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**Educational Sabotage –
A form of abuse against children and youth
with potentially long-term consequences**



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Educational Sabotage – a form of abuse against children and youth with potentially long-term consequences

Introduction

When I meet Anna for a research interview in a quiet café, she is deeply concerned about her last year of school and what final grades she will receive after 12 years of schooling. For years, she has worked hard to be a high-achieving student, so she is accepted to one of the old universities in Sweden, known for its prestigious law programme. She has great plans for the future and is already well-informed about university life, its traditions, the student clubs, and the parties where she expects to meet like-minded people her age. However, at the end of her second year in upper secondary school, she meets and falls in love with a young man, Tom, who is new to one of her classes. They quickly become a couple, and while their relationship is initially filled with romance and warmth, it quickly turns for the worse. During the interview, one year into their relationship, Anna describes how she is extremely worried about her falling grades and that her dream of being accepted to the prestigious university will not come true, as most of her energy and time goes to handling Tom and his unpredictable temper.

What Anna describes to me, during the 90 minutes we spend together in the little café, is what the research literature on youth intimate partner violence calls 'educational sabotage' (Voth Schrag, 2019). This phenomenon, defined as a disruption of academic efforts and focus, affecting all aspects of the victims' efforts to obtain educational credentials and disrupting relations with peers and adults in school, is a problem that has received limited attention. In comparison, school violence such as bullying, and school shootings receive a great deal of attention from school officials, governments, and media (Lagerlöf & Överlien, 2022).

This paper will discuss the issue of educational sabotage as a consequence of domestic violence or youth intimate partner violence from the perspective of children and youth who are victimised at home during childhood or by someone with whom they are in a romantic/intimate relationship during their adolescent years. I will show how the sabotage is played out, during the early school years up to upper secondary school, and how children and adolescents find strategies to handle the violence and create a school environment where learning and interaction with peers and adults is possible. I will take a starting point in research studies I have conducted with colleagues on children experiencing domestic violence and abuse and on youth intimate partner violence. I have conducted qualitative interviews with children and youth in all my research studies. As most children spend most of their time in school, many of the interviews have engaged with the topic of schooling, how the violence in their lives has damaged their performance and well-being in school, but also affected their relationship with classmates and peers, teachers, school leaders and others who work in school. Although the impact of the violence on their schooling has differed, few children have stated that their schooling has been unaffected by it. Hence, the idea that thoughts and concerns about violence in our close relationships could be left at home when the child goes to school in the morning is not



realistic. Moreover, if the abusive person is someone you share the same classroom or school cafeteria with, this idea is impossible. Furthermore, as many children and youth have access to social media and phones during their school day, keeping violence and abuse outside the school premises becomes even more challenging.

Literature on school disruptions as a consequence of violence

Before showing how educational sabotage is expressed in the lives of the young informants in my studies, I will briefly discuss some of the literature that has focused on the dynamics by which violence victimisation disrupts or affects youth's educational attainment. In two studies, one on service providers at community college (Voth Schrag & Edmond, 2017) and another on victimised community college students (Voth Schrag et al., 2019), Voth Schrag and colleagues show how tactics of school sabotage identified by service providers include physical violence or stalking at school and disruption of academic efforts and focus. Common themes reported by victims were academic jealousy from the abusive boyfriend or ex-boyfriend and disrupted studies. Voth Schrag & Edmond (2017) recommended research exploring school sabotage among high school pupils. To my knowledge, only one published article has qualitatively investigated this topic. Chronister et al. (2014) examined how female high school pupils', aged 13 to 18, experiences of intimate partner violence influenced their educational experiences and developed a theoretical model that highlights how violence and abuse can negatively affect relationships with school staff, peers and family.

Brewer et al. (2018), in a sample of undergraduate students aged 18–24, found that victims of youth intimate partner violence (YIPV), particularly girls subjected to sexual violence, had more academic difficulties, lower grade point averages and higher absences from school than non-victimized girls. Along the same lines, Adams et al. (2013) showed how women victimised during adolescence obtained less education than non-victimized women, negatively impacting their earnings as adults. Hence, violence and abuse affect all aspects of the victims' efforts to obtain high school and future educational credentials. Drawing on the above studies, Lagerlöf & Överlien (2022) show how victims of YIPV do not consider the school environment a sanctuary from the violence but instead describe how physical, psychological, and sexual violence, as well as different coercive control tactics, can continue at school, even after relationships are over.

