and not acceptable." (Timi, 13)

Both sides involved in the conflicts are influenced and shaped by the systemic violence present within the school environment. The collective condemnation of Anna's behavior by the teachers, labeling it as overly sexual and a result of her "mixed parenting," is echoed by Réka and Virág, who often resort to derogatory terms such as "whore" and loudly attribute her behavior to her upbringing, which is a very triggering accusation for Anna. Despite Anna's explicit assertion that she wants to maintain her virginity for a certain amount of time, her frequent changes of boyfriends and open discussions about relationships contribute to the perception of her as promiscuous and are enough to be branded as a "whore" in the eyes of other students. Réka and Virág's perspective follows the idea of 'respectable femininity'[6] is defined by specific traits, expecting girls and women to exhibit care, uphold high moral standards, and consistently adhere to socially expected behaviors and embody a "ladylike" demeanor (Allan, 2009; Hussein, 2017; Skeggs, 2013).

The school environment's role in defining and enforcing expectations for appropriate feminine appearance further fuels the conflicts between the girls. The reinforcement of traditional gender norms provides a basis for Anna and Erika to criticize Réka and Virág for their

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[6] Though this term is also closely connected with class positioning, in this case this aspect of it was not relevant, as none of the students greatly differed in their class or ever referred to it while I was there.

boyish appearance and perceived nerdiness. It is worth noting that boyishness, in this context, can also be associated with queerness, which does not fit into the heteronormative female role that is reproduced in the school culture and to which Anna adheres to. As Jón Ingvar Kjaran and Brynja Elísabeth Halldórsdóttir Gudjonsson argue, "[b]odies that do not "fit" into the heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) are rendered unintelligible in terms of gender and sexuality, and perceived as not belonging within the epistemic space" (2021, pp. 183-184) These conflicts came up during multiple interviews with girls, including the one with Virág:

> "Réka and Virág usually behave less like the other girls in the class. The other girls in the class are more mature and more grown up […] but they are more childish, and they behave more like boys in the class, which is not always childish, but they also behave more childish like boys in the class." (Interview with Fanni, 14)

> "Yes, so there are Réka and Virág, they are the ones who make comments like that. I mean, they don't comment much, you know, they think they're better than us because they read and are smart, but at the same time everyone hates them because they're such a trashy little slut, sorry, but they really are." (Interview with Luca, 14)

> "I was just looking at Anna, she started to provoke me, asking me why I'm looking at her. I tried to ignore her, but I stood up for myself, they tell it like they are the victims, she tells the teachers how I was looking at her, what I said to her. She hasn't liked me since she first saw me, she says I'm a nerd or that I'm starting to look like a boy." (Interview with Virág, 14)

These quotes highlight the dynamics and perceptions surrounding the behavior of Réka, Virág, and the other girls in the class. Fanni's statement suggests that Réka and Virág stand out from most of the other girls, behaving in a way that is seen as less mature and more childish, resembling the behavior typically associated with boys. This characterization implies a judgment based on gender norms and expectations, which is enforced by the teachers as well. Luca's

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perspective reveals a negative perception of Réka and Virág, referring to them as "trashy little sluts" and expressing a sense of disdain towards them, reflecting a combination of judgment related to their behavior and intelligence, suggesting a complex interplay of social hierarchies and derogatory stereotypes[7]. Virág's account sheds light on a conflict between herself and Anna, where each accuses the other of provoking and behaving inappropriately. Similarly, in other instances during my fieldwork, they both presented themselves as victims after their fights and while from most of the other girls' perspective they were equally at fault, the teachers tended to believe that Anna was the perpetrator and bully.

