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## Domestic abuse prevention education: listening to the views of young people

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This paper reports on findings derived as part of a two-year project funded by the European Union's Daphne III scheme, involving collaboration between seven partner organisations across six European countries. The project involved an evaluation, using questionnaires and focus groups, of domestic abuse prevention education programmes delivered in schools in the UK, France and Spain. This paper presents the findings from the UK focus group discussions, conducted with young people aged 10–11 years, and 13–14 years to explore their opinions about the intervention delivered in their school. The focus groups revealed the following challenges for service providers in this area: young people can misunderstand issues related to domestic abuse, especially the role of power and control within relationships; there is a tension between educators giving young people free expression to share their opinions and challenging sexism and other prejudices; and boys can become disengaged with gender-based interventions. These issues point towards three key considerations when implementing a domestic abuse prevention education intervention: programme content (the what); the teaching methods used (the how); and whether teachers or external organisations should deliver the programme (the who).

**Keywords:** domestic abuse; violence; children; prevention; education

### Introduction

In the UK, high rates of abuse in teenage dating relationships have been found (Barter et al. 2009), highlighting the significance of the issue in the lives of many young people. A recent study of 13 to 14 year olds in the UK ( $N = 1143$ ) found that 45% of pupils who had been in a dating relationship reported having experienced domestic abuse and 25% having perpetrated it (Fox et al. 2013). There is, therefore, good reason to target preventive interventions at teenagers in early adolescence. As noted by Barter (2011), research on what US scholars tend to call dating violence is not as developed in the UK and Europe as in North America. The same is true of attempts to establish effective domestic abuse prevention education programmes. The recent enlargement of the UK government's definition of domestic abuse to encompass incidents or patterns of 'controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour' alongside physical assaults, together with its decision to extend this definition from adults to young people aged 16 and above, renders the need to conduct research and evaluation on preventative education all the more urgent (Home Office 2013).

In the USA, programmes such as Safe Dates to tackle dating violence have been developed and evaluated over 15 years (Foshee et al. 1998, 2004). In the UK, a number of programmes have been developed by organisations such as Women's Aid, the Zero

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Tolerance Trust and Tender, giving schools the option of buying in or borrowing from a range of different packages, but without much evidence base to guide them. A mapping study by Ellis (2004) revealed that one-half of UK local authorities had commissioned domestic abuse prevention education programmes at some point recently, if not on an enduring basis, typically to support personal, social and health education (PSHE) lessons in schools. Some UK programmes aim to tackle dating violence specifically (a term more commonly used in the USA), whereas other programmes have a slightly wider remit of addressing the issue of domestic abuse, focusing on abuse in teenage relationships, abuse in adult relationships and with consideration of children as witnesses. Although the programmes within the UK might differ in their focus, their primary aim is to raise awareness of abuse in relationships, tackle the underlying attitudes that give rise to abusive tendencies and encourage more young people to seek help. Thus, the findings outlined in this paper have relevance for domestic abuse prevention programmes, those that aim to tackle dating violence, as well as sex and relationships education (SRE) more generally.

Once implemented, ownership tends to vary between UK schools, highlighting problems with the long-term sustainability of such work (Stanley, Ellis, and Bell 2011). Moreover, few such interventions are formally evaluated. Where evaluations have been conducted, they have been small scale and methodologically limited. Rarely are experimental methods used to assess attitudinal or behavioural change. Where questions have been administered at pre-test and post-test, analyses typically involve comparing the percentages of responses to individual items at each time point, with no attempt to track individuals over time and little consideration of whether the changes are statistically significant. A strength of the UK evaluations in contrast to those conducted in the USA has been that qualitative methods are used to explore young people's perceptions of the education they have received (e.g. Bell and Stanley 2005; CRG Research 2009; Hester and Westmarland 2005; Scottish Executive 2002; Stanley, Ellis, and Bell 2011). These evaluations have highlighted some of the challenges in terms of service delivery and suggestions for good practice, such as *what* should be taught (i.e. programme content), *how* it should be taught (e.g. teaching methods) and *who* should deliver it (e.g. teachers or external organisations).

