

## 'This is a Healthy Relationship' school pupils as researchers and equals

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### Abstract

This chapter draws on the author's experience of working with mainstream and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) pupils on a research project about domestic abuse and healthy relationships. The Government definition of domestic violence and abuse was extended in 2012 to include young people aged 16 and 17. This change increased awareness that young people in this age group experience domestic violence and abuse. Young people aged 12 to 19 with a disability experience violence at nearly twice the rate as those without (Harrell and Rand 2008). The chapter considers how the methodologies used by the researcher to listen to, and respect the voice of the pupil, to ensure their participation became integral to the research, and enable creation of a co-designed resource on relationship education. It reflects on these experiences and explores how creative research methods can be used in a variety of situations and adapted to diverse participants, including those with special educational needs and disabilities in particular pupils with visually and sensory impairments. The context for this chapter is set by the increasing recognition of the need for whole school approaches to prevent gender-based violence from happening in the first place. The chapter aims to encourage researchers to explore the approaches and methodologies outlined to engage directly with young people in the school environment with SEND requirements. It explores critical issues around the development of better understandings to make sure the ethics process enables such engagement.

### KEYWORDS:

1. domestic abuse
2. relationship education
3. creative methodologies
4. special educational needs
5. gender based violence
6. research
7. arts based research
8. SEND

### Introduction

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*FIG 1 HERE*  
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Janette Porter, the Lead Researcher, delivering Healthy Relationship workshop in a SEND secondary school, Greater Merseyside, UK, 2014  
Photograph by a school staff member

This chapter reflects on an arts and drama relationship education research project that was delivered in secondary schools across Greater Merseyside UK between 2012-2020 by the author, an academic/artist from Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU). The project was funded by LJMU, Children in Need and Tender Acting Against Abuse. The chapter aims to offer valuable insight into how the use of creative methodologies is integral to teaching about gender-based violence (GBV), domestic abuse (DA) and healthy relationships to all pupils. The specific focus of the chapter is the work with pupils with special education needs and disabilities (SEND) this focus was selected as often engaging with SEND pupils can be perceived as challenging by researchers and problematic within the standard ethical process. The chapter will however also reflect on some of the workshops that were delivered to pupils in mainstream schools too. The research project explored how to increase confidence and awareness of creative methodologies amongst researchers working within a strong and effective ethical process. During the eight years of the project a total of 912 pupils participated in relationship education workshops over a period of 10 hours each, either on two days or delivered weekly over a period of 10 weeks. Additionally, a total of 3,293 pupils watched an assembly delivered by the participant pupils on their learning about relationship education. In total over the eight years, the project was delivered in 24 state schools four were SEND, the project was delivered in six of the schools more than once with a total of 34 relationship education deliveries in total. Relationship education training was delivered to 559 school staff across the schools to offer a whole school approach to the project and to support pupils' learning.

A mixed methods approach was adopted to maximise the impact for as many pupils as possible within the scope of the project. Arts based methods (ABM) was an instrumental tool to deliver the workshops: using the arts, drawing, drama, poetry, singing, and role play all enabled the pupils to learn in a creative way. These methods were piloted in the early stages of the project and adapted to suit not only the needs of the participating schools but also the specific pupils within them, including pupils with SEND requirements. Staff training was incorporated to enable pupils to have in school support during and beyond the life of the project. The relationship education project was delivered in four SEND schools to pupils with a range of physical, visual and sensory impairments and learning disabilities and in mainstream 25 schools some of whom offered support for SEND requirements.

The focus of this chapter is on work delivered to pupils in the four SEND schools with a particular emphasis on work with a school for pupils with sensory impairment and other needs. The approaches adopted for the project enabled effective pupil participation so that the young people's voices were fundamental to the core design of workshop content. This chapter will also share how the author incorporated creative methodologies as the foundation for delivery and data collection is on what is essentially a violence prevention project. The aim is to encourage fellow researchers to recognise the value and confidently explore the possibilities of these approaches to research work with young people in schools and especially pupils with SEND requirements. It also suggests ways to navigate formal university ethics processes to maximise the opportunities for learning for pupils and researchers alike. Finally, this chapter aims to dispel myths not only about the difficulties and challenges of working with young people in schools and pupils with SEND requirements but also about the validity of offering creative methods as a tool for data collection.