The conflicts between the girls reflect a complex interplay of gender expectations, sexualization, and societal norms. The reinforcement of these beliefs by the school environment perpetuates the divisions and judgments between the girls, creating an atmosphere where conformity to prescribed gender roles is favored, and deviation from these norms is stigmatized. However, these cases suggest that the manifestation of violence and aggression is not inherently different between boys and girls, as both engage in the use of curse words, and sexist or racist slurs but they do deviate in certain aspects. From what I have observed, girls tend to be more direct and confrontational in their arguments, while boys rely more on banter and subtle remarks. The key distinction in these conflicts lies in the social expectations that they seek to enforce through their confrontations, particularly in terms of acceptable gender performances for boys and girls. The conflicts do not conform to a clear bully-victim dynamic; rather, they are influenced by systemic issues that normalize everyday violence and aggression. The students regulate and discipline each other based on societal expectations of "proper" behavior tied to

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[7] It is also notable that despite Virág and Réka being perceived as boyish and nerdy, they are derogatorily labeled as sluts, highlighting a failure to conform to expected gender norms rather than reflecting their actual sexual activities.

gender. It is evident that the conflicts are not isolated incidents but are shaped by broader

systemic factors that perpetuate and normalize gendered and intersectional violence.

Understanding girl-boy conflicts – impact of teacher intervention and parental involvement

In this section, I analyze conflicts that arose among the students, specifically focusing on

the dynamics between girls and boys, and the ways in which these conflicts demonstrated the

students' perspectives on gender-related issues. These instances of interpersonal violence serve

as a reflection of how deeply ingrained beliefs about gender stereotypes are perpetuated within

the school system, influencing the students' thinking and shaping their interactions with

individuals of different genders. Factors such as sexism, antisemitism, and jokes about sexual

abuse were prevalent in these cases, further contributing to the intersectional complexities of the

conflicts. Additionally, they add to a relatively unexplored field of research on the mixed-gender

negotiations of appropriate gender expressions during conflicts in school, showing how girl

students directly push back against sexist, racist or homophobic remarks made by boys.

While during the interviews some of the boys expressed a strong and targeted animosity

towards Anna, it was Fanni, a confident and outspoken 14-year-old girl, who was engaged in the

most conflicts with the boys in the classroom. Through the examination of two specific cases —

one observed during my fieldwork, and another that happened earlier in the year and was

referenced by multiple students — I aim to explore the multifaceted nature of these conflicts and

identify the underlying systemic factors that contribute to their occurrence.

The following is an excerpt from my fieldnotes I took during a grammar lesson:

During the lesson Fanni and Máté start fighting, I can't hear what exactly they say to each other, but it seems like a more and more heated debate. Suddenly Fanni stands up upset, on the verge of tears, and says Máté told her to go back to Auschwitz. The teacher sends both students to the head of class. After a while Máté comes back, says that Fanni

is crying, she lied, he didn't say anything like that and anyways, she also lied when she said that another boy from the class said he wants to rape her. Another boy says "Seriously, who would want to rape her?". Some students laugh. Most of the students seem to condemn Fanni's behavior, saying that "She just doesn't see her own mistakes" (boy) and "It's not that but why does she run out crying. I'm her friend, but I don't get it" (Timi)." (fieldnotes, 05.2022)

This quote presents the first case involving Fanni and Máté, where their conflict escalates to verbal attacks and accusations, highlighting several systemic issues related to gender and discrimination. Fanni claims that Máté told her to go back to Auschwitz, an antisemitic remark, which shows that the gendered attacks work in tandem with reinforcing other social hierarchies. The severity of the situation is evident as Fanni is on the verge of tears, which the teacher also recognizes and intervenes by sending both students to the head of class. However, upon Máté's return, he denies making any such comment and accuses Fanni of lying, also referring to another previous incident, accusing Fanni of fabricating claims that another student expressed a desire to rape her. This seemed to be a recurring position the boys took whenever something more severe came up regarding their behavior, normalizing the culture of victim blaming and the gender stereotype of 'lying women'[8]. The response from one of the boys, who questions why anyone would want to rape Fanni, indicates a dismissive and insensitive attitude towards sexual violence, connecting it to the desirability of the possible rape victims. The laughter that follows further underscores a disturbing normalization of such remarks, which is in line with the culture of sexualized banter among the boys that has been allowed to continue and escalate in the school environment.