Below we provide a review of this small but growing evidence base and we then add to this literature by describing the findings from focus groups we have conducted with young people who have been exposed to the relationships without fear (RwF) programme in the UK.<sup>1</sup> We will structure the literature review and discussion around the *what*, the *how* and the *who*.

### *The what*

In terms of what should be taught in domestic abuse prevention education programmes, a key issue is whether the programme should explicitly focus on notions of gender inequality and power. Stanley, Ellis, and Bell (2011) state that a gendered approach is needed but that this needs to be delivered thoughtfully. There is a risk with explicitly feminist approaches, of alienating boys, who can perceive such material as one-sided or anti-men (e.g. CRG Research 2009; Hester and Westmarland 2005). Boys and girls also differ in terms of the topics that are relevant to their experiences and concerns, for example boys want to learn about how to resist peer pressure to have sex and discuss issues pertaining to pornography (Hilton 2001). As Hilton (2007) argues, the topic of pornography in boys' SRE is important because boys often obtain information about sex from this source and thus are at risk of acquiring distorted perceptions of the roles of men and women within (sexual)

relationships. Crucially, research shows that both boys and girls want information about sex and relationships. However, SRE often focuses on the biological processes of reproduction and pregnancy (within National Curriculum science) rather than looking at issues pertaining to relationships (Ofsted 2006; Sex Education Forum 2008).

### *The how*

With regard to how this material should be taught, research highlights the challenges of delivering material in a way that is responsive to the preferences of young people, because students will have different learning styles. This has been demonstrated in young people's views about drama and role-play, with some being uncomfortable with the requirement to role-play, while others perceiving it as an excellent way of getting at the perspective of the victim and perpetrator (CRG Research 2009).

A more consistent opinion amongst young people appears to be their preference for more practical and interactive sessions, e.g. making posters and cooperative jigsaws (Scottish Executive 2002). Boys in particular tend to appreciate the more active elements of the programme – often referred to as kinaesthetic activities, whereas girls may enjoy sitting and talking (Stanley, Ellis, and Bell 2011).

Encouraging young people to share their feelings about sensitive issues is also a challenge. This requires workshop leaders (whether teachers or outside experts) who can engender high levels of trust and respect, encouraging openness while also respecting an individual's privacy (CRG Research 2009). The challenge for those delivering such programmes is knowing when and how to tackle extreme views, while not discouraging young people from contributing in the future.

There is also the question of where domestic abuse prevention education programmes should sit within the curriculum. Typically, in the UK, they are situated within the PSHE curriculum; however, with all the other issues that are covered within PSHE, schools can struggle to allocate enough time to domestic abuse prevention education (Maxwell et al. 2010). This is exacerbated because PSHE is a non-examination subject, and can be perceived by teachers and students as being a lower-status subject. Subsequently, both parties invest less effort and interest in PSHE compared with other mainstream subjects (Formby et al. 2011). However, evaluations have highlighted the possibilities of a cross-curricular approach, with the issue of domestic abuse integrated into subjects across the National Curriculum, e.g. History, English and Maths (see Hester and Westmarland 2005; Maxwell et al. 2010). This would certainly help the messages to be reinforced on a regular basis and also address the issue of long-term sustainability.

### *The who*

The final challenge that needs to be addressed when delivering domestic abuse prevention education is who should deliver the programme – a teacher or a facilitator from an external organisation. This is an important consideration because as identified by CRG Research (2009, 25), 'the delivery and success of the project is to a large part determined by the ability of the workshop leaders to effectively engage, manage and communicate with the students'. Ellis (2004) noted that programmes are typically delivered by external agencies, with teachers sitting in and observing. There are both advantages and limitations to this approach. Specialist facilitators have experience of discussing domestic abuse issues with young people, and are accustomed to managing a range of attitudes/opinions they express. Conversely, evaluations of programmes delivered by teachers show they

often lack confidence and skills in this area (Hester and Westmarland 2005), receive inadequate training in SRE (Biddulph 2007) and anxious or inexperienced teachers can become reliant on worksheet-based lessons (Hilton 2001).

