



Focus groups with students

Introduction: social characteristics of the respondent types in the focus groups

Three focus groups were implemented with students in high schools: two in the capital Sofia (18 William Gladstone School; 51 Elisaveta Bagriana School) and one in the medium-sized town of Byala Slatina in Northwest Bulgaria (Elisaveta Bagriana Professional School of Clothing).

-18 William Gladstone School in Sofia - the focus group consisted of 9 girls;

-51 Elisaveta Bagriana School in Sofia - the focus group consisted of 4 boys and 7 girls;

-Elisaveta Bagriana Vocational School of Clothing -- the focus group consisted of 5 girls and 5 boys.

The following social characteristics of respondents in the focus groups should be considered in the analysis. A number of sociological studies¹ demonstrate that the education system in Bulgaria reproduces to a high degree the social inequalities present in society. It is also the social inequalities that highlight different types of consumption habits within the focus groups among students in different schools, related to popular culture, in particular the consumption of soap operas. From a report by the National Institute of Statistics analysing poverty and social inclusion levels in Bulgaria for 2022 and 2023², we can also see that the North West region is characterised by some of the highest levels of poverty in the country, in contrast to the capital Sofia, which has the most advantageous economic position. The two high schools from Sofia are not only located in the capital, but are also among the prestigious schools ranking in the top 50 schools for

¹ Mineva, M. (2019) Who is afraid of "those" children? On Bulgarian education between law and competitive resources. *Sociological Problems*, 2, pp. 509 - 529; Kabakchieva, P. (2019) Quality of education - for whom? Normative visions of quality and practical differentiation of schools according to quality and opportunities for educational and social mobility. *Sociological Problems*, 2, pp. 483 - 508; Yakimova, M. (2019) Whose child is this? Family responsabilisation in education as a generator of social inequalities. *Sociological Problems*, 2, pp. 466 - 482

² National Institute of Statistics (2022) INDICATORS OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN 2021. https://nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/SILC2021_6IY8TD4.pdf [Accessed 15/6/2023].
National Institute of Statistics (2023) INDICATORS OF POVERTY AND SOCIAL INCLUSION IN 2022. https://www.nsi.bg/sites/default/files/files/pressreleases/SILC2022_4UPGZS4.pdf [Accessed 15/6/2023].



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the city according to the NHE³. On the other hand, students entering the vocational high schools, typically located in small towns and the outskirts of cities, typically come from families of low socio-economic status and low cultural capital with Roma ethnic backgrounds. Education in vocational high schools is limited to the acquisition of competences for low-skilled physical labour intended for the local labour market, as students are not expected to migrate after the high school level.⁴ The school in Byala Slatina is just a vocational school of clothing and the town is located in one of the poorest regions of Bulgaria.

As a disadvantage of the research at this stage should be considered the lack of students from the LGBTI community, which could be compensated by implementing a separate focus group with them. The establishment of a separate focus group with students from the LGBTI community as a place of security is necessary for several reasons. First, disclosing their sexual identity and orientation among other classmates would put them in a risky situation. Secondly, due to the strong negative attitudes towards the topic from the three focus groups held so far, I think it is right to give voice to community representatives as well, so that there is a balance in terms of different perspectives.

Section 1: How do young people watch soap operas?

User habits

Already at this initial level of the conversation, gender differences and persistent stereotypical gender roles can be identified among students, regardless of which school they are from. Girls show a greater tendency to watch soap operas, while boys consume mostly full-length films. Those who do not watch serials insist that they are engaged in academic activities, prefer to hang out with friends or attend extracurricular activities. Often in the discussions there is mockery by boys towards girls. Watching soap operas is, according to them, an activity for 'outsiders', 'anti-social people' or 'grannies'. Those who watch say they get addicted and therefore cannot tear themselves away until they reach the end of the film. They may spend an entire day or night watching a series.