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[8] The credibility of women is often a subject of research, particularly within the context of the law and court proceedings, where the consequences of women's stories not being believed are particularly harmful. (see: Ellison & Munro, 2009; Epstein & Goodman, 2019)

It is notable that the students' reactions primarily focus on condemning Fanni's behavior rather than addressing the underlying issues and the hurtful nature of the comments made. They question why she reacts by running out crying, showing a lack of empathy or understanding for her emotional state. This attitude echoes the teachers' constant reminders of their expectations of maturity and their previous dismissal of the crying student as childish. Even Timi, who seemed to be Fanni's closest friend in the class, expresses confusion and an inability to comprehend her reactions, implying that her crying is an overreaction. Therefore, the gender dynamics and gendered expectations functioning in the school environment make a students' emotional reaction to sexist, antisemitic, or racist remarks more unacceptable than the remark itself. It is also relevant that labeling Fanni's reaction as "overly emotional" also contributes to gender-based discrimination and reinforces sexist stereotypes of women and girls being more emotional or irrational. This underlying belief works to undermine the girls' credibility and dismiss their opinions, reinforcing the school culture that discourages them from openly expressing their feelings or asserting themselves.

During my interview with Fanni, she told me that sometimes the boys mockingly call her a "14-year-old feminist" as an insult, and she expressed that she feels that she is perceived as a whiny little girl. She also said that the boys do not want to listen to her because she makes them uncomfortable when she confronts them about their remarks. During my fieldwork I witnessed a few occasions when she actively confronted the boys' harmful and offensive banter and remarks and remarks, where the dynamic she described was very tangible. Interestingly, though she usually represented opinions that adhere to a liberal feminist perspective, she never identified her views as feminist. This was also the case with other girls, who repeated similar views to me during our interviews but explicitly stated that "I would not call myself a feminist or anything

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like that" (Interview with Timi, 13). As such, even those who acknowledged the harm of sexist, homophobic, and racist banter were still uncomfortable with feminism, as it was perceived as a derogatory term with a negative connotation in the school environment, indicating a lack of education or discussion about its meaning.

How the teachers intervene and handle these conflicts is also relevant when looking at how the systemic factors influence the students' views on gendered violence. Fanni said that the advice she most often received from teachers was, "oh just ignore them, they're just doing it to get your attention" (Interview with Fanni, 14). This demonstrates how the teachers tend to minimize and brush off the harmful remarks that the students report to them, encouraging the girls to not interfere and hide their discomfort. Fanni expressed her frustration with the ineffectiveness of this advice, stating that "I've ignored them for 5 months, they've continued the same way" (Interview with Fanni, 14). When I asked her about how the teachers intervene or discipline the boys she explained:

> "And this is obviously if there is a serious situation, when they don't just say something rude about a group of people, but about a certain person, especially about me usually, something so really ugly and disgusting, then I usually tell the teacher because how can I not tell them that they dare to say such things and expect that they will not get any punishment. Then usually the teachers are like "hey, hey, you shouldn't do that, little boys" and then the boys are trying to be like "but I never said that". Obviously, the teachers are not stupid, and they understand that boys say things like that, but yeah." (Interview with Fanni, 14)

This quote highlights the experience of encountering serious and derogatory remarks directed at individuals, particularly Fanni herself. Notably, what is categorized in her view as a "serious situation" is when the boys "don't just say something rude about a group of people", indicating that the sexist, racist, homophobic, or antisemitic remarks that do not target someone specific are

more acceptable to express in the school environment. Fanni emphasizes the need to report such incidents to teachers, as she finds it necessary to address the audacity of such remarks and expects appropriate consequences for the perpetrators. However, the response from teachers is described as somewhat dismissive, using phrases like "hey, hey, you shouldn't do that, little boys", implying that while they may recognize the severity of such behavior, they do not address it adequately. The boys involved then deny their involvement, creating a situation where the accountability for their actions becomes ambiguous. Fanni acknowledges that the teachers are not ignorant and are aware of boys making such remarks, but they act in accordance with the prevailing perception in the school that boys are more immature and less capable of taking responsibility for their words and actions. She expresses her frustration with the perceived lack of adequate response or punishment for these instances, which may reflect a broader pattern of addressing gendered and offensive language within the school environment. Later in the interview, Fanni also added that at some point, the head of class asked her about what could be done to stop the boys from saying things like that all the time, placing the responsibility of solving the issue on her, as a 'more mature girl'.

