

My Perfect Partner: Using Creative Methods to Address Gender Based Violence

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Abstract: Young people aged 16-24 are most at risk of relationship abuse and intimate partner violence, The UK definition of domestic violence includes incidences of abuse between people aged 16 or over, but young people below the age of 16 are also at risk of relationship abuse. Relationship education became compulsory in schools in England and Wales in September 2020. There is increasing recognition of the need for whole school approaches to prevent gender-based violence from happening in the first place, and for equipping schools to teach relationship education and to feel more confident supporting young people affected by gender-based violence (GBV). Drawing on our experiences of delivering relationship education in both mainstream and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) schools in England since 2012, this paper argues creative arts-based methods can be an effective tool in DA prevention and intervention. The paper explores young peoples views of healthy and unhealthy relationships, and ideals of the 'perfect partner', mediated through gender, body image and social media. We present material co-produced with young people in school, including art, drama, poetry and song. We discuss how creative methods are useful as both a research and prevention tool, and the social impact of research derived knowledge on both participants and the wider school community.

Keywords: Relationship Education, Schools, Healthy Relationships, Creative Methods

1. Introduction

Gender based violence (GBV) is a global issue which affects people of all ages. The World Health Organisation reported that 30% of women between the ages of 15 and 19 have experienced GBV in their relationships (The World Health Organization 2021). The UK GBV statistics, indicate women aged 16-24 are most at risk of violence and abuse in relationships, however, GBV can affect anyone, regardless of gender. Education is key to preventing GBV, and school-based interventions can be an important way to raise awareness and prevent and GBV amongst young people. This paper reports on a healthy relationship education project in UK schools, and the creative methods used to engage young people as part of the project.

Relationship and sex education (RSE) is compulsory in all UK primary and secondary schools since September 2020, with an increase in disclosures of sexual abuse in schools making this particularly urgent and relevant issue (Ofsted 2021). The global Covid-19 pandemic delayed its introduction, and the quality of education provided varies across schools. Parents and carers are able to withdraw children from sex education for religious reasons, but not from relationship education. RSE is only statutory until age 16, despite the school leaving age being raised to 18 in the UK in 2015.

The current UK government definitions of domestic violence (DA): *is Any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive or threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality. This can encompass but is not limited to psychological, physical, sexual, financial and emotional abuse* (Gov.uk 2102)

This do not include those under the age of 16, but young people of all ages can experience relationship abuse. In the UK, young people aged 16-24 are at most at risk of relationship violence, making early intervention essential. Recent research shows 25% girls and 18% of boys aged 13-17 years old have experienced physical abuse. 75% girls and 50% boys reported emotional partner abuse (Home Office, 2019). Controlling and jealous behavior is 42% more likely to occur in relationships involving someone under 18 than any other age group. (Home Office, 2019). For young people aged 12-19 with disabilities, reports of violence are more than twice the rates of those without a disability (Rand and Harrell 2009). Online abuse, such as sexting is also a key issue for young people, with girls experiencing sexualized technology abuse at a higher rate than boys, 16% of girls compared with 6% of boys (ONS 2021). Despite these high numbers, only 33% of teenagers involved in a violent relationship talk to someone about it (Barter et al 2009).

We argue embedding relationship education into the curriculum is one way to tackle growing rates of reported GBV, including online abuse, as schools are settings where young people are socialised into gender norms and where significant amounts of IPV occurs (Girlguiding, 2021; Ofsted, 2021).

2. Young People and Relationships

Developing healthy romantic relationships is central to young people's self-understanding and identity formation, influencing self-esteem and beliefs about attractiveness and self-worth, and as a 'training ground' for adult intimacy, influencing their view of relationships in adulthood (Erikson, 1968, Shulman, & Connolly, 2013,). However, unhealthy relationships can have long-term negative effects, and violence and abuse in young people's relationships is common, as discussed above. Schools are environments where young people are socialised into gender norms and adolescence is 'a crucial time when young women and men are developing their sexual identities' (Mahony & Shaugnessy, 2007; p.1), therefore age and ability appropriate RSE is crucial to enable young people to navigate, and learn from, their early romantic relationships.