Firstly, let's look at the need for relationship education amongst young people.

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Artwork by mixed gender pupils, age 14, Greater Merseyside, UK secondary SEND school 2013. Photograph by Janette Porter

The images (Figs 1 – 9) in this chapter were drawn by the pupils Porter worked with at SEND schools during the life of the project, they offer the reader insight into the perspectives of young people's opinions of relationships and how the project was made accessible for all.

### **Context for the relationship education project**

It is estimated that 1 in 3 (30%) of women worldwide have been subjected to either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence in their lifetime. Globally as many as 38% of all murders of women are committed by intimate partners (WHO 2024). WHO also evidenced higher rates of intimate partner and sexual violence in women with disabilities (WHO 2024). The World Health Organisation (WHO) developed a Global Plan of Action aimed to strengthen the role of the multisectoral health systems to address interpersonal violence, in particular against women and girls, and against children (WHO 2016).

In 2012 the UK definition of Domestic Abuse (DA) was amended to include young people aged 16 and 17. DA is defined as: '*any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, 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*' (Home Office 2013). This amendment enables young people of this age to be registered as having been involved in domestic abuse incidents. Additionally, the offence of 'controlling or coercive behaviour' was introduced under the Serious Crime Act 2015 (Bishop and Bettison, 2017). The 2021 Domestic Abuse Act <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17/contents>, 2021 brought changes to the criminal offences of DA crimes. Children are now recognised as potential victims or perpetrators of abuse but only where those children are aged 16 or over.

Young people aged 16-24 are most at risk of relationship abuse and intimate partner violence (IPV) (The Children's Society 2020). However young people of all ages can experience relationship abuse and sexual violence. A quarter of girls aged 13 to 17 reported they had experienced physical violence from a boyfriend and a third had been pressured into unwanted sexual acts. 75% of girls and 50 % of boys report they have experienced some form of emotional abuse in relationships (Barter 2014). In the year ending March 2019, disabled women were more than twice as likely to have experienced domestic abuse (17.3%) than non-disabled women (7.0%) (ONS 2019). These statistics only reflect on those crimes reported to the authorities: it is anticipated that the actual statistics are much higher. It has been shown that only 33% of teenagers involved in a violent relationship talk to someone about it suggesting an urgent need for early and active intervention (Barter et al 2009). Since 2019 relationship and sex education (RSE) has been made compulsory in all UK primary and secondary schools (GOV.UK, 2019). Sexting is an issue for young people: 16% of girls experience sexualised technology abuse compared to 6% of boys. (ONS 2021). Sexting is the sending or posting online of nude or semi-nude images, videos, or live streams by young people under the age of 18. Abuse also includes Revenge Porn: the sharing of private, sexual materials, either photos or videos, of another person without their consent and with the purpose of causing embarrassment or distress; and /or upskirting someone by taking a picture under another person's clothing without their knowledge, with the intention of viewing their genitals or buttocks (GOV.UK, 2024). The global and national context suggests the need for relationship education is ever present in schools and that teaching about unhealthy and healthy relationships is integral to pupils' understanding about relationship abuse and sexual violence.

### **Authors' Experience**

*This is a healthy relationship*

*It might be a bore*

*You might be having a chewy or looking at the floor*

*Right now you need to look at me you need to listen you need to think*

*This is what would happen in the early days off an unhealthy relationship*

*Your partner would probably tell you what to do*

*He might point out the bad things about you*

*He might threaten or even hit you*

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*So listen now and look at this play coz ye never know when it's going to be too late*

*This is all for you so sit up straight and show some respect like ye would to ye mate*

This is a healthy relationship poem written by a female age 14, Greater Merseyside, UK secondary school 2017

The memory of the 14-year-old female pupil reading the poem she had just written out loud to her peers *this is a healthy relationship* has stayed with the author. The confidence she had reading her poem was mighty, she commanded her peers in the classroom with the powerful presence of a great writer. She signed the poem *a scouser* and for you reading the poem that means she was proud to be from Liverpool, UK the city of her birth. If you can try reading this poem again with a Liverpool, scouse, accent you may just experience the power of a 14-year-old scouse woman.