In Fanni's description of the teachers' reactions during our interview, she brought up the second case, which Máté referenced in the conflict I previously mentioned:

> "I mean I don't know of any bigger consequences… After the boys joked about dragging me into the toilet and raping me, afterwards, I don't know about all of them, but I know one of them had his parents called in and his parents couldn't believe it and said, "how dare that girl say such things about my little boy, he would never say that". […]
> J: And did several boys say that, or just one?
> F: One boy said it, the other two boys were laughing and nodding like hahaha."
> (Interview with Fanni, 14)

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This quote reveals the distressing incident from Fanni's perspective. The boys joked about dragging her into the toilet and raping her, displaying a complete disregard for her well-being and dignity. She also highlights that while one boy made the explicit remark, the others laughed and showed approval, demonstrating a collective participation in perpetuating a hostile and disrespectful environment. Fanni brought this case up as an example where the teachers took more decisive actions of discipline, notifying the parents of one of the boys.

From some of the boys' perspective this step was already an overreaction as, even though the boy who made the remark did not want to do an interview with me, another student, Ferenc explain his perspective:

> "There were problems because of this, one of my classmates, I don't know if you've heard of this, she said that the boys wanted to rape her, and there was nothing like that, but everybody, the teachers, the principal, believed that one girl, even though everybody said it wasn't true. […] And then it turned out that none of it was true, but at least they scolded the boys, [telling them things] like who do they think they are." (Interview with Ferenc, 14)

The quote suggests a sense of injustice and unfair treatment towards the boys involved, as they faced scolding and judgment despite their denial of anything happening. However, when the altercation was brought to the attention of the parents, they also denied their son's involvement and expressed disbelief, shifting the blame onto the girl for making such accusations. This response illustrates that even when a case of violence is acknowledged and regarded as unacceptable by the standards of the school system (which appears to be a rare occasion), the wider societal attitudes still ultimately reinforce gender inequalities. The reluctance of the parents to acknowledge and take responsibility for the inappropriate and harmful actions of their children encourages the students to continue making such remarks and judge and dismiss others' disapproving or hurt reactions.

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The influence of the parents was also highlighted to me when, during our interview, Fanni told me about an email one of the boys' mother sent on the class mailing list, where she blamed some girls in the class, including her, for the departure of one of the male teachers, saying that the "mentally disturbed girls wear heavy black make-up and when the makeup gets in their eyes they start to throw a tantrum" (Interview with Fanni, 14). Fanni said the mother referred to several incidents, one of which was when some dust got into her eye during a PE lesson, and she went outside to wash it out. She said that the email had no consequences in the school and that the boy whose mother sent it apologized to her, however, this case also demonstrates that at least some of the parents partake in upholding the systemic inequalities related to gender and they can practice their authority within the school to dismiss accusations and the responsibility of their children. These incidents exemplify the need for a comprehensive approach to address the deep-rooted issues of misogyny, victim-blaming, and the dismissal of serious offenses within the school community and, in line with Françoise Vergés' argument, on the broader societal context of violence and its normalization (Vergés, 2021, p. 23).

In conclusion, these conflicts highlight the pervasive nature of systemic violence within the school environment, impacting all students involved. In my view, there were no clear bullies and victims in most of the cases, as participants both initiated conflicts and resisted verbal attacks throughout my fieldwork, practicing their agency and never being collectively pushed out by the class community. However, there were many forms of gendered violence that were allowed to take place, largely without any consequences. The systemic violence that perpetuates harmful hierarchies and power dynamics within the school only allowed a restricted perspective for the students to act upon and reinforced the acceptability of sexist, homophobic and racist attitudes. As this environment fails to address critical issues such as gender inequalities,

feminism, and rape culture, it further contributes to the normalization of harmful behaviors. The absence of discussions surrounding these topics denies students the opportunity to develop a comprehensive understanding of social injustices and perpetuates the continuation of oppressive norms. These cases demonstrate the need for a more inclusive and comprehensive approach to education that actively engages with topics of different social inequalities, feminism, and rape culture. It is crucial for schools to create and prioritize these discussions and empower students to recognize and challenge systemic violence both inside and outside the school environment.