Research shows over 80% of those aged 14 years and older in the US were, or had been, in a romantic relationship (Moore, 2016). Having healthy romantic relationships is crucial for adolescents' well-being (Gomez-Lopez et al 2019). Young people actively seek information on relationships and advice on dating experiences to help them navigate and guide their anticipations and beliefs, and social media, television, as well as peers, family and teachers/sex educators are all sources of information on romantic partners (Porter & Standing, 2018, 2020). On social media, TikTokers and Instagrammers widely share stories of relationships and Gen Z's are re-defining what romantic and sexual relationships look like, with a rise in 'situationships' and hook up culture (Wade, 2021). Online dating has also changed relationships, especially since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Young people's views on relationships are also mediated by gender, sexuality, ethnicity, cultural expectations, religion and other intersecting factors. For example, it has long been argued that men value physical attractiveness in potential mates more than women do, while women value earning capacity more so than men. However, there are some commonalities; a study on dating preferences of 2,700 international students in Singapore, Malaysia, Hong Kong, the UK, Norway and Australia found kindness, physical attractiveness and good financial prospects the top three traits young people found desirable (Thomas et al 2020). In the relationship project we explored young people's ideas of their 'perfect partner' using creative methods. The Crime Survey for England and Wales (ONS 2022) reported a 7.7% rise in reported DA related crimes, estimating 5% of adults aged 16 and over experienced DA in the year ending March 2022. Due to this it is highly appropriate that this is addressed within the school curriculum, and pupils given the tools to recognise and prevent coercive and abusive relationships. However, this is a sensitive subject, so the methods incorporated into any such research require a person-centred approach. Our research project did exactly that, aiming to empower the pupils via project participation in order to maximise their learning.

3. About the Project

Challenging societal attitudes towards DA and promoting healthy relationships via a school-based relationship education programme was crucial to our research. A cutting-edge approach using creative arts-based methods was used to enable pupils to understand and express their views on gender and relationship abuse.

Between 2012-2019 we delivered a healthy relationship project, in 23 state schools in Merseyside, UK, including four Special Educational Needs and Disability schools (SEND). We delivered the project in eight

schools more than once, with 34 project deliveries in total.

Table 1: Schools type and delivery

School	Gender	Pupil age	Type of School	Times visited
A	girls	14-15	Mainstream State	1
B	mixed	14-15	Mainstream State	1
C	girls	14-15	Catholic	1
D	mixed	14-15	SEND	1
E	mixed	14-15	Mainstream State	1
F	boys	14-15	Mainstream State	1
G	mixed	13-15	Mainstream State	3
H	girls	14-15	Catholic	1
I	mixed	14-15	Mainstream State	2

School	Gender	Pupil age	Type of School	Times visited
J	mixed	14-15	Catholic	1
K	mixed	13-15	Catholic	2
L	girls	14-15	Catholic	1
M	boys	14-15	Church of England	1
N	mixed	14-15	Mainstream State	1
O	girls	13-15	Mainstream State	3
P	boys	14-15	Catholic	1
Q	mixed	14-15	Mainstream State	1
R	mixed	14-15	Jewish	2
S	mixed	14-15	Mainstream State	1
T	mixed	13-19	Catholic, SEND	2
U	mixed	15-16	Mainstream State	2
V	mixed	13-15	Catholic	2
W	mixed	13-15	SEND	1
X	mixed	13-16	SEND	1

Workshops were delivered to 912 pupils and shared with an audience of 3,293 to their peers through assemblies and other events. Additionally, we trained 559 school staff in healthy relationships education. Workshops were delivered to approximately 30 pupils aged 13-19 in each school, either in a two-day block, or an hour a week over a ten-week period. Workshops used creative arts-based methods and focused on how to identify early warning signs in unhealthy relationships. The project was funded by Children in Need, Liverpool John Moores University and Tender, Acting to End Abuse.

Pupils learnt about healthy relationships and DA within an age, ability, and culturally- appropriate context. Workshop content was designed for pupils' needs and schools' requests. The project focused on peer-to-peer relationships and took a gendered approach, reflecting the priorities of the initial project funder, Tender.

4. Creative Methods

Creative methodologies, using drama and role-play, art, song and poetry, enabled the pupils to gain the confidence to express themselves in front of their peers. There is evidence that using creative approaches, such as arts or drama, are effective as part of DA intervention/prevention projects (Hester and Lilley, 2014; Sander-McDonagh et al., 2016, Stanley et al. 2015), and this was evident in the project. Porter, as an artist, academic, and the lead researcher used her skills to engage the participants using a variety of arts-based methods to understand their views on healthy and unhealthy relationships. Arts based research is collaborative and inclusive, and creative methodologies enabled participants to engage without the pressure of feeling part of a research project, with art and drama-based workshops enabling pupils to gain the confidence to express themselves. Drama and role-play were essential to success of the project, with pupils re-enacting and creating scenes to help them to understand how abuse is not always physical, but can also be emotional, psychological, financial, sexual and coercive. Creative methods, such as poetry, spoken word, and song helped to both share lived experiences, and for pupils to understand the complexity of DA.

