Raising the Issue of Domestic Abuse in School

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Abstract

Literature suggests that around 30% of children may be exposed to domestic abuse. However, there is little direct evidence from older children. This paper reports on the findings from an invitation to raise the issue in one Scottish secondary school. Ninety eight percent of the pupils consented to participate. Using an anonymous structured writing technique 32% wrote that they were currently witnessing domestic abuse. We have compared their responses with those of pupils who said they were not currently experiencing domestic abuse and found marked differences. For example ten 'experiencing' pupils said a young person might feel suicidal in this situation, a response that was not used at all by 'non-experiencing' pupils. This group also wrote a greater number and wider range of negative descriptors for how a young person might feel. These results have implications for the well-being of young people experiencing domestic abuse. There may be scope for building on this methodology for further education and training among school pupils and their teachers, and to highlight the crucial support that these pupils may need.

Introduction

Much of the evidence on the impact of domestic abuse[1] on children is drawn from people living in refuges or those already in contact with social services as a result of such abuse (Mullender and others, 2002, Hester and others, 2000). In the past parents have been relied upon to describe the impact on their children. However, the second hand nature of such data can 'severely underestimate' exposure (Edelson, 1999). Although her sample was also from those who had survived the experience McGee (2000) highlighted the importance of allowing the children involved to relate their experiences themselves in order to determine the impact on their lives. A complicating factor is that children's responses to domestic abuse (i.e. the number of problems exhibited) can change with distance from the events (Edelson, 1999).

There are no national UK statistics on the incidence or prevalence of domestic abuse (McGee, 2000). Published estimates vary considerably, ranging from one in nine women in any one year (Stanko and others, cited in McGee, 2000) to anywhere between 25 and 60% experiencing physical violence (McGee, 1997, as cited in McGee, 2000). It has been suggested that one third of children in the USA have witnessed violence between their parents (Edelson, 1999). Figures obtained directly from source by Mullender and others (2002) showed that 30% of the children they surveyed reported knowing someone who had experienced domestic abuse. Our reliance on estimates for incidence and prevalence is related to the fact that children exposed to inter-parental violence have no formal designation as victims of crime, hence statistics are not routinely gathered (Margolin & Gordis, 2000).

The impact of domestic abuse on children has been found to vary. Hester and others (2000) reported that younger children were most affected and may experience delayed development. School-age children's responses may include erratic attendance at school, lack of concentration, and

displays of anger. Hester and others (2000) found there had been very few studies of the impact on older (teenage) children. In part this reflects the fact that there are not many teenagers living in refuges. Reactions can also vary in relation to the level of violence to which children are exposed.

Recent work elaborates on previous reports of gender-related response differences. Whilst reporting an endemic tolerance of violence among teenage boys (from their school survey), Mullender and others (2002) found no obvious gender divisions in their young interviewees who had lived with domestic abuse. These authors reported a far greater degree of individual variation than commonality within groupings.

There is also conflicting evidence, in the psychology literature, about the link between witnessing/being the target of parental aggression and the children internalising or externalising their problems (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). That both of these reactions have been cited in different studies tends to support the idea that the response depends on individual variation within general groupings of age, gender, and circumstances.

Children can develop complicated survival strategies in an attempt to minimise the level of violence in the home (Ornduff & Monahan, 1999). They may try to protect their mothers, fantasise about killing the abuser, or just stay quiet for long periods in the hope of not aggravating the situation (Hester and others, 2000). The most common emotion cited by children who had experienced domestic abuse was fear and this could escalate into life-threatening proportions (McGee, 2000). Other dominant feelings were anger, sadness, and powerlessness. Violence can have both direct and indirect effects on the child's intellectual functioning (Huth-Bocks and others, 2001) e.g. pre-school children witnessing abuse had poorer verbal abilities than non-witnesses. Children who intervene in domestic abuse may be attempting to take some control over the situation. However, these children have more negative outcomes than those who concentrate on controlling their own

[1] By 'domestic abuse' we mean violence (physical or mental) that is perpetrated by men on women. Many other terms e.g. domestic or inter-parental violence are common in the literature and this section replicates the terminology used by

behaviour to protect themselves from the violence (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). These authors also describe a growing body of literature linking childhood experiences of domestic abuse to adult risk of mental health problems.