Gender hierarchy construction through sexual harassment

To understand the dynamics of violence at play in the school environment, it is important to acknowledge and analyze the different manifestations of violence that occur, particularly the ways in which power imbalances are reinforced. One especially insidious form of violence is the abuse of power by teachers, which can perpetuate both the teacher-student hierarchy and the heteropatriarchal gender hierarchy. This instance demonstrated the connection and harm of the systematically constructed and reinforced proper femininity and proper student as well as the sexualized banter and objectification among the students towards the girls. In this section, I will examine the inappropriate behavior of a teacher that falls into the "grey area" of sexual harassment, as defined by Strandbu, Åse, Gerd Marie Solstad, Kari Stefansen, and Morten Renslo Sandvik (2022), and argue that it exemplifies the strong presence of violence in schools.

According to the Equal Rights Advocates' "Know Your Rights at School" guide, sexual harassment is "harassment that is sexual, sex-based, or gender-based in the nature of the harassment itself, regardless of the orientation, gender-identity, sexual interests or pleasure of the harasser" (2022). In the case of schools, sexual harassment can negatively influence the educational opportunities and the performance of a student, where "even a single experience of

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sexual harassment was associated with higher student distress" (Crowley & Cornell, 2020).

Research on sexual harassment in schools have shown that there is an increased risk factor based on race, gender, sexuality, and age (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Harris & Kruger, 2020; Smith et al., 2022). As Harris & Kruger argue "the middle school context is of particular interest [in terms of sexual harassment] given adolescents' increasing independence from parents, newfound autonomy at school, exposure to different peer networks, and pubertal onset" (2020, p. 9). Additionally, growing research on sexual harassment in coaching is also relevant, as PE classes create similar circumstances in the school environment. Strandbu et al. argue "sport-related situations may not always be easy to define as appropriate or inappropriate" and as such, there are "sport-related 'gray area' situations, which we defined as situations characterized by coaching behaviors that are potentially sexualizing" (2022, p. 2). Evaluations of gray-area situations demonstrate how perceptions on "caring coaching" closely resemble perceptions on "intrusive or sexualizing behaviors", which is why problematic coaching behaviors are often overlooked (Strandbu et al., 2022, p. 10).

While I did not expect to come across such an issue during my fieldwork, I did encounter one example that I believe is crucial to include in my findings since it highlights how this form of violence relies on and contributes to hierarchies and power relations established within the school environment, which create an uncomfortable and threatening space for students (in this case especially to those who are perceived as girls).

The case of the male PE teacher highlights not only the presence of gender-based inequalities but also the abuse of a teacher's position of power against the students. Initially in my fieldwork, the students described the teacher in a positive manner, with many describing him as "nice" and "cool," particularly because he did not pressure the girls to participate in the

physical education lessons. However, it was later revealed that some of the students, especially the girls, felt uncomfortable in his presence. The teacher often made physical contact with the students, such as lightly touching their heads, hands, or other body parts, sometimes even grabbing the boys by the back of their pants to move them (this usually happened in the context of PE classes). The boys and the other teachers witnessing these instances perceived these gestures as playful and not inappropriate. Most students reciprocated his attitude and used a more playful, sometimes teasing tone when they talked to him as opposed to other teachers.