Delivering a relationship education project to secondary school pupils - all 912 of them - might sound quite an arduous task. However, the experience was quite the opposite. The wealth of knowledge these young people shared with the research team was quite extraordinary. The research team were constantly surprised by the young people as active participants in the research, growing with confidence throughout the project. The young people offered insights into their lives and had an insatiable thirst for knowledge and yearning to learn. The research team consisted of the author Janette Porter an academic/artist, and undergraduate students from LJMU and was managed by Professor Kay Standing LJMU, an intersectional feminist researcher whose interests lie in gender, education and GBV. The students varied year by year whilst the author Porter and standing remained the team throughout until the Covid Pandemic and subsequent lockdowns abruptly ended delivery of the project in early 2020.

The relationship education project was initially funded by Tender Acting Against Abuse <https://tender.org.uk/>. The funder offered a gendered approach to the relationship education project where pupils learnt about healthy relationships and DA within an age, ability, and culturally appropriate context. The project was from the onset offered as a drama intervention project. Given the authors background as an artist she was easily able to adapt ABR to incorporate the wider arts to deliver the workshop content. Using creative methodologies, drawing, poetry and singing into the workshops it was intended that the project be as inclusive as possible to all the pupils, enabling them to access the materials as an effective and engaging way for the pupils to learn about healthy and unhealthy relationships.

*This is a healthy relationship* poem is a prime example of this approach, pupils were invited to use writing poetry or rap in their work as it was considered this could be an effective way to share their learning about the relationship education project with their peers. Relationship poems, of which many were written, would be read by each author to between 50-220 peers at an assembly at the end of the 10 hours of workshops. The language used in *This is a healthy relationship* poem is so strong and poignant that it was often the poem chosen to read to pupils to introduce the project in each school. The importance of listening to and incorporating the voice of the young person not only in the design as discussed further in this chapter but also into the material used to deliver the project was most relevant for pupils in SEND schools, here their opinion has the greatest impact.

Performative Social Science or Arts-Based Research (ABR) is the use of the arts in discovery and communication of scholarship. *Described as any social research or human inquiry that adapts the tenets of the creative arts as a part of the methodology. So, the arts may be used during data collection, analysis, interpretation and/or dissemination* (Jones & Leavy, 2014). The ABR used in this project allowed pupils to take the lead on being creators of their data. If a pupil required a scribe to draw or write their ideas or feelings a scribe was made available to them. If a pupil who was nonverbal required an individual pod book (a photo book) to suit their needs a pod book was developed, one pupil used a voice activated keyboard to communicate with the research team to engage in the discussions during the workshops. There was a swathe of creative outputs created by the pupils as a direct response to the opportunities to use personal creativity that this project offered.

Due to the nature of the creative methods used the research team responded to the pupils needs enabling them as much ownership of the project as the university ethics application would allow. The authors experience with this project may encourage others to navigate their university's ethics process to enable the voice of the young person to be heard in research and to better develop their own skills as action-based researchers. This will be discussed further in the ethical approval section of this chapter.

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FIG 3 HERE

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Pupil, aged 14, drawing healthy relationships, Greater Merseyside, UK secondary SEND school 2014. Photograph by Janette Porter

#### SEND provision

The relationship education project aimed to serve pupils to understand their control of their lives: to live responsibly, to live with independence, and to develop socially just decision-making skills. (Papa 2020) However, this project was developed by the initial funder as a project for mainstream schools. The intention was to enable all school pupils to access the project to enable them all to make informed life choices. The research project was then to include both mainstream pupils and SEND pupils. The content of teaching materials needed to suit the needs of the schools and the range of their pupils. Adaptation of the teaching material for SEND pupils took time negotiating between the staff in schools as to what teaching material was to be used and how best to deliver it. In SEND school particularly the creative methods, such as poetry, spoken word, and song helped to both share lived experiences, and for pupils to understand the complexity of DA (Porter & Standing 2024).

The authors experience of delivering the research project about DA and healthy relationships to pupils varied from school to school and pupil to pupil. I focus here on sharing my experience working with SEND schools. The project was delivered in four SEND schools and delivered twice in one of those; all schools were mixed sex schools; three were state schools; and one was a Catholic school. The age range of the pupils who participated in the project in SEND schools was 13-19. I worked with a total of 111 pupils and trained 106 school staff plus 1 parent who

requested to attend the staff relationship education training. The project was also delivered to SEND pupils in mainstream schools with SEND provision. However, that data cannot be isolated from the overall findings for review in this chapter.