Children learn from an early age that 'the violence must be kept secret at all costs' (Hester and others, 2000) and often actively resist disclosing the problem. They do not seek help on their own and focused inquiry may be needed to uncover domestic abuse (Faller, 2003). A direct approach termed 'straight talk' has been recommended instead of polite/indirect questions (Silvern and others (1995) as cited in Hester and others, 2000, p 137). An explicit invitation to disclose violence 'might appear overly directive' but is thought necessary to let children know that the subject is not taboo. The availability of supportive relationships with a parent or other important carer, or a trusting relationship with an adult outside the immediate family can protect children from some of the effects of domestic abuse (Margolin & Gordis, 2000). Children themselves say primarily that they need to feel safe and secondly need someone to talk to (Mullender and others, 2002).

Hester and others (2000) found that the area of violence prevention in schools and youth groups was 'largely underdeveloped and ad hoc rather than co-ordinated' as yet. Schools can have a 'crucial role in emotionally supporting children experiencing domestic violence' (McGee, 2000). Children need teachers and senior staff who know what the impact of domestic abuse can be, so that they will have some understanding of children's experiences and the impact on their schooling without breaking any confidences (Mullender and others, 2002).

each author in order to retain any associated nuances of meaning.

Method

Author SP was invited to raise awareness of domestic abuse with pupils in a South Ayrshire secondary school (identity not disclosed). The aims were to initiate discussion and gather young people's views on domestic abuse. Pupils were told that the findings would be written up and disseminated for future planning, preventative work, and training. The 50 minute session time-tabled for 'Personal and Social Education' was used and every year group (S1 to S6) was accessed within a two month period (May and June, 2002). All pupils were given the choice of whether or not to participate and assurances of the anonymity of the data were given several times during the session.

In line with research guidelines on the best way to gather data from children in relation to domestic abuse (e.g. Faller, 2003, Silvern and others, 1995, as cited in Hester and others, 2000), a two stranded approach was adopted: a facilitated discussion followed by structured writing. The facilitated discussion was a shared process with open participation. The structured writing was a private opportunity for pupils to give a personal view. Structured writing is defined here as the process of responding to a series of direct questions, but doing so anonymously and without prompts i.e. on a blank card.

The initial discussion began with an introduction by the session facilitator. Emphasis was placed on the importance and value of consultation with young people. There was no teaching input from the facilitator, rather she asked questions such as, 'what is domestic abuse?' and the group responded. The second part of the session was described to the young people before they were asked for their consent to participate. They were told that those who agreed would be asked to write their own personal responses to a series of questions. Each question would be answered on a separate piece of card and inserted into an envelope to be sealed after the last question. No personal details were being asked for, hence all responses would be entirely anonymous. Pupils were told that there were

no right or wrong answers and that all their responses were valuable. They were also asked not to confer or read what their classmates were writing.

Questions were not given out in advance but were read aloud one at a time. Each question was repeated to ensure everyone had heard it and an offer of further explanation was always given. Once pupils had written their answers to the first question and put the card in their envelopes, the second question was read out, and so on. The four questions were as follows:

1. Why do you think a man would behave in any of the ways we've talked about and abuse someone he's supposed to love?

2. What would you like to say to men who abuse women in this way?

3. Choose a word that you think would best describe how a young person your age might feel if they witnessed the kind of abuse we've spoken about happening to their mum.

4. A yes or no answer is all that is needed for the next question. Remembering the different forms of abuse we've spoken about, are these kinds of things happening in your home, to your mum?

Responses to question 4 were used to create the categories 'experiencing' and 'non-experiencing,' hence the 'experience' referred to could be any of the different forms of abuse discussed during the class session.

The four focused questions (Faller, 2003) are examples of 'straight talk' and the fourth involves the kind of specific invitation to disclose that is recommended for children being asked about domestic violence (Silvern and others, 1995, cited in Hester and others, 2000 p137). Once all four responses were in the envelopes, they were sealed and collected. Hence, although the data is anonymous, grouped responses are available for all participating pupils.