However, the more time I spent at the school the more I noticed the inappropriate behavior Béla demonstrated, especially towards the girls, such as teasingly commenting on their appearance, like before taking the class photo him 'playfully' saying to a girl "why are you fussing over yourself, your butt is not what will be photographed" (Béla, fieldnotes, 05.2022). In addition, during an interview with a male student, more alarming aspects of Béla's behavior were disclosed to me. The 14-year-old boy from the class recalled this instance during our interview:

> "G: Well, wow this is, how shall I say this in a voice recording friendly way. But so he's more concerned with the girls, I mean, I once heard that he slapped a girl on the butt. And that really pissed me off, but whatever. I mean, it's not whatever. Well, yeah, he's trying to do more with the girls, even though he's teaching the boys.
> […]
> J: So, he's not "direct" like that with the boys?
> G: Actually, he is, but he wouldn't slap a boy's ass I don't think." (Interview with Gergő, 14)

This excerpt reveals a potential case of sexual harassment in a school environment. Gergő expressed his frustration with a teacher's inappropriate behavior towards female students, specifically mentioning the teacher slapping a girl on the butt. The boy's response indicates that this behavior made him uncomfortable, yet he also acknowledges that the teacher may behave

similarly towards male students, albeit in a different manner, showing a clear gendered distinction. Notably, he did not call the act sexual harassment or abuse, and also expressed that it is not that significant, saying "it's whatever", which might indicate that the students do not know how to define and speak against violence or abuse. This was one of the first few interviews I conducted and for a long time I heard no confirmation of this behavior from anyone else. No one mentioned it during their interviews or the breaks when I had time to chat with some of the students more informally. Only towards the end of my fieldwork, experiencing an instance when the teacher made some of the girls uncomfortable first-hand, did the students confide in me further.

This instance happened during a PE lesson when the girls' teacher was not present and the boys' teacher, Béla, had to teach both the boys and the girls. The girls were known to be less active during PE with a lot of them arriving late to the class, refusing to change their clothes to their PE clothes and refusing to participate in any of the activities. In this case, only two of the girls changed their clothes to participate in the lesson and I was sitting with two other girls on some benches in the school yard, where most of the students were. The PE teacher came over, sat down next to one of the girls and started half-playfully asking why the girls did not change their clothes to PE clothes, to which the girls replied with some sarcastic excuses. He turned to me, asking me what he can do with them (meaning the girls' behavior), which I shrugged off, trying to not give him any reinforcement in his position. I could sense that the girls were uncomfortable because of his presence. He started asking the girl he sat next to why she is so quiet, playfully poking her arm. She was clearly uncomfortable by this and tried to get up but Béla grabbed her arm and asked her to please stay. Seeing this I asked both of the girls if they would like to take a walk with me, to which they said yes. Béla asked in a pretend sad tone if we would leave him

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there and I said yes and left with the girls. After this they confided in me that they had issues

with him in the past, especially when they felt that when he was teaching them how to

somersault, he touched their butts, saying that "you can feel it when someone touches you like

that". I asked whether he had touched them on their butt or any other inappropriate place besides

that time and they said no. They also said that the teachers and the school principal know about

it, but they either do not believe them or are not in the position to find a new PE teacher, since

there is a "shortage of teachers" (fieldnotes, 05.2022).

In this instance Béla deployed his authoritative power as a teacher and his social power as

a man. I often felt in his presence that he did not take me seriously because of my gender and in

this case he either did not even perceive the uncomfortableness of the girls or did not think that

my presence could or should make any difference. His attitude showed the duality of the

heteropatriarchal system he was reproducing, in which he devalued the girls in the PE class and

feminine behavior in general but at the same time paid a lot of attention to them, reinforcing a

heterosexual identity to achieve 'proper' masculinity. This is in line with Kerry H. Robinson's

argument in her article on sexual harassment in schools that "engaging in sexual harassment can

be integral to the construction of their heterosexualized masculine identities; and how sexual

harassment operates to regulate heterosexualized gendered power relationships" (2005, p. 21).

To my knowledge, Béla kept his actions in the 'gray area' and refrained from making explicit

sexual advances or touches towards the girls, nevertheless, the discomfort expressed by the girls

in response to his 'playful' behavior indicated that they were often uncomfortable, and he

disregarded their cues of uneasiness.