However, teachers have greater knowledge of their students' personal circumstances, which external facilitators typically do not have. Furthermore, Hilton (2007) points out that facilitators are often not trained teaching professionals and therefore can struggle to build rapport with students, are unable to manage classroom behaviour, and elicit apprehension in students who are reluctant to discuss sensitive topics with a stranger. Some pupils can perceive visitors as easy targets to embarrass, and presenting opportunities for classroom high jinks. Evidence provided by Formby et al. (2011) has also found that the assumed expertise of facilitators does not always translate into effective lessons, and that teachers and pupils have noted that facilitators can be perceived as 'boring'. Thus, external facilitators may not be the most appropriate group to teach SRE, and Hilton (2001) highlights that teachers play an important role in delivering this area of the curriculum.

Thus, a compromise would be collaboration between teachers and external facilitators. Indeed, external facilitators welcome the presence of teachers for behaviour management and so teachers can learn something alongside the pupils (CRG Research 2009). Providing teachers with the opportunity to observe external facilitators also helps to ensure the long-term sustainability of the programme (Stanley, Ellis, and Bell 2011). However, the active level of participation by teachers in such contexts has been found to vary (Stanley, Ellis, and Bell 2011), with some teachers using the time to catch up with administrative tasks (CRG 2009).

An evaluation of the Zero Tolerance initiative in Scotland concluded that experienced (guidance) teaching staff are best placed to lead the programmes, but that teachers should not be forced to deliver this material (Scottish Executive 2002). In support of this, it must be acknowledged that some teachers will not embrace the aims and messages in the programmes, for example one survey found that 22% of teachers who had delivered a programme thought that sometimes girls can provoke violence because of how they behave and dress (Scottish Executive 2002). Again, this points towards the importance of collaboration between teachers and facilitators from external domestic abuse prevention organisations.

### **The present study**

In this paper, we report on the findings of the focus groups we conducted in the UK with young people to evaluate a domestic abuse prevention education programme they received in their schools called RwF. In these focus groups, we explored what the young people liked and disliked about the programme as well as their suggestions for improvement.

RwF is delivered by a charity based in the West Midlands, which supports families who are experiencing domestic abuse (including victims, perpetrators and witnesses of domestic abuse, e.g. children). The programme starts in year 4 (8–9 years) and runs through to year 11 (15–16 years) with the programme tailored to different year groups. Younger children receive a programme in which the emphasis is on friendships and peer group relationships. The topic of abuse in intimate relationships is introduced in year 6 (10–11 years).

The principal aim of the programme was to contribute to a long-term overall reduction in domestic abuse. The programme aims to achieve this by teaching children and adolescents about how to identify different forms of domestic abuse, recognise that all

forms of domestic abuse are unacceptable, and challenge attitudes and stigma surrounding domestic abuse. The programme aims to prevent domestic abuse in the relationships of children and young people by giving them the knowledge and skills to recognise an abusive relationship and seek the appropriate help. Thus, the aim of the programme was to tackle abuse in teenage dating relationships and their future relationships. The programme does emphasise the gendered nature of violence and also includes examples of male victims of female violence, as well as domestic abuse among same-sex couples.

RwF runs for 6 weeks, 1 hour each week, often during PSHE lessons. It is delivered by specially trained facilitators from the charity who draw upon real-life stories that encourage pupils to empathise. The programme also uses question and answer sessions, fact sheets, true/false exercises, problem page exercises, role-play and video clips. Using these activities, pupils are encouraged to share in discussions, given the freedom to voice their own opinions and are required to listen to the views of others.

### Method

Following ethical approval from Keele University's Ethical Review Panel, five focus groups were conducted; two of the focus groups were conducted with primary school children aged 10–11 years and three of the focus groups were conducted with secondary school pupils aged 13–14 years. In total, 32 young people took part. As pupils were the recipients of the programme, focus groups provided a good opportunity for them to share their thoughts about what was effective and ineffective about the programme. The rich data collected from such focus groups can be used to inform any changes made to the curriculum.<sup>2</sup>