In order to ensure that pupils were aware of further support available to anyone concerned, each session closed with a brief discussion of the reasons that young people might not want to tell others about experience of domestic abuse. This made clear the legal responsibilities in relation to child protection and allowed some misconceptions to be addressed. Each session ended with information about Women's Aid locally and the support they can offer to women and young people.

The envelopes containing all four cards were gathered by the session facilitator and typed into a personal computer. The data were checked for accurate transcription. The file was then passed to authors HA and EM who subjected the responses to content analysis. For this the short responses were read repeatedly and themes were noted until the emergence of new themes had been exhausted. Themes were grouped into categories and, to demonstrate the degree of commonality, responses within each category were quantified. Examples of the different categories are illustrated as quotes from the pupils' written responses.

Results

During the whole three month period, a total of 258 pupils from S1 through to S6 (aged from 11 to 17 years) were given the opportunity to participate. Four pupils declined and 254 (98%) completed the written response cards.

Facilitated discussion

Details of the pupils' peer group discussions were not recorded to ensure that they did not feel constrained by the formality of such a process. However, it is important to set their written responses in the context of what was said immediately beforehand. The notes of the facilitator were drawn on to provide this background.

In very broad summary, the pupils described the different forms of domestic abuse as physical, verbal, psychological, and emotional. They were aware that it was about one person trying to exert

control over another and knew that it usually happened within current relationships but that it also happened when relationships ended. They were also clear that domestic abuse was mainly perpetrated by men on women. These were the views of the young people themselves and, as described above, no teaching input or direction was given by the facilitator.

Structured writing

The question about personal experience of domestic abuse was asked at the end to ensure that acknowledging this, albeit anonymously, did not affect the other responses. Differences were apparent throughout all four responses between the pupils who wrote that they were experiencing domestic abuse and those who said they were not, so the variable of 'experiencing' or 'not experiencing' has been used to separate the results from the first three issues. Table 1 shows the number of pupils in each of the experiencing groups.

Table 1: Number of pupils who said they were experiencing domestic abuse

Experiencing domestic abuse?	n	%
Yes	81	32
No	170	67
Don't know	3	1

Whilst the majority of pupils in the school said they had no experience of domestic abuse, almost one third (32%) said they did currently. Three pupils responded that they did not know if this was happening in their homes. These three responses have not been included in the rest of the results tables, but are described at the end of this section. Table 2 shows the young people's responses to the first question they were asked in the structured writing part of the session.

Table 2: Pupils' responses when asked why men might behave in the ways discussed

Response category	Number of responses* from 'experiencing†' pupil group		Number of responses* from 'non-experiencing†' pupil group	
	Number (n=81)	Percentage*	Number (n=170)	Percentage*
Power/control	42	40	67	34
Enjoyment	10	10	5	3
Lack of punishment	9	9	4	2
His emotions	8	8	24	12
Personal characteristics	7	7	5	3
Gender related	6	6	8	4
Ill or sick	5	5	25	13
Trigger incident	5	5	12	6
Family history	4	4	20	10
Drink/drugs	3	2	9	5
Relationship breakdown	2	2	6	3
Don't know	0	0	9	5
Total number of responses	**104**	**100**	**195**	**100**

* Numbers are expressed as a percentage of the total number of responses, not the percentage of pupils who gave each response (as many pupils cited more than one reason)

† These categories are as detailed in Table 1

The most common reason why pupils felt men might behave in the ways discussed were related to power and control. These included comments like, *'to be in charge,' 'to feel hard,'* and *'to be the big man'* and these were written by 'experiencing' and 'non-experiencing' pupils. Within this category, only non-experiencing pupils framed responses in terms of the man thinking he has *'the right to abuse/dictate to his wife.'* Only experiencing pupils used the word *'bully'* or said the man might want *'to get revenge on the woman'* or make her *'too scared to leave.'*

More differences between the two groups were found with some of the other categories. Young people who said domestic abuse was happening in their own home were more likely to say that the man enjoyed abusing women or that they continued to do it *'to make them feel better'* or because

'they get away with it.' Pupils who said they had no experience of domestic violence were more likely to attribute the man's behaviour to external causes, such as the man having witnessed domestic abuse or experienced it as a child, or to him being ill or sick (a category that includes *'mentally ill'* and all the colloquial descriptors of it e.g. *'nutter'* and *'mad'*).