In a systematic literature review, which covers ten articles that focus on the impact of IPV on young women's educational well-being, Klencakova and colleagues (2021) conclude that exposure to IPV during ages 10–24 leads to academic underachievement in the form of negative impact on grades, incomplete education, missing homework, and truancy as well as mental health decline among the victims. However, younger children's schooling is also affected by the violence and abuse they experience. In a review article from 2018, Lloyd examines how domestic violence impacts the lives and education of children and youth and how they can be supported within the education system. She states that the violence and abuse children experience can result in emotional trauma, physical and psychological barriers to learning, and disruptive behaviour in school. At the same time, while some children's schooling is affected dramatically by the violence they experience at home, or when they are older from partners, other children and youth can function well in school and achieve high results (Korkmaz & Överlien, 2020; Sterne & Poole, 2010). In fact, for some children, school can be a safe place where they can relax, play, and interact freely with friends and school staff.



I will now continue by showing how the issue of educational sabotage plays out in the lives of children and youth. I will start by showing, with the help of voices from the children and youth, how a high rate of non-attendance at school is a common problem for these children.

Child and youth voices on educational sabotage

High rates of non-attendance

Many of the young people I have interviewed have described how they were forced to be absent from school because of the violence and abuse in their lives. The absence was sometimes due to fear, as several informants went to the same school or class as their present or former abusive boyfriend. Other times they felt the constant disruption, often because of texts or images sent to them on social media or the phone, which made it impossible to focus on schoolwork and that they, therefore, left the school premises. Some also described how they felt they had to leave to check on a boyfriend or, in the case of children experiencing domestic violence, their abused mother.

Lovisa, 16 years old, whose ex-boyfriend is a student in the same school, said,

'I don't think there was one week I was in all the classes ... and sometimes I wasn't there for a whole week.'

Felicia, whose ex-boyfriend attends a different school, also described problems focusing when being at school,

'He started texting me, and I felt like I can't be here [in school].'

Similarly, Paulina described how she left school during her free time to check on her abusive boyfriend, as she worried about his mental health.

Younger children also describe how the violence in their lives sabotages their school achievement, partly by them being forced to be absent a lot. Anna, ten years old, lives with her mother, younger sister, and stepfather, who is abusive to her mother. Anna describes how she runs home during lunch break to check on her mother in case she is wounded or needs help. Her everyday school life becomes stressful, she has little time for playing with other kids, and her worries about her mother impact her ability to focus while in the classroom. Some mornings, she is too afraid to leave her mother and decides to lie.

I save some leftovers after dinner, throw them down the toilet and call for my mom. Look, I say, and show her the toilet. I threw up. And then she lets me stay home from school that day

By listening to the children and youth about their everyday life in school, we learn that they experience a lot of stress during classes and recess, as they are constantly prepared to leave the school building. Other children and youth describe how they feel it is impossible to go to school at all in the morning, because they are too afraid to meet the former abusive boyfriend or that they need to be home to protect and care for their abused mothers or younger siblings. The result is that they quickly fall behind in school and may struggle to catch up with schoolwork, once the situation is resolved.



Difficulties focusing on schoolwork

When the children and youth are in school, they describe how difficult it is to keep their thoughts and worries about the violence and abuse in their lives out of their mind so they can focus on schoolwork. It is difficult to focus on doing math at 8 am when you have been lying awake all night because of the sounds of violence. Other youth, like Nina, 18 years old, linked her inability to study to the burden of handling and hiding her situation with her abusive boyfriend from everyone in school.

It didn't go particularly well. I was in a bad shape mentally, but it got worse because of this dark, horrible secret that I couldn't tell anyone and that I don't think a lot of people know so much about because it is so shameful, and nobody can relate to it

Nina describes how others perceive her as a top-student with a successful life in front of her. She is engaged in many after-school activities and is often invited to parties and events. Nina feels that it is impossible to tell anyone about the psychological, physical, and sexual violence that takes place in her relationship, as it would alter people's view of her and result in strong feelings of shame.

Grace, also 18 years old, talks about being unable to keep up in school because of the violence and abuse to which her father subjects her mother and her siblings. Grace is a very ambitious student, aiming to study to become a microbiologist. She has applied to university for the upcoming year but is concerned about her falling grades and not being accepted.

Grace: *I have not been doing well in school this last year. I've been doing really poorly actually.*

Interviewer: *Has anyone in school reacted to your falling grades?*

Grace: *Yes, my main teacher. He said he thought it was because I was lazy, that I didn't want to focus on school. But I have tried to do my best. I've been thinking of going to the school counsellor because I just couldn't take it anymore. I had a headache every day, a stiff neck, and could hardly stay in school. I started to get lower grades, because I just couldn't concentrate.*

Being the oldest child in the family, Grace takes a lot of responsibility for her mother and younger siblings. She feels she is the only one who can calm her father down and prevent his violent outbursts. This puts tremendous stress on her, as the responsibility for her family's well-being is a heavy burden. She stays awake during the night, in case she is needed, and consequently, is constantly sleep-deprived.