A research assistant invited pupils to take part in the focus groups and interested children were given a letter for their parents that explained the research and gave parents the opportunity to opt their children out. At the beginning of each focus group, the research assistant explained the research, reminded the young people that they could leave the focus group at any time without giving a reason and explained that they could refrain from answering questions they preferred not to answer. Pupils were asked not to repeat the discussion to others outside the focus group, but because confidentiality within the group could not be guaranteed, the importance of only sharing information that they were happy for others to know was highlighted. The pupils were reminded that the discussion was about their likes and dislikes about the programme, as well as their suggestions for improvement. They were told that they would not be asked about their personal experiences. The focus groups were recorded and fully transcribed, and this was highlighted to pupils. Permission to record the discussion and use short quotes was gained from pupils before the focus group commenced. Afterwards, young people were thanked for their help, directed to sources of support and each given a *Childline* card. This card includes the free confidential Childline helpline number which children can call for any problem they might need help with. The number does not appear on a telephone record/bill. The focus groups lasted approximately 30–60 minutes. Each one was transcribed verbatim and thematic analysis (TA) was used. TA was chosen as the analytical technique because it takes into account the qualitative richness of the data (both within and across individual transcripts). Furthermore, its flexibility (e.g. Braun and Clarke 2006) provided an ideal method for approaching the transcripts. Also, unlike other analytic methods in qualitative research, TA is not dictated by a single theoretical position. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), analysis involved using an inductive approach to identify codes (notable extracts of speech relating to the research questions) that resided explicitly in the interview transcripts. Each transcript was read several times to ensure familiarity with the



data, and notes about initial codes were made. These codes were revisited and refined in order to create groups of codes that were related to each other and, thus, indicate potential themes in the data. In order to develop these themes so that they reflected the content of the transcripts, they were reviewed and refined by re-reading the data extracts relating to each theme, and re-reading all of the transcripts in full. This process ensured that themes were coherent and captured the meanings of the extracts they contained.

## Findings

### *The need for varied activities, active participation and flexibility*

This theme was derived from the following sub-themes: (a) the programme/activities are boring, (b) too many stories/case studies, (c) too teacher-led, (d) active participation of students needed, and (e) one size does not fit all, i.e. mixed opinions (as in the role-plays). It cuts across both genders and age groups – although boys tended to report the programme as more boring than the girls did.

The programme consisted of a predetermined, fixed curriculum that facilitators delivered in much the same way to all students within a particular year group. However, the focus group discussions highlighted that this ‘one size fits all’ approach was problematic because of young people’s differing ability levels, interests and experiences. For example, the sessions often required students to read and discuss case studies, but boys appeared to dislike this approach. Both boys and girls suggested that activities should be more student-led, so that they were actively (rather than passively) engaging with the material. Criticisms included:

I felt like we were going over the same stuff. There were too many lessons for the things; there wasn’t enough to put in the lessons. We were recapping things that we sort of already knew – just different scenarios but the same. (Anna, 13, FG3)

She told us too many stories. (Daniel, 13, FG3)

A couple of my mates started talking through the lesson because they didn’t like it ... just getting bored. (Ben, 14, FG3)

Sometimes when we were doing group activities, like sometimes some people don’t take part, they sit there having a chat or something – not really interested. (Stephen, 13, FG4)

Like [the lesson] wasn’t to do with us, we were just listening. (Charlotte, 14, FG5)

These criticisms were reflected in students’ suggestions for how to improve the programme, specifically that the content should be more varied and include activities that required active student participation:

Do half time writing or something and half time play a game or something that involves relationships. (Jess, 11, FG1)

Vary [lessons], like sometimes you do role-plays, sometimes you do story-telling, sometimes you’re on netbooks. (Phil, 14, FG3)

We could have like made an A4 PowerPoint presentation. (Daniel, 13, FG3)

We could watch videos like showing the effects of it. (Katie, 13, FG3)

You have to find the information, not like people telling you. (Chloe, 13, FG4)

Pupils’ divergent opinions about role-play illustrated the problem of the ‘one size fits all’ approach. The primary school children reported they did not enjoy participating in role-play exercises about how to cope with uncomfortable situations:

The majority of my group, we didn't enjoy the role-play. (Haseena, 11, FG2)

Whereas most of the secondary school pupils thought that role-plays were a good idea, and were able to suggest a number of ways that role-play could be implemented in the programme, for example:

Zoe, 13: you could pause [the role play], do a freeze frame, and then tell [the class] what you would have changed.

Charlotte, 14: yeah what you would have changed in that situation. (Secondary School, FG5)

### *The difficulty in managing pupils' opinions*

This 'superordinate' theme has the following sub-themes: (a) teacher's opinions, (b) role of teacher, and (c) unknown background of students. This theme has most relevance for the secondary-age focus groups, representing the views of both boys and girls.