It was important that prior to delivering the healthy relationship research project to visit each SEND school to meet the pupils I, this was for observation purposes only being mindful of staff to pupil and pupil to pupil interaction. These visits included noting how school resources were being used by the pupils and how the staff delivered them (Porter & Standing 2020). This gave the team insight into how the resources would be adapted to suit the needs of all the pupils. For example, the use of braille, a scribe, reader, font size and colour and pod books were incorporated into how my resources would be used in schools. The resources used in each of the SEND schools were to enable each pupil to fully engage in the research project and in some cases how staff with SEND provision could access the staff training that was offered. The resources consisted of scripts on relationships, statistics on and information about early warning signs in unhealthy relationships and GOV.UK guidelines on and information about DA.

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**FIG 4 HERE**

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Pupil aged 14, reading workshop material in braille, Greater Merseyside, UK secondary SEND school 2019. Photograph by Janette Porter

**Ethical approval**

Ethical approval for the project was initially sourced by Middlesex University, UK but was amended for delivery in the school for visual impairment and other needs due to new funding requirements. The funder in this school was Children in Need. As a member of her University Research Ethics Committee, the author was aware of the need to renegotiate with staff, as the gatekeepers at each school regarding the artistic data that pupils produced that also sat within the boundaries of the research projects ethics application. Pupils were invited to keep their artwork or offer it to the project to assist other pupils' learning and contribute to the data gathered. The original ETHICS application was amended and sought approval to deliver to pupils with an upper age limit of 19 as previously the upper age limit was 16. It was vital to the research project that all pupils in this school were invited to participate in the project. The head teacher provided consent in loco parentis for their pupils, however the research team were mindful of explaining the project to the school staff in their staff training session. The intention was for each staff member to consider all their pupils and how each pupil would respond to the workshops and the material provided. Given the sensitivity of conversations regarding DA and the statistics around DA and disability staff were invited to consider their pupils ability to not only participate but their emotional maturity to understand the project and its content. Staff made a decision for one pupil not to attend the workshops, but that pupil was invited to a sharing about the project by their peers. All pupils selected by the gate keeper to participate had the opportunity to 'uninvite' themselves from the research. There was a point early in delivery where some staff were concerned that pupils were not able to fully understand the concept of relationships. However, pupils proved them wrong: *When you look at subject material, you're thinking oh no they are too young for that, but with having (the project) it has helped us to see what we can and can't talk about with them* (SEND school staff 2019). Project gatekeepers need to be encouraged to recognise the full ability of their pupils; appreciate the value and impact of research done with the active engagement of young people; and the benefit to pupils of enabling them to be active agents of change.

Content for discussion during workshops included, but was not limited to, societal reactions to people deemed 'different' whether with disabilities, as transgender people, or in homosexual relationships and romantic relationships as a disabled person, and the stigmatisation of disabilities within society, mixed relationships and gender. The project revealed a lack of knowledge by the pupils on these subjects. This could be aligned to the lack of clear and agreed guidelines about the scope of relationship education and how to teach it. The invisibility of relationship education within the curriculum caused confusion and obscured boundaries. Staff at school would often guide the research team to issues that their pupils were having about relationships. These issues would be researched by the team and workshops developed to accommodate not only the needs of the school staff but that of the needs of the pupils. All material developed was age and ability appropriate given the wide age range of pupils that participated in the project between ages 13-19. One SEND school member of staff commented on having more confidence to deliver relationship education after he received the relationship education training. Prior to the training he had felt uncomfortable talking about sensitive subjects and appreciated the opportunity to observe how the relationship education project was delivered to his pupils. This sentiment was widely reported in both mainstream and SEND schools.

Pupils were respectful of each other during the workshops and gave each other time to listen and reflect on their learning. This time was invaluable to consolidate new knowledge and reflect on past experiences. Pupils left the workshops having learnt something new and gained in confidence. Signposting to local agencies for support was offered to all pupils as well as the school safeguarding officer being available to the pupils during and after the life of the project. This approach was not only a requirement from the university ethics committee but that of the funders too. In some schools we worked in the school had also arranged for local support services to follow up with assembly delivery to support their pupils. For example, these included the Young Persons Advisory Service (YPAS), Gay Youth are Out (GYRO) and Women's Health & Information Support Centre (WHISK).