A creative approach to engage with the pupils was fostered by the lead researcher, finding ways to navigate the pupils' needs and requirements was essential. Material for pupils to use was always at hand for pupils to use to express their feelings, stories and or simply have their voices heard. Pupils often created posters to demonstrate their participation and understandings. Often these posters (figure 1) were displayed in schools to disseminate information.

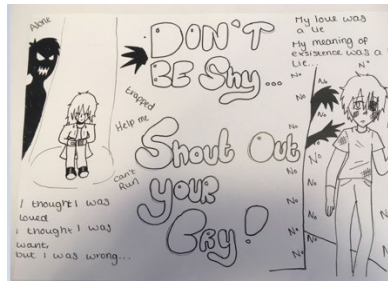


Figure 1 Poster: female, 15, School J, 2017, image ©Porter

Workshop material and research methods were developed and tailored to each school to enable participation for all. In the SEND schools, and schools with SEND requirements, resources were co-designed with pupils to suit their specific needs, including using scribes, readers and photo books, as well as audio visual aids. Co-design research is an increasingly popular approach, that includes relevant stakeholders, pupils and teachers and is especially suitable to meet diverse needs, as research outcomes tailored to all. For example, in a school for pupils with sensory needs the research team worked closely with pupils to co-design scripts based on healthy and unhealthy relationship scenarios. These scripts were designed by, and for, pupils with a visual impairment. These scripts were offered for use by pupils in three formats: Braille, large print, and scribe (figure 2). This enabled all pupils to gain ownership of their learning and to fully engage with the research and workshop resources.



Figure 2: Braille codesigned script, school T, 2019. image ©Porter

In other schools with SEND needs, photo (pod) books were co-developed with school staff to enable those pupils who are nonverbal. The books were used to create a visual narrative for pupils by either pointing with their finger and or using their eyes to navigate the pictures. By creating the pod books (figure 3) non-verbal pupils were given a voice to share their story and participate in the project.



Figure 3: pod book, School X, 2019. image ©Porter

Ethical approval was given by the university ethics and research committee and informed consent from all participants, schools and partners had been obtained by the research team prior to the delivery of the project. In schools' ethics are often negotiated on a moment-to-moment basis (Scherer 2016). Because of the fluid and changing nature of creative data collection, we found ourselves in a constant process of negotiation over ethics, going back to participants and gatekeepers (pupils, schools, and parents) to gain permission to use data and creative material in different formats.

One of the key methods to engage young people was the perfect partner activity.

Towards the end of the project, after the pupils had learnt about relationship abuse and discussed healthy relationships, we revisited this activity with the same group of pupils, however this time we invited the pupils to draw their perfect partner in ten years' time. Figures 7 and 8 show the perfect partner drawn by for the same group of pupils showing their ideal partner now, and in ten years' time.

The 'perfect partner' in ten years' time was considerably different to the original drawing, reflecting the pupils' growing understandings of healthy relationships. The person drawn tended now to be a person with less physical attributes but someone who offered more emotional and long-term support, for example 'someone who listens to me', 'someone who respect me' and 'a kind person' (figure 8). Over the six years of delivery in schools it was noted that this activity had the most impact on changing attitudes of the pupils towards healthy and unhealthy relationships.

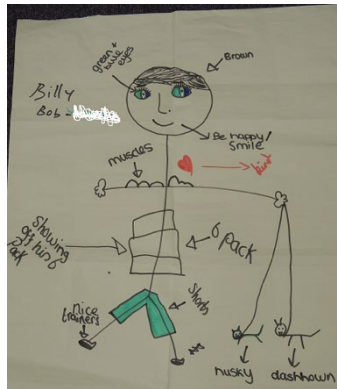


Figure 7: Perfect partner now, School O, age 13/14, 2019, image ©Porter

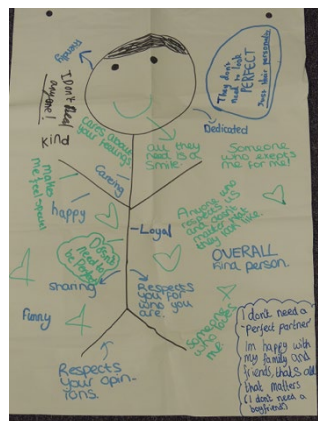


Figure 8: Perfect partner 10 years' time, School O, age 13/14, 2019, image ©Porter

The before and after perfect partner drawings (figures 7 and 8) give an insight into how pupils attitudes had healthy and unhealthy relationship the pupils had changed through the project. From ideals of a 'sexy body' in perfect partner workshop one to 'I don't need a perfect partner, I'm happy with my family and friends and that's all that matters (I don't need a boyfriend)' (figure 8) demonstrates the power of a person-centred creative methodological approach to relationship education.