The focus groups highlighted that when delivering material pertaining to sensitive topics such as domestic abuse, educators can encounter problems related to students' opinions. This issue was demonstrated by some year 9 students who explained their teacher's management of their attitudes during one lesson (delivered by an external facilitator with the teacher present to monitor behaviour). The students explained that the facilitator had posed a question about the victim's culpability in a particular scenario, and the students had responded with viewpoints that their teacher openly disagreed with. Thus, the teacher ceased to maintain his role as an observer, and instead became actively involved in the lesson – superseding the facilitator. However, the teacher's actions and in particular his attempt to manage students' contributions to the class discussion inadvertently discouraged the students' participation:

Our form tutor though, he was like every time you said something he'd put the point against it even though it was your opinion, he'd put a point against it, and it'd just do my head in. (Anna, 13, FG3)

Yeah he was like stirring it a bit, even though it was our opinion, he like, he had to be right. (Katie, 13, FG3)

This highlights the tension between allowing students to freely express their opinions, while also having to manage these opinions, especially when they may cause upset to others. As two girls suggested, this may be especially problematic in classes where someone has witnessed domestic abuse at home and open discussions could cause discomfort:

Molly, 13: like if someone was in that lesson and they saw their dad hit their mum.

Rachel, 13: That can make them feel more ... awkward. (Secondary School, FG5)

Sometimes teachers will know (or suspect) that certain young people in their class have witnessed and/or experienced domestic abuse and anticipate that these students will feel anxious or self-conscious during these types of discussions. Teachers may seek to ensure that these individuals are not exposed to insensitive comments. Therefore, a potential challenge faced by educators is how to manage pupil participation and 'protect' vulnerable students, without contributing towards the disengagement of pupils who are frustrated at the restriction of their opinions.

### *Managing student discomfort*

The following sub-themes were initially identified: (a) feeling awkward, (b) feeling upset, and (c) disliked activity. The sub-themes of feeling upset and awkward were more relevant to secondary school girls. However, the primary school children (boys and girls)



said that they felt awkward in the role-plays, and all ages could identify activities they disliked.

A related issue is that through the lesson content and delivery, teachers/facilitators can inadvertently tap into the anxieties and experiences of young people. For example, some of the children who participated in role-plays about uncomfortable situations mentioned to the researcher after the focus group that there was a boy in their class who sometimes made them feel uncomfortable because of his tactile manner. Thus, a potential problem with role-plays in this type of programme is that they may tap into a young person's lived experience, and this raises questions about the potential risks of re-enactment, and the discomfort this could cause.

In addition, the topics covered in domestic abuse prevention programmes are often sensitive and regardless of personal experience, this increases the risk of students' becoming upset and/or shocked by the programme content. This was highlighted by girls in Focus Group Five, who thought the use of real-life case studies was inappropriate for year 9 pupils because the stories made them feel upset and awkward. This was especially applicable when the facilitator sought to evoke the pupils' empathy by suggesting they imagine that their friend was the victim:

Charlotte, 14: I found that [activity] a bit awkward, yeah.

Zoe, 13: because you wouldn't want your friend to die, would you?

Molly, 13: no exactly.

Debbie, 13: you wouldn't want your friend to get into that anyway.

Charlotte, 14: no because like, like because you hear about it in stories and like it is based on like a true story, but like it just felt awkward to be like talking about it as if it was your friend.

(Secondary School, FG5)

### *The programme is 'sexist'*

This theme had two main sub-themes: (a) blaming men, and (b) does not address male victims. This theme has most salience for the boys.

Some of the boys thought that the programme was 'sexist', and were unhappy with the programme's greater emphasis on male perpetrators than on female perpetrators. Likewise, one girl suggested that girls might not like how females are presented as victims:

That's not fair when it's always men beating women – it's sexist against men. (Adam, 11, FG2)

Katie, 13: Most of the time it seemed like the male gender was getting the blame for abuse, and I don't think the lads felt that happy with that.

Ben, 14: It was sexist.