The opinion and voice of the young people in the design of the project not only impacted theirs and their peers' connection to the material in the workshops but also impacted how school staff include pupils into delivering ongoing relationship education. The adaptation of materials used in the project by the research team, and through the input of the pupils to project design, did not adversely affect the research protocols. The use of these creative methodologies resulted in the capture of a rich layer of data which would not otherwise have been accessed. The co-development of scripts for pupils with visual impairment was particularly significant not only in the designing of the scripts but for the scripts being used as a research tool in itself.

**Co-designing material with SEND pupils**

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Pupil aged 14, reading workshop material in large print, Greater Merseyside UK secondary SEND school 2019. Photograph by Janette Porter

The importance of listening to the voice of the young person was fundamental throughout the relationship education project in terms of conception, design and delivery. The project aimed to increase knowledge about unhealthy relationships and DA amongst participants, so the research team needed to understand what the pupils knew already and consider the young person's position before engaging in the delivery of the project. Enabling pupils to speak openly about relationships gave the pupils a sense of respect and acknowledgment that their experiences and opinions mattered. The research team offered a non-judgemental position and provided an open discussion that the young people led at the beginning of the project to share their views and perceptions on relationships as the starting point for the project. It was the intention that after these discussions the research team would encourage pupils to reconsider and reflect upon their preconceived ideas about relationships. However, in framing this kind of research project one must consider and take account of the position and perspectives of the researchers when working with participants whose life experiences and assumptions may differ significantly. In this project the research team consisted of able-bodied adults working with disabled and non-disabled young people in SEND and mainstream schools. Our subjectivity must be considered when the research team aim to interpret the participants, the young people's, voices and opinions on intimate partner relationships. Using the mixed methods adopted in the project to enable young people to participate in essentially what is a violence prevention project, also meant the research team were better able to navigate the sensitivities around the subject of abuse and violence in teenage relationships.

Lifting barriers of disability was key to the research as was broadening the age range from the original age 14-16 to 13-19 as this enabled the project to reach a wider audience. Pupils' feelings of comfort and safety within school was reflected in the fact that this project had the potential to discuss sensitive subject information. The time of the day that the project was delivered was considered to allow pupils time to reflect on new knowledge and or that of previous sometimes unhealthy relationships. Pupils worked with school staff and the research team to co-design material and develop a timetable of project delivery. The researchers listened to, and respected, the voice of the pupils to ensure their participation became integral to how the research was designed and conducted. The creative methods used in the relationship education project was a commitment to the young people who participated in and embraced it, as Davidson (2017) would argue, *honesty, inclusivity and, importantly, the humour that can come from this approach to research.*

The observations in schools prior to the finalising of the content for delivery was an essential method of understanding what resources were required. These observations helped to gather the tools for delivery and research best practice, working alongside schools' staff to better understand the needs of their pupils. Role play scripts were developed to deliver workshops on a range of subjects such as DA, Sexting, and unhealthy relationships for use initially in mainstream schools. The rewriting of these scripts for use in SEND schools was discussed in the first instance with school staff who offered their insights as to what they felt their pupil's needed advice or guidance on. However, during the course of workshop delivery the research team responded to the pupils' requests to co-design resources that suited their particular needs.

In the school for sensory impairment the team worked closely with pupils aged 16-19 to rewrite existing role play scripts to reflect the visual disabilities of themselves and their peers. They particularly requested changes to the script on healthy/unhealthy relationships and early warning signs of an unhealthy relationship. The script and teachers' notes are discussed below.

Changes to the following scripts were also requested, they were redesigned and delivered in line with pupils' requests and input:

- Guidance on handling situations
- What to do if someone is being insulting on social media
- How do you lower frustration in a relationship?
- How do you find a solution to arguments in a relationship?
- Guidance on appropriate vocabulary
- Unwanted touch

Pupils clearly demonstrated the need to own this research project and guide the design of resources to suit their need for knowledge. In turn this experience empowered the pupils to take ownership of their minds and their bodies, and they began challenging relationship situations that they had previously found themselves in.

#### **Visual Impairment scene co-created with pupils aged 16-19 and the lead researcher**

*They talked about relationships and unhealthy relationships and not once during the whole project did the fact, (that) they (the pupils) were visually impaired wasn't mentioned because it wasn't in itself relevant... Quote from SEND school staff 2016*

The following scene is a teenage couple relationship scenario it was co-designed with pupils aged 16-19. This scene was role played and openly discussed with the group before it was rolled out to their peers across all ages 13-19. It was made available to all pupils in this particular school in braille, large print, colour preference paper and font, and a reader.