Sofia students consume series and movies individually in their free time (i.e., after school). They mostly watch HBO and Netflix using free online platforms (e.g. Filmisub) or paid, if their families have a subscription, via phone, tablet or their personal computer

³ <https://danybon.com/obrazovanie/top-50-sf-nvo-7-cl-23/> [Accessed 15/6/2023]

⁴ Kabakchieva, P. (2019) Quality of education - for whom? Normative visions of quality and practical differentiation of schools according to quality and opportunities for educational and social mobility. *Sociological Problems*, 2, pp. 483 - 508



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(lap top). No mention of using popular pirate sites to download movies. These films are also used for educational purposes to practise English. English series are watched less frequently but, if they do, are mainly consumed with the family in the evening, watching them on national television.

Unlike the Sofia students, however, those of lower social status from the vocational high school in Byala Slatina watch only Turkish and Indian series with Bulgarian dubbing on national TV, often with their mothers and grandmothers, and do not use free online platforms or even pirate sites. They describe how much they enjoy relaxing with a "beer and pips" in front of the TV while watching a series and that they look forward to the next day when they can see the sequel. It seems that their consumer time is entirely aligned with the national television schedule. I would like to point out that these students had not heard of HBO and Netflix, and at no point did they point out that they were practicing a foreign language through the series.

All students use Tick Tock through their phones to watch segments of their favorite movies or follow favorite characters. Mostly from Tik Tok they learn about new trends, but also from a brother/sister, as well as their peers - at school, friends, including those from the neighborhood, among whom one or another series is popularized and everyone starts watching it.

What are your favorite serial dramas?

Girls watch serial dramas whose genres are either fiction, but mostly romance. They like the enemies to friends, friends to lovers, K drama genre. Guys prefer war-themed movies, action movies, and ones that have expensive and fast cars. These are again stable positions that unite the more privileged children from Sofia with those of lower social status from Byala Slatina.

Girls view romance as love is thought of as the key to overcoming socioeconomic inequalities, conflicts or social discrimination, especially discrimination towards a girl's appearance based on gender stereotypes. It is precisely with appearance that the theme of stereotypes emerges. They dream of meeting the love of their life as represented in the movies and talk critically about boys who show tendencies to brag about changing their partners frequently and have a different attitude towards intimacy. In the focus groups, girls portray their parents as a family based on "true love at first sight" and in this key problematise the difference between them not being able to find such love and the previous generation. Boys, on the other hand, insist on war and action movies as they like messages of brotherhood, fraternal solidarity and support, courage, sacrifice for a cause, etc., and expensive cars are an expression of privileged male status.



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In the focus group at 51 Elisaveta Bagriana School, Sofia, the following series, movies and genres were discussed: New Neighbors; Game of Thrones; House M.D.; The Vampire Diaries; Teen Wolf; Stranger Things; K dramas: FBoy Island and Boys over Flowers; Fast and Furious; Harry Potter; The Summer is Turned Pretty; The Killer is also Romantic; Euphoria; Sex Education; BG serials: Dads and Revolution Z.

The following series, films and genres were discussed in the William Gladstone School 18 focus group: Harry Potter; How to Get Away with Murder; The Vampire Diaries; Stranger Things, Game of Thrones; Chernobyl; Suits; Young Sheldon; Grey's Anatomy; CSI: Miami; The Hunger Games; Marvel; DC; 1918; Fury; Scent of Woman; Law & Order: Criminal Intent; War of the Roses; The White Queen, The White Princess; The Spanish Queen; The Good Doctor.

Among the students from Byala Slatina the films Jan and Sanem and Gopi were highlighted.

Students generally had difficulty answering the questions whether serial dramas influence their behaviour and whether they feel represented by the series they watch? However, if they found these questions difficult to relate to, then when they took a critical stance on the representation of LGBTI issues in contemporary films, then 'influence' was over-exposed and commented on as 'very powerful propaganda on children'. This will be commented on in the next section.

Section 2: Gender equality

As anti-gender discourse is strongly present in Bulgaria after 2018, "Are you interested in the issue of gender?" into "Are you interested in the issue of equality between men and women?" and "Are you interested in the issues of the LGBTI community?" to avoid the automatic negative reactions around the word "gender".