The girls did take action when they experienced this abuse of power, but it seemed to not

yield any results, either because they were not believed, which is often the case when women

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report sexual harassment (Lawton, 2007), or because of the lack of teachers they could replace him with in Hungary, which was at the time and currently still a big issue in the country[9] (Aradi, 2022). The tendency to not believe women is also in line with how the boys in the class constructed the girls as liars throughout multiple conflicts, saying that they were accusing them of saying terrible things, which were completely untrue and that they lied all the time. In addition, considering how the girls were also constituted as the worse behaving gender, their ability to report if they experienced harassment was already restricted, especially those who experienced intersectional inequalities.

Béla's gender identity performance was constructed around a hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) in the school. As a PE teacher he emphasized the importance of physical strengths and expected the boys to take the exercises seriously, often employing heteronormative banter to do so. One of the recurring remarks around his persona was regarding him having a 'cool' car, which the students often brought up in front of him and he was visibly proud of it. As such, his behavior towards the girls also fit into reinforcing a hegemonic masculinity that relies on gendered power dynamics. Robinson also noted that boys use sexual harassment to establish dominance over their peers, gain popularity, and reinforce traditional gender roles (2005). Though there were many instances of inappropriate comments from the boys, the clearest example for this came from this teacher, which demonstrates the importance of more research into the power dynamics and possible violence between teachers and students and their intersectional implications on the gendered, sexualized, and racialized identities of students.

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[9] https://telex.hu/belfold/2022/08/30/pedagogusok-szakszervezete-4800-pedagogus-hianyzik-az-oktatasbol

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented various examples of interpersonal violence in schools, ranging from clearer cases of direct aggression to more subtle forms of gendered harm that are enabled by the structural, social, and cultural layers of the primary school. These examples illustrate the severity and extent of violence in schools, and how it is connected to wider systemic inequalities. Gendered expectations, sexism, homophobia, and racism intersect in the school environment, constructing social hierarchies through the deployment of violence.

By analyzing the violence in schools beyond physical aggression and the traditional view on school bullying, it is possible to gain insight into how political and social structures influence schools. Schools are a microcosm of wider communities, and the unique qualities of this regulated space enable these influences to flourish and reproduce themselves in the younger generation through school policies, pedagogical approaches, and the presence or lack of disciplining actions. This includes different attitudes and approaches to discipline and the approaches towards acknowledging and teaching about inequalities.

As schools play a significant role in shaping children's perspectives of the world and forming or challenging patterns of interaction, understanding the impact of schools on gender socialization is crucial in comprehending the broader gendered dynamics in society. By recognizing and addressing the presence of violence in schools, we can work towards creating safe and equitable learning environments for all students.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have delved into the complex dynamics of gender identity, social interactions, and school violence, focusing specifically on the context of a Hungarian primary school. Throughout my research, I have aimed to shed light on the impact of social interactions within schools on students' gender identities and experiences. I explored the interconnectedness of gender constructions and school violence, highlighting the multifaceted nature of violence within educational settings. I emphasized the systemic nature of violence in schools and its influence on students' gender identities. Through challenging and complicating categorizations of violence, I discussed the interplay between individual acts of violence and the structural and systemic levels of violence, recognizing the interconnectedness of these dimensions and their role in shaping and perpetuating violence in the school context.

In the beginning of my research, I posed the question: *In what way do social interactions in school shape the gender identity of students?* Based on my findings and analysis, I have presented an argument that social interactions within schools are deeply situated within and perpetuate a significant amount of violence, thereby shaping the gender identities of students. Throughout my research, I have emphasized the role played by systemic violence, direct interpersonal violence, gender stereotypes, power imbalances, and discrimination in influencing and molding students' gender identities.

Through my research, I have made contributions to fields of scholarship on the connections between gender and school violence, such as manifestations of violence in schools and their impact on gender identity; systemic violence in school; sexual harassment and abuse in school; masculinity and bullying in school. An important focus of my research has been on the impact of intersecting identity categories on students' social positioning and the types of

violence they experience in school. I explored the ethnicized construction of a half-Arab girl's identity and its influence on her experiences of violence. This finding complements the existing literature on violence and demonstrates a variation on the prevailing racist attitudes in Hungarian schools against Romani students, further expanding our understanding of the complexities of violence within educational settings.