Table 3: Pupils' responses when asked what they would like to say to abusing men

Response category	Number of responses* from 'experiencing†' pupil group		Number of responses* from 'non-experiencing†' pupil group	
	Number (n=81)	Percentage	Number (n=170)	Percentage
Level insults at them	24	21	40	20
Ask them why	21	19	35	17.5
Suggest what should happen to them	19	17	48	24
Suggest they have a problem	10	9	26	13
Tell them abuse is always wrong	9	8	3	1.5
Explain the effects of their actions	8	7	10	5
Give instructions or suggest actions	8	7	17	8.5
Challenge their gender perceptions	7	6	11	5.5
Wouldn't say anything	5	4	1	0.5
Love mentioned	1	1	6	3
Other	1	1	3	1.5
Total number of responses	**113**	**100**	**200**	**100**

* Numbers are expressed as a percentage of the total number of responses, not the percentage of pupils who gave each response (as many pupils cited more than one reason)

† These categories are as detailed in Table 1

The three most common responses from both groups of pupils were in the same categories. The first involved them levelling a series of insults at the perpetrator and the language used did not differ greatly between 'experiencing' and 'non-experiencing' pupils. Their descriptors included *'scumbag,' 'pathetic,' 'waste of space,'* and *'b*****d.'* The second top response to this question

related to attempts to understand why this kind of thing happened, typically *'why do you do this?'* The third of the most frequently cited responses was in the category of making suggestions for what should happen to the man as a result of the abuse and this was in fact the most common response overall for the 'non-experiencing' pupils. The responses were a mixture of the suggestion that men should experience the same things as they had put women through and threats on their life or liberty. Whilst the 'non-experiencing' pupil responses were made from a general perspective (e.g. *'hope you get what you gave'* and *'you should be shot'*), only 'experiencing' pupils wrote of involving themselves in carrying out any threats (e.g. *' I wish I could do everything you have done to a woman back to you'* and *'I would like to drive a screwdriver through your heart'*). Other differences in response categories were that 'experiencing' pupils more frequently pointed out that abuse was always wrong (e.g. *'you don't have any right to abuse women'*) or drew attention to the futility of saying anything to the perpetrator (e.g. *'what difference would saying anything make?'*). Six of the 'non-experiencing' pupils mentioned love in their written responses (typically *'how can you say you love someone you beat up?'*) while only one in the 'experiencing' group used this word (*'if you really love them you wouldn't hit them'*). The 'other' response written by an experiencing pupil was *'I hate you'* while the three non-experiencing pupil ones were *'who the hell do you think you are?' 'what the hell are you on?'* and *'I don't know.'* In terms of the quantity of writing by the two groups of pupils, double the proportion of young people (32%) who said they had experienced domestic abuse compared to the 'non-experiencing' ones (16%) gave two or more responses to this question.

The third question of the structured writing session asked the young people to put themselves in the place of someone their age witnessing domestic abuse and to describe how they might feel. Their responses are illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Pupils' responses when asked how a young person might feel on witnessing domestic abuse

Response category	Number of responses* from 'experiencing†' pupil group		Number of responses* from 'non-experiencing†' pupil group	
	Number (n=81)	Percentage	Number (n=170)	Percentage
Frightened	23	21	40	23
Sad	16	15	24	14
Lonely/isolated	11	10	0	0
Suicidal	10	9	0	0
Angry	9	8	70	40
Worthless	8	7	0	0
Depressed	6	6	4	2
Sick	5	5	12	7
Like they're going mad	4	4	0	0
Like hiding it	4	4	0	0
Worried	3	3	2	1
Responsible	3	3	2	1
Horrible/terrible	3	3	15	9
Helpless	0	0	4	2
Other	4	4	2	1
Total number of responses*	**109**	**100**	**175**	**100**

* Numbers are expressed as a percentage of the total number of responses, not the percentage of pupils who gave each response (as many pupils cited more than one reason)