Gemma, 13: So it seemed a bit like sexist. But the women, but like the girls as well, I think some of them got offended when they turned round and said that we weren't as strong as men in domestically abusive situations. (FG3)

Although women are more likely to be victims of domestic abuse incidents than men, younger children in particular appeared less likely to be able to grasp the complexity of 'fairness' in the depiction of gender-based violence.

### *The limitations of raised awareness*

The following sub-themes: (a) 'stranger danger', (b) anxieties about future relationships, (c) confused about role of power/control – struggle to identify psychological abuse, and (d) culpability of victim, were grouped together into the theme 'The limitations of raised

awareness'. This theme captured extracts from the secondary school pupils primarily, both boys and girls.

The secondary school pupils said the programme raised their awareness about the prevalence of domestic abuse, the different types of abuse, why victims struggle to leave an abusive relationship, sources of help for victims and the importance of victims 'telling someone':

[Lessons] raised awareness of [domestic violence]. (Ben, 14, FG3)

[The lessons] made us worry but then it's made us aware at the same time. (Rachel, 13, FG5)

You learn about what can happen. (Stephen, 13, FG4)

We all learned something that we didn't know before. (Charlotte, 14, FG5)

However, despite the pupils' perceptions that they had greater awareness, this did not always translate into greater understanding. Some students appeared to have misinterpreted the messages conveyed in the lessons. In particular, there was confusion pertaining to emotional/psychological abuse and the role of power/control in abusive relationships. This meant that while pupils were aware that psychological abuse constituted a form of abuse, they did not understand it. Subsequently, threatening and controlling behaviours were not always identified as domestic abuse, and some of the girls believed that placid individuals could suddenly become physically violent towards a partner. Consequently, they reported being very anxious about future relationships:

'Cause it was just like, 'cause like, she kind of give the impression that you know, that you can be in a happy relationship and then one morning the boyfriend and the girlfriend they will like wake up and just snap, and then it'll all turn nasty, and that's the impression that I got. (Anna, 13, FG3)

Yeah but that's what made me think like, she was saying like [the husband] don't show their true feelings until after they were married so you wouldn't know would you? (Charlotte, 14, FG5)

Hearing about other people's situations, it's like, worrying like to get into a relationship if you think that something is going to happen. (Molly, 13, FG5)

Students' anxieties about the unpredictability of future partners were also extended to their concerns about the risk of strangers. Given the aim of the programme was to highlight that domestic abuse can occur at the hands of someone well known to the victim (rather than a stranger), this suggests pupils had misunderstood this message:

Molly, 13: Don't have a one night stand sort of thing.

Zoe, 13: And don't block out your friends.

Molly, 13: It's true.

Rachel, 13: Make sure you know like the person because like.

Zoe, 13: Don't get with a stranger. (Secondary School, FG5)

Jack, 13: [Girls] don't go with a stranger that you hardly know.

Chloe, 13: Yeah a man who thinks, who just takes advantage of you. (Secondary School, FG4)

Pupils' misconceptions about power and control were highlighted when they talked about an activity they completed which examined threatening behaviours within relationships. The pupils were given a fairy tale about a baroness who was trapped by her husband in a castle. If the baroness left the castle, her husband had ordered the gatekeeper to kill her. Despite her husband's warnings, the baroness did leave, and her husband carried out his threat. The students had to identify that the baroness was not 'to blame' for her death, and that it was her husband who was wrong for using control and threats. This scenario was

intended to depict a situation of domestic abuse. However, due to some students not understanding the concepts of power and control within a relationship, they argued that the baroness was responsible for her own death:

Chloe, 13: Because the husband said the wife couldn't get out and leave the castle, and she did.

Stephen, 13: He said, you're not allowed to leave or you die. But I thought it was the baroness' fault because he did warn, I know like.

Joshua, 13: He did warn her, she still went down.

Stephen, 13: He did order for her death if she leaves.

Chloe, 13: It wasn't [her fault] because she should go out.

Stephen, 13: But it's kind of her fault because if she left, you know, she's kind of like thingy ... because she knows, like she was told like if she left, she'd get killed, and she left. (Secondary School, FG4)

## Discussion

### *The what*

In terms of the content of domestic abuse prevention education programmes, the focus group discussions showed that there was a discord between pupils' awareness and pupils' understanding. Thus, educators need to be alert to students who gain greater awareness of the issue of domestic abuse, but not necessarily greater understanding. In our focus groups, there was confusion about whether controlling behaviours constituted abuse.