Here I will also divide the students' responses between those from the capital and those from the provincial city because the differences were significant.

The students from the capital freely and dialogically reflected on gender stereotypes conceptualized in a heteronormative framework, mainly focusing on labour inequalities - unequal distribution of care work at home; discrimination at work against women; whether there are male and female professions, etc. But strongly negative reactions were expressed at the use of the word 'feminism'. In this line of reflection, distinctions were made between first, second and third wave feminism, where students expounded the first wave of feminism's demands for the right to vote as legitimate, but were strongly negative towards new trends, overlaying any ideas they conceptualised as



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'strange and radical'. For example, "Radical feminists think God is a woman and that's totally nuts!".

Unlike the issue of equality/inequality between men and women, which were discussed in a relatively moderate way, the issue of LGBTI rights evoked strong negative reactions and very often tropes from anti-gender discourse were mechanically reproduced. The LGBTI cause was conceptualized as, quotes: "powerful propaganda of the West being imposed on us from the outside, while "we are Balkan", "we are constantly being pushed "perverts" that we don't want to look at" and if possible "LGBTI should not air in public", mocking and having a strong negative attitude to the protests taking place on 25 November against gender-based violence and domestic violence, 8 March - Women's Day and Sofia Pride. The transgender issue also arouses the most negative reactions.

Unlike the Sofia students, those from Byala Slatina felt that the questions were forced and alien. The topic of stereotypes was not familiar to them. Therefore, I tried to thematise the gender differences that emerged immediately from the focus group - "Do these differences that have now emerged between girls and boys, such as the fact that you girls watch soap operas while boys do not, bother you?". From here the students began to talk about their daily lives in the school environment. The girls discussed issues of sexual violence at school by boys towards them, such as stigmatizing a female classmate as a "light woman", circulating videos with sexual content with female classmates and finding it unacceptable and offensive. The boys, in turn, claimed that the girls constantly gossiped and gossiped about them. There was a persistent lack of anti-gender discourse among these students and therefore they were more open to discussion. On the topic of LGBTI community issues, they again talked about their classmates. Initially they approached it negatively, quote "God created only man and woman. Therefore it is not normal to have different ones", but when I asked "God must have created others, since there are them?" they hesitated and started thinking in another direction.

Section 3: Serial dramas and gender

Given the strongly negative attitudes I outlined in Section 2 among the Sofia students, the topic of gender representation in serial dramas was also subject to strong criticism. Mainly, the representation of the LGBTI community or the topic of gender inequalities in cinema was conceptualised again as "very harmful propaganda of the West", which "is alien to us" and which is "harmful because mainly children are watching". When I asked the question before about whether films influence their behaviour and whether they feel represented in them, students often had difficulty answering. But, now, when I asked about films and their relationship to the topic of



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gender, suddenly films became "a very powerful means of influence and propaganda aimed at children". The theme of the little mermaid, who is presented with a dark skin colour, evokes particularly strong emotions. This is strongly interpreted as a distortion of the 'truth' and as unacceptable. Hence, discussions arise about 'distorting historical truth' in films altogether by presenting historical figures as black, for example.

The students from the countryside could not respond to these questions. Only one of the boys said that it was a Hollywood topic, but that he did not think it was something important for the Bulgarian context.

Focus group with teachers

A focus group was conducted with 5 female teachers - 3 over 40 and 2 under 40 - 18 William Gladstone School, Sofia.

Section 1: Teacher-student interaction

User habits

2 of the respondents who teach English are fans of serial dramas. One watches every night with her husband and the other during vacations when she is not in school for hours and taking care of grandchildren. The two share each other's movies. They are also passionate about serial dramas because of the students, so they can have a common topic of discussion with them and build closeness. The topic of serial dramas naturally comes up in their classes as there is such a section in the English textbooks regarding leisure as well as culture. That is why they make an effort to follow the trends. The other respondents - one a teacher of philosophy and civics, the other of Bulgarian language and literature - also watched serials, although they were not such avid watchers and did not integrate discussions of films into their classes. In the conversation, they highlight those that are popular and are broadcast on television. All are adamant that students are big fans of serial dramas and that they are an important part of their lives. One of the respondents tells how she once saw in class that a student was tired and after she realized that he had been watching a serial all night, she decided to watch it too to find out how it was possible that the student had not slept all night.