*Person A: hey please could you come and help me make a cup of tea because I don't know where everything is in your kitchen*

*Person B: no I'm busy*

*Person A: well, if you change your mind let me know*

*Person B: just have some water or something instead*

*Person A: well, I just wanted a cup of tea but never mind sorry for bothering you*

*Person B: stop going on about it you are boring me now*

*Person A: \*starts to cry\* I wish you weren't so horrible to me all the time, like I always help you I wish you would help me as well*

*Person B: oh, give over crying all the time it's so annoying I was only joking chill out*

*Person A: you always say you're joking, but you don't understand how much you upset me*

*Person B: I didn't even say anything bad anyway I don't know what you're talking about so just chill out you're overreacting like you always do it's only a cup of tea.*

The following teaching notes were developed for use by school staff after the life of the project.

#### Scene D - Visual Impairment Scene, Teaching Notes

Questions to ask:

- What's happening in this scene?
- Is this normal in a relationship?
- What are the early warning signs of an unhealthy relationship in this scene?
- Who has the power in this scene?

Exercises:

- Change the scene so that person B is being kind: how does this change how this scene feels?
- Change the scene with person A telling person B about how they feel about the way they are being treated
- Talk about if person A leaving this relationship is person B does not change

Early Warning signs present in the scene:

Minimising and Denying

- Making light of the abuse and not taking concerns about it seriously.
- Isolation
- Controlling what another does by limiting their independence as they are unable to have a cup of tea without assistance
- Emotional abuse
- Making person A feel bad about themselves
- Putting them down

During the relationship education research project, the research team discussed with the pupils what abuse in a relationship could look like. Pupils were made aware of Government guidance on relationship abuse to support their learning:

*'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 the following types of abuse:*

- *psychological*
- *physical*
- *sexual*
- *financial*
- *emotional*

(GOV.UK 2013)

This GOV.UK definition enabled the pupils to understand where relationship abuse was subtly hidden in their co-created scenes. Using role play as a method to unpick the scenes the pupils were able to make connections to relationships they had been involved in or of relationships of people around them. Pupils were then able to identify the early warning signs in unhealthy relationships. Pupils being emersed in role play whether as participants of the role play or as observers were more able to understand and verbalise the abuse in the scenes. These creative methods enabled participants to be fully involved in all aspects of the project not only within the conceptual framework and design of social sciences research but also in how the data gathered influences dissemination of that research. The dissemination of this research, for example, is not only in academic papers and book chapters such as this on creative methodologies and DA, but also in media designed to reach the participants who produced the data. *I Love Him I Love Her* is a short film made about the relationship research project: it shares the journey of pupils, their knowledge gathered and the importance of talking about GBV and relationship abuse,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaIYqr0wHFO> Davies (2016). *I've heard the pupils talking about the project and what's been happening its lovely to hear talk going on and the pupils looking forward to it next time so that for me is impact ... what I've liked about it is that there is some strong academic underpinning in how it's been delivered.* quote from SEND school principal 2016. According to fellow researcher Dr Kip Jones, a pioneer in Performative Social Science at Bournemouth University UK: *Creativity is defined as working within certain boundaries while, at the same time, somehow changing them ...* (Jones 2017). Consciously planning to use creativity within the methods used to design and deliver this research project opened up opportunities for the research team, school staff and pupils alike.

#### Creative research methods

According to the Gov.UK Families and Children's Act (2014) professionals who elicit the voice of children and young people with SEND requirement have a commitment to ensure a person-centred approach. Using ABR methods with pupils in SEND secondary schools is a way to engage with sensitive subject material in a constructive yet respectful way. The methods in this research project were identified to enable pupils to learn about relationships and relationship abuse also proved an effective tool for the research team to understand what existing knowledge pupils had (Porter & Standing 2023).

Pupils were supported to engage with the project without pressure and in a way that was not only creative but fun they were treated as individuals with the research team sensitive to meeting their individual needs. Pupils supported their peers by talking and listening to each other and encouraging involvement in the many creative methods offered. The performative element of this project offered pupils the use of drama, music, song, rap and role play: these creative methods gave opportunities for young people to in turn produce rich creative data. Performative social sciences can offer the bridge between community and academics (Kipp 2017).