† These categories are as detailed in Table 1

Fear, sadness, and loneliness were the most frequently cited words the 'experiencing' pupils wrote for how a young person in this situation might feel. It is of some concern that 10 of this group cited suicidal feelings or that life would be *'not worth living.'* This was one of the categories not used at all by the 'non-experiencing' pupils and others not used included feeling *'worthless,'* like they were *'going mad'* and the desire to keep the abuse hidden, e.g. *'trying to pretend nothing's wrong.'* The most common emotion attributed by the 'non-experiencing' pupils was one of anger, although there was also an appreciation that domestic abuse could generate considerable fear. The 'other' responses from the 'experiencing' pupils were *'like running away,' 'as if people were judging me,'*

'like a prisoner,' and *'unsympathetic what happens to him.'* The two responses from 'non-experiencing' pupils in this category were *'like a prisoner'* and *'f****d.'*

When the responses of the two groups to this question are compared, the most obvious difference is the passivity and negativity of response from the young people who said they were experiencing domestic abuse compared to the other group's projected anger against perpetrators or the situation. When combined with the number of responses of depression and suicidal feelings, the 'experiencing' pupils exhibit a very strong internalisation of the effects of domestic abuse on someone their age. And as with the second question asked of them, the 'experiencing' pupils used many more descriptors in response to this third question than the single word they were asked to write. In total, 28 of those who said they were experiencing domestic abuse (35%) wrote more than one word (one used six different descriptors) whereas all but four of the other group wrote a single response.

As indicated at the beginning of the results section, there were three pupils who said they did not know if domestic abuse was happening in their homes. In reviewing their responses to the three questions described above, it is noticeable that these more closely resemble the writings from the 'experiencing' pupils rather than the other group. This was particularly apparent in relation to question three, where two of the three 'don't know' pupils gave responses that were only cited by the 'experiencing' group i.e. *'worthless'* and *'lonely.'* Whilst this does not mean that they can be assumed to have some experience of domestic abuse, it raises the question of why they did not feel able to answer that they were not currently experiencing domestic abuse.

Discussion

This paper reports on an initiative that was implemented in a Scottish secondary school. Although it was not set up as a research study, we have complied as far as possible with published recommendations for how to conduct research with children. Our intention was to test the method during normal class time i.e. as part of the Personal and Social Education (PSE) curriculum. As such, the results should be considered within the context in which they were gathered. Our initial impression is that this method has potential to be built upon with a more rigorous research design.

In addition to testing the methodology, we aimed to disseminate the results for future planning, preventative work, and training. We were primarily interested in the implications for practice and as such acknowledge a number of limitations that should be considered in any attempt to extrapolate from our results. Firstly, we have only utilised one approach to gather the young people's views. While there is ongoing debate in the literature as regards whether conducting research with children is able to truly reflect their experiences and needs or merely 'adults' cognitive agendas' (see e.g. Goodenough and others, 2003), our decision was entirely pragmatic. Like Goodenough and others (2003) we attempted to adopt a child centred perspective and this meant not imposing any adult framework around the freedom the children had to respond. Therefore we gave no direction and did not constrain participants by asking them to consent to more than one method.

The second major limitation is related to the fact that we wished to gather entirely anonymous views, hence we made no attempt to ask the young people for their personal characteristics. This means that we are unable to break down the results by either age or gender.

Thirdly, and related to the first methodological limitation, we cannot be completely confident of our prevalence figure of 32%. However, 30% has been quoted in review articles (e.g. Edelson, 1999) and Faller (2003) warns that there is a greater risk of false negatives in this kind of work than false

positives. Further research is required with other groups of children, obviously not just those who have witnessed domestic violence, in order to confirm or adjust our prevalence rate.

In terms of our results, they appear to have face and content validity in that they resonate with colleagues who have considerable experience of working with children who have witnessed domestic abuse and our results from the 'experiencing' group match many of the findings reported in the literature. However, we feel that this method has allowed us to go beyond what is already known in a number of ways:

1. The ability to compare children's experiences of domestic abuse with those of their 'non-experiencing' peers
2. The identification that some of these children cite suicidal feelings associated with witnessing domestic abuse
3. The demonstration of considerable depth of understanding of the very negative impact of domestic abuse on older/teenage children, a group from whom we have relatively little information.