"I: And according to your observations, do students watch soap operas?"

All: Oh, a lot! Lots



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P3: That's why we started looking."

"P1: I watch soap operas when I have time. That's the problem, I don't have time. We share movies with P3 because she watches every night and has more free time. I have grandchildren. Often R3 sends me and if there is a period when I have watched a series, then I share it with her because she has more time than me obviously. But I like to watch soap operas because at least with students we comment in school soap operas and it's good to be in class. It's good to know what the students are talking about, to have an opinion on the subject so they can feel closer to you. So I watch every break. But about then I sit down and look at a whole season in one day. I watch about 10 hours. During school hours it's hard for me because I also work weekends. I also have a lot of tests to check. But vacation, when it starts, the first day I read a book, the second day I watch a show, the third day is the book, the fourth day is the show. So I can say every vacation, which is upstairs downstairs every month."

"P4: I don't have a TV. I watch everything mostly on a computer and that's for 9 years as I'm in constant renovation. I don't watch modern Bulgarian serial dramas. Foreign ones maybe, yes. I have watched old serial dramas like Friends, Everybody Loves Raymond... I like comedies basically. Bar cheers... There was one about a boy, what was his name, Everybody Loves Chris."

"P2: I also don't watch much TV and soap operas, but so going back in time I generally went through Zamunda to download some of the soap operas or I've watched on TV. Like names I can say The Bridge, but the Scandinavian version. It is a crime series made between Denmark and Sweden. And it's about a policewoman who works the cases.

P1 and P3: Sounds like The Chestnut Man.

P2: The other series I've watched is the Bulgarian World of Vankata. The students recommended it to me. They watched the series on the internet. It is generally a humorously made film. Miss Fit many years ago. It's a series about some youngsters who gain super powers and get into different situations. And we are currently watching The Rookie on Nova Television. It's about the guy who starred in Castle, he's a rookie cop and he solves different cases. We've been watching Hawaii 5-0.

P1: Yeah, that's what I watched with my son.



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P2: I've also watched Doctor House consistently. There was another Doctor Who one, Grey's Anatomy.

P1: Oh yes, he was very good and we watched him!

P2: From Bulgarian - Stolen Life.

P1: But without the last season.

P2: Yes, season 1 and 2. And Brothers also 1 and 2 season.

P1: Haven't you seen Undercover?

P2: No."

All respondents download movies through Zamunda, watch HBO Go, HBO, Netflix and also FilmiSub.

As a favorite genre definitely stand out thrillers, crime series produced by Scandinavian countries. From their point of view, students mostly like crime series and thrillers, as that is what the conversations with them are about, but they also admit that they talk about these genres as they know that teachers mostly like them.

Section 2: What works and what doesn't work in teaching gender equality?

Teachers say they became interested in gender issues because of the students they primarily learn from. They have not had any special training on the subject, and apart from the students, they also educate themselves. They share observations that two trends are developing in the school - students who have liberal attitudes and freely express their different sexual orientations and sexual identities and those who have strong nationalistic attitudes. They are relieved to report that open conflict and violence do not occur between them. Those who freely express different sexual orientations and identities feel safe to do so mainly in the school environment where they find like-minded friends and supporters, but not in their families and on the street. It is with their friends that students discuss gender issues, but not in their families. The issue comes up in English classes, where there is a topic on women's rights, and in civics. It is not present in the Bulgarian language and literature curriculum. From the focus group, it seems that the post-2018 anti-gender wave has not had a significant impact in terms of the ability to teach the topic.