Being both an academic and artist the use of creative methods had been adopted across academic and arts-based practice and in both education and community settings for many years. The creative methods enabled the pupils to confidently talk about their understandings of healthy and unhealthy relationships. During the eight years of the project the creative data was derived from drawings, posters, creating school appropriate signposting, role play, singing a song, making a rap, writing a poem, and playing musical instruments. All these methods singly and in combination were integral to the success of the project.

The creative data as artwork has been displayed in schools as posters for pupils to learn about relationships, signposting to peers who need support from unhealthy relationships, and invitations to peers to attend a peer led assembly about healthy and unhealthy relationships. During the life of the project writing poems and raps on relationships were used in live performances during whole year assemblies as well as playing musical instruments and singing songs. In one school where a pupil was deemed by staff to be disruptive the pupil fully engaged with the healthy relationship project and sang a song of her choice about relationships to her peers in a school assembly, in this school singing was then introduced into the school curriculum as a direct result (Porter & Standing 2020).

In SEND schools the project adopted methods that were specific to the pupils' needs. The use of a Podd book was incorporated for one pupil who used his eyes to guide the researcher to the pictures in the book to share his story and thoughts on relationships and friendships. A Podd communication book is a collection of pictures that are associated with an individual for them to either point to or look at in order to communicate their needs to others.

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Pupil aged 14 drawing healthy relationships with the use of a pod book, Greater Merseyside UK secondary SEND school 2014. Photograph by Janette Porter

The information that was shared with pupils about DA varied slightly from school to school and was age appropriate but generally the following information was shared:

- Young people aged 16-24 are most at risk of violence and abuse in relationships
- Only 33% of teenagers that are involved in a violent relationship talk to someone about it
- Two women per week are killed by their partner or ex-partner
- One in three women will experience abuse from a partner in their lifetime compared to one in six men
- Sometimes disabled women are twice as likely to experience domestic violence as non-disabled women

Given the sensitive nature of the content of the workshop the use of creative methodologies was integral to teach about GBV, DA and healthy relationships to all pupils. However, pupils in SEND schools benefited considerably. When staff at SEND school were asked what they thought their pupils gained by participating in this project they responded with;

- *A lot of insight and knowledge into things like sexting*
- *An understanding of the early warning signs in relationships, particularly the types of signs psychological, physical, sexual, emotional. They also learned facts about Domestic violence and also the age of consent/facts about abuse*
- *The young people gained confidence*

And when asked what changes they had noticed in the pupils who we had worked with they commented,

- *Pupils asking if they can hug other people*
- *More reflective and act in an understanding and mature way when it comes to talking about relationships*
- *They behaved well and showed respect to each other, to their younger peers and to the staff*

Staff in all SEND schools asked if they could role the project out so it would benefit more pupils. Given the resources that were used with the pupils and specifically the co-designed resources staff were able to use this for relationship education after the life of the research project and in one school an education resource pack was developed in braille for use by staff ongoing.

This experience underlines the importance for researchers in design and delivery of projects to consider:

- Is the research appropriate?
- Have I placed the workshop content into context considering culture, faith, disability, gender?
- Am I open to suggestions on design and content from pupils and school staff alike?

The creative method of drawing healthy and unhealthy relationships was a way for the pupils to engage relatively early in the workshop plan. It also gave the researchers a real insight into who had knowledge and who was disengaged at this early stage. In some cases, pupils who did not want to actively participate in the workshop but wanted to stay present to learn independently, created posters about relationships. The pupils' ownership of their artwork then gave them confidence to role play the scenarios they had drawn. The opportunities to film their methods, read or sing their scripts enabled the pupils to exchange learning with peers yet offered intellectual, verbal or pictorial dialogues with academics. According to Jones' concepts of creativity it will evolve and be transformed by participants' outlooks and willingness to engage with unfamiliar territory (Jones 2019). The creative research methods used by the author in a variety of situations and adapted to diverse participants, in particular pupils with visually and sensory impairments, enabled rich data to be gathered and used to enable school staff to teach about relationship education. The author's experience was that where pupils were respected as equals when designing workshop content this shifts the balance between researcher and participant in a positive way, increasing engagement and meaningful outcomes for the individuals, their peers and the school community.