Furthermore, my research sheds light on the intersections of systemic violence and direct forms of interpersonal violence within schools. By challenging and complicating existing categorizations of violence, such as the bully and victim dichotomy, I have examined the interplay between individual acts of violence and the structural and systemic levels of violence, offering a new perspective on gendered peer conflicts among students. I delved into how sexual harassment and abuse are normalized and overlooked in schools, specifically addressing the issue of sexual harassment by PE teachers. This underexplored area of investigation uncovers how PE teachers, under the pretense of touching and controlling students' bodies, actively exercise violence through a discourse about gendered bodies, thereby shaping and disciplining gender performance. These findings contribute to the existing literature on the influence of teachers in the gender construction of students and add to the research on sexual harassment in schools and coaching.

To address the pervasive issue of school violence and promote a safer and more inclusive educational environment in Hungary, I propose a set of policy recommendations. With these suggestions I aim to tackle various aspects of violence and create a supportive framework for students, teachers, and administrators.

Firstly, I identified a need for comprehensive programs within schools that address different forms of violence, including gendered and intersectional violence. These programs

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should provide education, awareness, and resources to prevent and respond to violence effectively and involve students, teachers, and administrators in their creation and implementation. Secondly, I believe that developing an inclusive curriculum would play a significant role in combating school violence. By challenging social inequalities, dismantling gender stereotypes, and promoting gender equality and respect for diverse gender identities, curricula can create a more inclusive learning environment. This can also be supported by incorporating lessons and activities that encourage critical thinking, empathy, and respect for all students. Additionally, enhancing teacher professionalism is essential. Ongoing training programs should be provided to enhance teachers' understanding of diverse gender identities, intersectionality, and gender sensitivity in the classroom. Equipping teachers with the necessary skills to address and prevent gender-based violence fosters a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Furthermore, engaging parents and caregivers would be another important aspect of combating school violence. Providing resources, training, and information on gender diverse identities to parents and caregivers can help foster their understanding and support. Collaborative partnerships between schools and parents should be encouraged to promote a shared responsibility in creating safe school environments.

In addition to and as a basis for these recommendations, I believe that comprehensive reform of the Hungarian education system is urgent and necessary. Students and educators are already advocating for change, and some versions of my recommendations have been put forth by various entities and organizations that the government has ignored. Beyond focusing on the educational system, it is important to address systemic factors such as heteropatriarchy, nationalism, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, capitalism, neoliberalism, and colonialism that also influence these acts of violence in schools. In order to create a truly inclusive and safe

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educational environment for all students, politicians, parents, and educators have to be willing to notice and address the effect of these overlapping systems of oppression to begin dismantling the harm towards adolescents' identities.

Identifying areas for future research is crucial to continue deepening our understanding of the interplay between gender constructions and school violence. In addition to investigating the interconnected nature of school violence and gender across different contexts and scales, I believe it would be crucial to prioritize research that specifically focuses on the experiences of LGBTQ+ adolescents in Hungary in the current sociopolitical climate of the country. Future research should aim to intersectionally explore the specific ways in which LGBTQ+ adolescents experience and navigate gendered violence in Hungarian schools as well as the school climate and institutional factors that contribute to the perpetuation or mitigation of this violence. Additionally, research should explore how LGBTQ+ students navigate and challenge oppressive systems, as well as the strategies they employ to foster resilience, empowerment, and positive change within their school communities. By conducting comprehensive research that centers the experiences, agency, and resistance of LGBTQ+ adolescents in Hungary, we can inform the development of targeted interventions, policies, and support systems that effectively address the specific needs of LGBTQ+ students.

In conclusion, this thesis has highlighted the pervasive nature of gender constructions and school violence within the Hungarian context. By uncovering the various forms of violence, the perpetuation of harmful gender norms, and the power imbalances present in schools, my research contributes to the existing scholarship on violence, gender, and education. It is my hope that the findings presented in this thesis will inform policymakers, educators, and researchers, leading to a safer, more inclusive, and more supportive environment for all students in Hungary.

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