Some young people also developed misinterpretations about the messages that the programme sought to convey in relation to gender. Facilitators highlighted that perpetrators of domestic abuse were more likely to be male than female, and the programme content reflected this. However, the programme's focus on male perpetration and female victimisation was construed by some pupils as being 'sexist', supporting research by CRG Research (2009) and Hester and Westmarland (2005). Thus, whilst it is important to raise children's awareness of the gendered nature of domestic abuse, it is also necessary for facilitators to recognise how this message might be interpreted by young people and especially children. Boys and young men familiar with the rhetoric of gender equality and being fair to one another might become confused by a programme that focuses on males perpetrating abuse, especially if they have experience of females being aggressive (e.g. aggressive girls in the playground or authoritarian mothers). This is particularly problematic because boys appear to then reject the programme's messages and become disengaged with the lessons. These findings lend support to Stanley, Ellis, and Bell's (2011) assertion that material pertaining to gender has to be delivered in a thoughtful way.

### *The how*

The focus group discussions pointed towards some of the inherent flaws of taking a 'one size fits all' approach. For example, it was evident that some activities were better suited to certain groups of young people than others, and this was demonstrated in conflicting opinions about role-play. Moreover, students' criticisms about the programme were often related to the way the material was delivered, highlighting the importance of a programme that is responsive to students' needs.

It seems that the issue of responsiveness should be addressed in two ways. First, the programme should be responsive to students' learning preferences (and abilities), for example a class that enjoys lessons with lots of kinaesthetic activities may be unresponsive to teacher-led lessons requiring extended periods of listening and note taking. Likewise,

educators may find that older, more confident students will enjoy role-plays, whereas younger or more vulnerable students find the process distressing. Second, the programme should be responsive to the needs and experiences of pupils. For instance, a class which includes boys who are verbally aggressive towards female peers will have different requirements to a class where this is not an issue. Other researchers have also highlighted the importance of relationship education programmes being responsive to students' learning preferences and experiences (Hilton 2007; Scottish Executive 2002; Stanley, Ellis, and Bell 2011).

The focus group discussions also demonstrated that topics covered in domestic abuse prevention education programmes can be quite distressing for young people. In one of the focus groups, girls talked about feeling upset and awkward after reading real-life case studies. This demonstrates that if topics are pitched above the emotional skills of the pupils, they may struggle to deal with the emotions that the material evokes, for example sadness, distress, worry and anger. This discomfort can be further exacerbated if there are students in the class who have witnessed or experienced domestic abuse, and/or students who express opinions which could be considered as inappropriate or insensitive. This is not to say that upset in such a setting is always a bad thing – something to be avoided at all costs. Indeed, some would argue that the best learning often happens when a skilled facilitator can help children work through discomfort as a group. An experienced teacher who has an existing relationship with the children might be in a better position to do this than an external facilitator.

It is acknowledged that making a programme more responsive to the needs of a specific group of pupils can present difficulties for teachers and in particular external facilitators, because this approach requires sound knowledge of students' experiences and learning preferences. Furthermore, adapting a programme to match the needs of a particular group is often time-consuming and resource-intensive. However, without this approach there is a risk that students will become unresponsive because they deem the programme as 'boring' or 'not relevant'.

### *The who*

In view of the focus groups highlighting the importance of domestic abuse prevention education programmes being responsive to students' needs, we would argue that teachers are best placed to adapt programmes accordingly. Teachers have the experience and expertise to modify teaching materials/curricula, as well as benefitting from having regular contact with the pupils. Our observations of the programme suggested that facilitators from external organisations often do not have any knowledge of the class until they arrive to deliver the first session, and frequently are not qualified teachers. Moreover, they often deliver prescribed material which is taught by all facilitators in a similar way – resulting in the problematic 'one size fits all' approach. It has also been noted previously that teachers might be in a better position to manage discomfort within the group, helping the young people to work through difficult emotions towards a greater knowledge and understanding.