This method of gathering qualitative data in the form of drawing enabled extremely sensitive subject matter to be expressed in a creative way, one pupil commented 'this workshop allows us to express ourselves and speak freely' (female, age 14). The perfect partner activity was an excellent method for pupils to address relationship abuse and how their choices now could affect their relationships in the future. As one pupil said: 'it helped us focus more on the person and personality traits rather than just appearance' (Female, 14).

6. Findings

Arts based research gave pupils the opportunity to engage with a sensitive subject matter whilst engaging in a fun and inclusive way. The project emphasised the value of implementing creative and art-based approaches to improve the effectiveness of relationship education and prevent relationship abuse.

The project was evaluated by Middlesex University (Sanders et al 2016), using mixed methods, questionnaires, interviews and focus group. Pupils completed pre delivery questionnaires (n= 536) and post-delivery questionnaires (n=457) to understand their experience and changing attitudes and behaviours. The discrepancies between the number of pupils completing the pre- and post-delivery questionnaire was a result of pupil absence, and pupils not completing the questionnaire. Pupils were keen to engage with the delivery of the project but often refused to participate in data collection (Porter & Standing, 2024). Similarly, audience questionnaire figures were lower than anticipated as pupils often refused to complete the questionnaire (n=2218). Questionnaires for school staff were also administered to evaluate the INSET training (n=309). In addition two focus groups (n=16) were conducted with pupils in two schools, and semi structured interviews with school staff (n=4).

Table 2: Pupils Questionnaires after the project: (2014)

Liverpool John Moores University Healthy Relationship project (2014)	Pupils
Understand what a healthy relationship is	77%
Saw a positive change in the attitudes or behaviour of their peers at school around the issues of violence and abuse.	75%
Knew where to seek help and support for abuse in a relationship.	75%
Violence and abuse in relationships affects a large number of people	64%
1 in 4 women in UK will experience abuse in her lifetime	67%

(Sanders et al 2016)

At the end of the project, pupils who took part in the workshops had a better understanding of what healthy and unhealthy relationships were (Table 2). They were able recognise the early warning signs of abuse in relationships and had the knowledge to make positive choices about relationships (Table 2). Pupils who engaged in the workshops showed the most understanding of healthy relationships and gained in confidence and skills. However, pupils and teachers also noted a positive change in behaviour and attitudes from the wider peer group.

Table 3: Audience Questionnaire post project

Liverpool John Moores University Healthy Relationship project (2014)	Audience
Understand what a healthy relationship is	70%
Knew where to seek help and support for abuse in a relationship.	65%
Violence and abuse in relationships affects a large number of people	58 %
1 in 4 women in UK will experience abuse in her lifetime	75%
Likely victims women	67%

(Sanders et al 2016)

Understanding and awareness from the audiences who watched the performances and assemblies were slightly lower (Table 3), but still showed increased awareness of the scale of DA and its gendered nature.

Pupils gained valuable knowledge about DA through the project, demonstrating school based creative interventions have a role to play in raising awareness about relationship abuse. The main themes of both qualitative and quantitative findings were that pupils understood what constitutes as abuse in relationships, the relevant statistics, where to seek help and advice, and had grown in confidence. Qualitative findings found the young people felt more confident talking to their family and friends about relationships and they knew where to go for support.

- *'it is more serious than I expected'* (Male, 14).
- *'it isn't ok to be violent [I've learnt] how to be confident in my relationships'* (Female, 14).
- *'It is NOT their fault; the aim of the other partner is to make them feel like it is. They never want to be abused'* (Female, 14).
- *'I've learnt who to go to, how to help other people, what to say and do and look out for early warning signs. I've learnt how to say confidently 'I just don't want to be with you anymore'* (Female, 14).

- 'I've learned about my own rights as a person'. (Female, 16).