Closeness to the abuser

For the children and youth who go to the same school as the present or former abusive partner, their school day is marked by constantly being on guard for where he is on the school premises, what his mood is like, and what will happen during recess. Comments about how they should dress or behave in school seem to have been commonly aimed at informants. Maria, 15 years old, says:

He would walk up to me in school and go like 'You can't wear that to school ... you look like a slut; you look like a whore.' He would degrade me. He did that like five or six times in one day, and I couldn't change in school because I didn't have any other clothes to change into.

Having your appearance commented on in a degrading way several times a day puts a lot of stress on Maria, sometimes also leading to her having to go home to change clothes. This controlling behaviour of women's choices to dress and behave, but also of their sexuality, has also been described by Chung (2005) in her article on how young women are controlled in their intimate relationships. She argues that gendered power relations and practices of inequality and violence are common in youth relationships and that it is essential to study structural inequalities in addition to the more commonly used individual psychological understandings.

Although children who experience domestic violence from their fathers don't share the same physical space with them during the day, children who live in hiding from their fathers express how concerned they are that their fathers will find them through the school. Belinda, who is nine years old when I interview her, says that she is constantly afraid her father will knock on the classroom door and take her away from school. She has therefore made a plan that she will run to a school toilet, lock herself in, and call for help, in case that happens. Tom, also nine years old, talks about his fear of his father seeing him play with friends on the school playground, and taking him away. He expresses strong hopes that the teacher allocated to guard the playground (a common practice in Swedish schools) during recess will protect him if this happens, but he is too afraid to tell her of his fear.

Strategies for managing the school-day

All children and youth of school age I have interviewed for my research studies on violence and abuse have talked about their situation in school. Many have talked about how their ability to focus on school and perform well, has been compromised by the violence in their lives. However, some have also talked about how they developed strategies to help them manage their school day, allow for learning, and increase their well-being in school. In a study by Selvik (2020), children who experienced domestic violence described six strategies to regulate their emotional state at school so that they could minimise disruptions as a result of the violence: imaginative safety (such as Tom, see above), recreational learning (using extensive school work to distance themselves), healing talks (talking to peers that understand them), physical activity (see below), divertive play (blocking out difficult thoughts through play), and creative explanations (avoiding questions from peers about their situation through creative answers). Camille, nine years old, struggles with intrusive thoughts as a result of living with violence and abuse for several years. In the interview, she describes how she manages her thoughts during recess on the playground through physical activity:



Interviewer: You said something about the fact that these thoughts also came up at school [on the playground]?

Camille: Occasionally

Interviewer: What do you do then?

Camille: Then I used to somehow...run around the gravel path [running track at the playground]

Interviewer: Yes

Camille: I run two laps around it, then I get tired, and I then can continue to play

The children in Selvik's study (2018) describe strategies that reveal little, if any, teacher awareness of the children's struggles during the school day. The children seem to have an understanding that they are expected to find solutions to their problems themselves. Accordingly, they develop strategies that make it possible for them learn and play in school, without disruptions of thoughts of violence and abuse. However, developing and carrying out these actions, such as running several laps around the playground, also takes time and energy away from what all children should be able to do in school, focusing on learning and interacting with peers and staff.

Discussion

In this paper, I have shown how the schooling of children and youth is affected by the violence and abuse in their lives. I have chosen to use the term 'educational sabotage', as the violence disrupts their academic efforts and focus and disrupts relations with peers and adults in school. Ten-year-old Anna misses many school days, as she must run home and check on her mother. Grace, 18 years old, is extremely tired after staying awake at night to prevent violence from breaking out in her home and therefore has difficulties concentrating in school. Fifteen-year-old Maria experiences much stress during recess, as her abusive boyfriend constantly comments on her appearance and behaviour degradingly. For some of these children and youth, the violence and abuse will significantly impact their educational credentials, to the point of them receiving low grades, being expelled for having too many absent days or having to change schools or move to another school district. In the long run, this may result in not being able to find a job or getting accepted to university. In addition to these more formal implications of their violence exposure, their abusive boyfriends and fathers can also fill their everyday life in school with fear and distress, resulting in generally low well-being. This may also impact children and youth's relationships with their peers.

Hence, many of the children and youth in my studies do not consider the school environment a sanctuary from the violence but instead describe how physical, psychological, and sexual violence, as well as different coercive control tactics, can continue at school, even after relationships are over. Unlike adults, young people cannot distance themselves physically from their abusers when they continue to attend the same school as their violent ex-partners. In most cases, school is mandatory, and changing schools can be complicated.



All children, have a right to education, as is clearly stated in the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child (art. 28). For learning and the vital interaction with peers to take place, children and youth need to feel safe in school and have a school day free from all forms of violence and abuse. Making this happen is a shared responsibility. Schools need sufficient resources in the form of more school counsellors and time for personnel to educate themselves. They need opportunities to cooperate with social services and other agencies to provide information and support and to promote resilience in victimised children and youth.

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