1. Comparing 'experiencing' and 'non-experiencing' peer group responses

Within the context of the facilitated discussion that preceded the structured writing part of the session, it is not surprising that the pupils displayed considerable knowledge of the reasons why men might be perpetrators of domestic abuse, the most common one involving power and control. However, the 'non-experiencing' pupils were more likely than the others to attribute such behaviour to external causes such as family history of abuse or to them being ill or sick. 'Experiencing' pupils were more likely to cite the abuser's enjoyment or lack of him being punished as his reasons for perpetrating domestic abuse. These responses suggest an appreciation that motivation may stem from a position of perpetrators being well-aware of what they are doing rather than not being able to

control themselves. The language used in relation to the power/control response also suggested greater insight, as only 'experiencing' children used words like *'revenge'* or making the woman *'too scared to leave.'*

In response to the question of what they would say to an abusing man, 'experiencing' pupils were also more likely to highlight the injustice of domestic abuse, pointing out that men have no right to control women. However, more 'experiencing' young people cited the futility of saying anything to abusing men, suggesting an awareness of their own lack of control over the situation.

When asked to put themselves in the situation of someone their age who was experiencing domestic abuse, both groups were able to describe a variety of emotions that young people might feel. Two major differences were apparent between those who ultimately disclosed that they were experiencing domestic abuse and those who said they were not. Many 'non-experiencing' pupils appreciated the fear and sadness that might be felt, but 40% said they thought a young person would be angry. A much smaller proportion (8%) of the experiencing pupils said someone in that situation might be angry, and only 'experiencing' pupils wrote of involving themselves in carrying out any threats. This could be interpreted as a more channelled form of their anger. However, this group were almost three times more likely to cite isolation, depression, and feelings of worthlessness than anger.

2. Suicidal feelings

The second striking difference is that only pupils who said they were experiencing domestic abuse said a young person might feel *'suicidal'* or like their life was *'not worth living.'* This appears to suggest a very strong internalisation of the effects of domestic abuse and, while we cannot be totally confident that they are based on real experience, this difference in their response and its potential impact on their well-being surely merits some form of follow up.

3. Depth of understanding of the negative effects of domestic abuse

'Experiencing' pupils in general wrote more descriptors than the non-experiencing group, even when they were asked to provide only one, as with the question about how a young person might feel. In this case 35% of those who said they had experience of domestic abuse provided more than one descriptor, compared to 2% of the other group. When asked what they would say to a perpetrator, again more of the 'experiencing' pupils (32% compared to 16%) gave two or more responses. Although further work would be needed to test these results, they suggest a group of young people who have a lot to say, possibly because they feel they have to keep a lot to themselves. In addition to the depth of emotions, the 'experiencing' pupils exhibited a greater breadth of response when asked to indicate how a young person might feel. They used many categories of response that the 'non-experiencing' group did not (Table 4). These categories included *'lonely/isolated,' 'suicidal,' 'worthless'* and *'like they're going mad.'* When added to the fact that only pupils in the *'experiencing'* group cited the need to hide anything related to domestic abuse, this creates an impression of a group of young people who have intimate knowledge of its effects, and they were clearly very negative effects.

Conclusion

This work allowed a number of peer groups within a school cohort to discuss and write about their views of domestic abuse. While further work, most notably within a research paradigm, is required around our methodology and findings, we have some valuable results. Not only has this approach enabled some pupils to acknowledge (albeit anonymously) that they are experiencing domestic abuse currently, but we have comparable data from their peers who say they are not experiencing this. If the negative effects among this group are to be believed, then they surely merit some form

of intervention. Apart from recognising the impact there must be on the education of this 'experiencing' group (Hester and others, 2000, Huth-Bocks and others, 2001), perhaps there is scope to build on this methodology in delivering some form of training in schools, as called for by Hester and others (2000). Wide dissemination of these results may help to highlight the crucial support these children need (McGee, 2000), and could be used for further training of teachers and senior staff (Mullender and others, 2002). At the very least it may help to reinforce the message about meeting 'experiencing' children's need to feel safe and to have someone to talk to (Mullender and others, 2002). The approach adopted in this study (and ongoing related work) demonstrates that providing a safe opportunity to express individual views or personal experience can help reduce the feared consequences for young people who tell someone that domestic abuse is happening in their home.

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