Table 4: Findings from post project staff questionnaire:

Noticed positive change in the attitudes or behaviour of students.	84%
Staff had better understanding of what a healthy and unhealthy relationship is.	74%
Staff felt more confident in dealing with sexual bullying/abuse.	62%
Domestic abuse awareness should be compulsory on the school curriculum.	97%
Domestic abuse awareness should be taught on teacher training courses.	97%

(Edge Hill report 2015, unpublished)

Responses from teachers and other school staff (Table 4) demonstrated that there had been a positive change in pupils' behaviour and attitudes as a result of the project. Both staff and pupils had a better understanding of what relationship abuse was, and using creative methods meant pupils were more engaged. This is reflected in the qualitative findings:

'So many pupils didn't realise that abusive relationships can be non-violent, many seemed to think controlling behaviour was the norm. I think a real eye opener to many of them was when you reflected on how abusers can use guilt and insecurity to mask their behaviour - as a teacher I hear this all the time 'he checks my social media because he is worried about other lads', 'he doesn't want me going out looking too good in case I leave him'. If your project can help challenge any of this, then it has been more than worthwhile. Several of the girls you worked with have been flagged as disengaged, however they were all fully engaged'. (Senior teacher, School O, 2017)

School staff also had increased knowledge and confidence to teach about relationships and highlighted the need for training on DA awareness to be a core part of both the school the teacher training curriculum (Table 4). One teacher commented: *'I found the staff training an eye opener, it really made me think about the importance of pupils being taught what is and isn't a healthy relationship. (Head of art, school M, 2015)*

There is increasing recognition of the need for whole school approaches to prevent GBV from happening in the first place, and for equipping school staff to feel more confident supporting young people affected by GBV. School staff are well placed to embed relationship education but require support and professional training from those with specialist knowledge in DA. Staff needed to be prepared to support the pupils leaning in an inclusive way. In school, staff training was vital to promote a whole school approach and to enable staff to consider the lived experiences of pupils outside of school. It also prepared staff for the project, using the correct vocabulary enabled the conversations throughout the school about GBV. Findings show this had an impact throughout the entire school and beyond:

'I understand that the project not only empowers pupils but that it also has wider impacts across the school as the pupils are advocates who share their knowledge to their peers. The health and wellbeing of pupils has an integral relationship with their learning. Healthier pupils make for happy well-balanced members of society. The project provides signposting from health perspectives as well as empowering pupils to make healthier lifestyle choices'. (Local Authority School Improvement Officer, Liverpool (Health and Wellbeing) 2015)

Findings contribute to existing literature by highlighting the importance of age and ability appropriate relationship education across the curriculum.

7. Conclusion

The research project enabled participants to challenge the normalisation of violence and abuse in relationships that is often portrayed in popular culture and social media. It enabled them to question their ideas about what healthy and unhealthy relationships are.

GBV is a serious global problem, and definitions of GBV are shifting to be more inclusive, whilst still rooted in gender relations, patriarchy, and power. Tender, the initial project funders in 2012, took an explicitly gendered approach, based on an understanding of how gender relations and women's inequality shape women's and children's experiences of intimate partner violence. Whilst useful, this doesn't acknowledge the multiple and intersecting ways sexuality, gender, ability, race, religion and other factors, impact on the way violence is experienced by diverse groups (Crenshaw, 1991) and the research project and delivery evolved to reflect this.

The strengths of the project were in delivering an inclusive, whole school approach to relationship education equipping pupils with knowledge about DA, whilst recognising the intersectional impacts of GBV. It also enabled school staff to be informed about DA via an in-school training session delivered by the research team. The research team were able to adapt the workshop content and methods in creative ways, in order to engage all pupils in activities, including those who did not initially want to participate, and to develop age and ability appropriate methods with pupils in SEND schools. Feedback indicated that the creative art-based methods used were an effective tool to engage young people in research about GBV, the young people we worked with were engaged and active learners.

The limitations of the project included funding, as funding ended in 2019. The covid 19 pandemic also meant the project was unable to be delivered. The project was mainly delivered to pupils aged 14-15, however RSE needs to be delivered to all pupils, at all ages, in an appropriate way. Although we delivered training to school staff, relationship education needs to be embedded within the school and community on a long-term basis, working with all genders and generations. There is a need for longitudinal research, to revisit schools to see the longer-term impact, and better systems are required globally to support those who do speak out.

The research demonstrated school-based interventions are successful in teaching pupils about healthy and unhealthy relationships and can enable them to make informed decisions about relationships going forward. Embedding relationship education into the curriculum is one way to tackle growing rates of reported GBV, including online abuse, as schools are settings where young people are socialised into gender norms, and where significant amounts of GBV occurs (Girlguiding, 2021; Ofsted, 2021). The perfect partner activity enabled young people to explore and express their understandings of relationships in a creative way, and to begin to make informed choices about current and future romantic and sexual relationships. We conclude therefore that creative methods, in particular visual art, is an excellent tool to enable participants to feel confident to engage with research projects on sensitive subjects.

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