"I: You mentioned that you have discussed the topic of gender equality. Is that a topic that you think has a place in school?

P3: They're excited about it themselves.



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And: and you start because of them to introduce it or for example it comes from you?

P3: Well, maybe somehow it's in the textbook. It's the purple English textbook, there's this Women's Rights topic at the end.

P1: Yes, there is this theme that is about women's rights, human rights, the feminist movement and therefore you can't help but ask them what they think. It's a reading comprehension text and you can't help but ask what you think.

P2: It's raised because they give themselves an indication that they're excited. Here in the 18th we have a very representative sample of similar characters who think one way or the other. I.e. say they approve of the idea of gender equality, others who disapprove. We have a lot of liberal-leaning students as well as students who are, in my opinion, pretty extreme nationalist views. This requires us to develop skills to be able to balance between these two positions. We have social psychology and personality psychology in one of the philosophy profiles. There we talk about gender, about ageism. There we raise topics like: do you approve of a woman in her 60s becoming a mother? A man of 80 to become a father? Why does one approve and the other doesn't? What are the specifics? This is present within civic education, where we talk about human rights.

P1: There was the subject of professions, now that I think about it. Are there typically male and typically female professions? Everybody: oooh! Then what a debate it was!

P2: Now I remembered that in an extracurricular activity we talked about gender-neutral language. What is it? Where does it occur? In different countries with different languages, how does the issue stand? How does it develop that there are not specifically clothes for men and clothes for women or toys for children that are not typically blue for boys, pink for girls. There was a lot of interest then. We looked at the living language side. There were examples, if I'm not mistaken in thinking, with the French, with them changing their language to give equality. Like in Bulgaria it sucks to say colleague in the feminine or teacher or assistant, I'm a masculine assistant, masculine teacher, masculine colleague. We have feminine, but the feminine makes it sound disqualifying.

P4: Well, I don't remember us talking about equality, but in general I'm thinking of having this specific lesson with Backman in a couple of classes, because in this particular novel, Björstad has a theme to do with whether the girl's word stands



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against the boy's word and who they trust more. And that's a very nice thing to take and discuss with these kids specifically. That's what I'm planning."

The main approach that teachers use when discussing the topic of gender equality is to hold discussions where rules are worked out in advance and students have a limited time within the lesson to quickly prepare the main arguments they will make in the debate. They are also divided into groups - Pros and Cons - with the most heated discussions occurring when one group consists of only boys and the other of only girls. This is also the preferred form by the students themselves, where the girls usually beat the boys. Another approach is to give students the task of making a presentation on a topic to present to the class.

"And: what do you think works as a teaching approach and maybe there are approaches that don't work at all?

P2: With me it's in the form of a discussion or a debate, and we try to clarify rules beforehand so that we can listen to each other and work out a reasoned position, or in the form of case studies. That is what it is for me - debates and case studies.

P3: We also do debates within English language teaching because, as I said, we have those topics in the English textbooks. We also do presentations.

P1: Yes. Another approach that sometimes works, sometimes doesn't, I make them pick their teams. Sometimes it happens that there are 4 girls and 1 girl or 4 girls and 1 boy and, when they have to take a position, it becomes difficult for them. They get a lot more fired up and enthusiastic when you split them into boys and girls. They are extremely easy to set on fire. They try to compete. Very often in such debates women win because we are more gifted, much better able to logically arrange their thought and say for example why this profession is female or not. Men are more imaginative and that always puts girls in a better position. And the boys are fuzzy, they're afraid, they feel humiliated that they're beaten by the girls, which... I don't know. What does it matter who beat you?"

Section 3: Serial dramas as a teaching tool

All the teachers approved of the idea of serial dramas being used in school as a teaching tool, and thought that watching them together was a good way to bond with students through the shared experience of the cultural event. They give the example of the already developed platform Sinet , where there are uploaded sample films on themes



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with developed tools for guiding discussions on parts of the film. But they insist that students should be an active part of the process and be able to propose their own serial dramas to be discussed.