That said, teachers can also encounter difficulties when delivering this type of material. Focus Group Three showed that despite the teacher's good intentions, pupils believed they could not share their opinions without being chastised, and their response was to simply disengage from the activity. Allowing pupils the freedom to express opinions can result in the teacher and/or facilitator having to entertain inappropriate opinions that may make other pupils feel uncomfortable. Whereas seeking to quickly

correct a student's misconceptions without more detailed examination carries the risk that students will become reluctant to share their views. In turn, entrenched misconceptions that are insufficiently discussed are more likely to endure rather than being constructively challenged. This is a predicament that many teachers are likely to be confronted with, and for newly qualified teachers and/or those who are anxious about teaching sensitive material, this type of predicament is likely to be handled with a degree of trepidation. However, external facilitators who are more experienced in exploring a whole range of opinions in the area of domestic abuse are likely to be more adept in facilitating discussion and are less likely to be unnerved by pupils' 'insensitive' or 'incorrect' viewpoints.

However, our focus groups also revealed a number of issues that can arise when external facilitators/organisations are recruited by schools to deliver these types of programmes. First, the role of an external facilitator can be ambiguous because although they are charged with delivering the lesson, they often do not hold a position of authority over the lesson or the pupils – deferring instead to the teacher (usually present for behaviour management). This is what happened in the lesson discussed by the young people in Focus Group Three. Second, although the young people agreed that lessons should be more varied and interactive, their suggestions to achieve this were less consistent. The use of role-plays, for example, demonstrated the pitfalls for an experienced facilitator who does not know the pupils and may inadvertently upset class members because the role-play mirrors pupils' experiences or because they lack confidence to participate.

In addressing the 'who' in domestic abuse prevention education programmes, as demonstrated there are advantages and disadvantages associated with both facilitators and teachers. However, our focus groups and existing research evidence indicate that on balance, teachers are better placed to deliver a programme that is responsive to young people's experiences and learning preferences. However, there are two important factors to enable teachers to effectively do this. First, good-quality training is essential. Given the sensitive nature of issues pertaining to domestic abuse, teachers need the confidence and expertise to deliver this material in an open manner, but with the skills to manage a whole range of student experience, vulnerability and opinions. As pointed out by CRG Research (2009), the effectiveness of these types of programmes is largely determined by the educator's ability to capture students' interest.

Second, when teachers deliver these types of programmes, they will still need the support of specialist facilitators from external agencies, and thus collaboration is vital. The importance of collaboration has also been emphasised by Hester and Westmarland (2005) who argued that specialist facilitators are needed to support teacher training and help children when they make disclosures concerning domestic abuse. Facilitators have also noted that teachers who are present during facilitator-delivered programmes have an opportunity to learn about domestic abuse alongside their students (CRG Research 2009). Consequently, this provides a means to empower teachers to deliver these types of programmes.

In summary, if we wish to improve the effectiveness of efforts to reduce the prevalence of domestic abuse, we need to ensure that young people's concerns are fully anticipated in domestic abuse prevention education programmes. Our research highlights the importance of listening to the views of young people to ensure that this type of education is tailored to their needs. Getting the message right is the key to effectiveness with the need to facilitate understanding as well as greater awareness. In addition, material on gender needs to be delivered in a more thoughtful way. Educators need to be responsive to the needs of the group and steer away from the 'one size fits all' approach. Children value learning using varied activities and those that enable them to engage with the material in a more active way. Teachers, we would argue, are best placed to deliver domestic abuse prevention

education, especially when we consider the issue of long-term sustainability, but they need the confidence and skills to be able to do so effectively, and greater collaboration between external organisations and schools is needed.

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### Notes

1. As part of the larger cross-national study from which this paper was developed, one focus group was also conducted in France and two were conducted in Spain. The results of these focus groups are not discussed in this paper, but further information is available from the corresponding author.
2. One of the outputs for this research project was a Research Toolkit, freely available at [www.readapt.eu](http://www.readapt.eu). The guidance in the research toolkit will enable practitioners to conduct their own focus groups and includes information on how to prepare for them, step-by-step guidance on how to conduct the focus group, as well as outlining an accessible approach to analysis. An Educational Toolkit is also available for those wishing to develop their own programmes. This toolkit was developed by combining good practice from RwF and two other such programmes in France and Spain. For further details, see [www.readapt.eu](http://www.readapt.eu).

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