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FIG 7 HERE  
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Artwork by mixed gender pupils, aged 14, Greater Merseyside UK secondary SEND school 2013. Photograph by Janette Porter

### Conclusion

The research highlights the importance that early intervention in both mainstream and SEND schools in enabling young people to understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships and look for the early warning signs in unhealthy relationships is essential. This project has shown the positive impact and success of the creative methods selected in both how the research project was conceptualised and designed and in the active engagement of participants and delivery.

This research project highlights the value of active engagement of a wide range of pupils and school staff especially through creating teaching material of real value and relevance to the pupils. The arts-based approaches were informed by the lead researcher's background as an academic and artist and her tried and tested methods working with diverse communities both in and out of formal education settings. The transferring of her skills from arts and community into a research and school setting was relatively easy for her to adopt. However, the research project has identified and described a range of creative methodologies that researchers can adopt and adapt to integrate creative methods into their design of their research projects. The methods used in this project can be used not only by researchers but also by school staff in real-world everyday situations to teach about relationship education.

The integration of a wide range of creative art forms in the relationship education project design resulted in a collection of rich creative data that had not been expected at the onset of the project, given that the original funding was allocated for a drama-based intervention (Porter & Standing 2024). For instance, incorporating drawing and spoken word through poetry and rap allowed pupils who felt uncomfortable or lacked confidence in formal school drama lessons fully engage with the project in other creative ways. This research is not only impactful for fellow academics but also for the young people who participated in the project. Pupils as agents of change had the confidence to rewrite scripts, perform in front of their peers and school staff this experience has also made a difference to their lives outside the classroom. A key conclusion of the research project is that relationship education should be taught in a creative way where the pupils themselves have input into the content of delivery, therefore making the teaching material of real value and relevance to the pupils. The research raised important issues about ethics. The ethics process for research projects with young people and those with SEND requirements can seem a challenge from the onset. This project required careful consideration of a range of ethical questions raised by active engagement of young people in the discussion of sensitive issues. However, it has demonstrated that these ethical issues can be navigated and resolved ensuring a safe and ethical research process.

The project has shown that enabling pupils to be respected and heard throughout project design and delivery has had significant positive results. It has resulted in successful active participation in important discussions by pupils whose voices might not otherwise have been heard additionally It has also produced rich quantitative data which can inform our future practice.

This chapter has offered readers the opportunity to consider the significance of the voice of the young person not only in design and delivery of research but also in the value of the data collected. It has also identified and outlined replicable creative methodologies that could be incorporated into future research project design and delivery. It is hoped the reader will be encouraged to either continue to or initiate research with SEND pupils and consider the creative methods used in this research process as positive tools of engagement to gather rich quantitative data whilst positively impacting the lives of the young people involved. Feedback indicated that the creative ABM used were an effective tool to engage young people in research about GBV, the young people were engaged and active learners (Porter & Standing 2024). However, the impact on their learning extended beyond the classroom and into the community.

*My daughter attended the (relationship education) course and I can't believe the difference it has made. She has changed her attitude, been more respectful and also has more confidence. It has made such a huge difference for the better for the whole family.*

Quote from a parent of a female pupil aged 14 who attended the relationship education project 2013

The impact of pupils' improved confidence can also be illustrated by the observations of a school staff member. Over time the staff noticed a more comfortable and confident discussion of relationships between the pupils and their peers. In an interview with the head of safeguarding at one of the SEND schools, they said *I've heard them speaking in the corridor about boyfriends and girlfriend we have not heard this before.* This perfectly demonstrates that the topic of relationships within the school outside of the formal curriculum has impacted the pupils significantly.

### Reflection for the reader...

#### Questions

Ask yourself, what experience do I have to contribute to research in the field, how can I bring my skills to my next piece of research, what non-academic skills do I value that could assist my next research project?

#### Challengers

Don't be afraid to take on a challenge that you know will add time to your ethics application, be mindful that that time is what enables a young person's voice to be respected and listened to and will form part of your data.

#### Pointers

Don't underestimate the value of what a young person offers to your research and don't be afraid to use their words, let them be change makers of your research.

FIG 8 HERE

Artwork by Female, age 15, Greater Merseyside UK secondary SEND school 2019 Photograph by Janette Porter

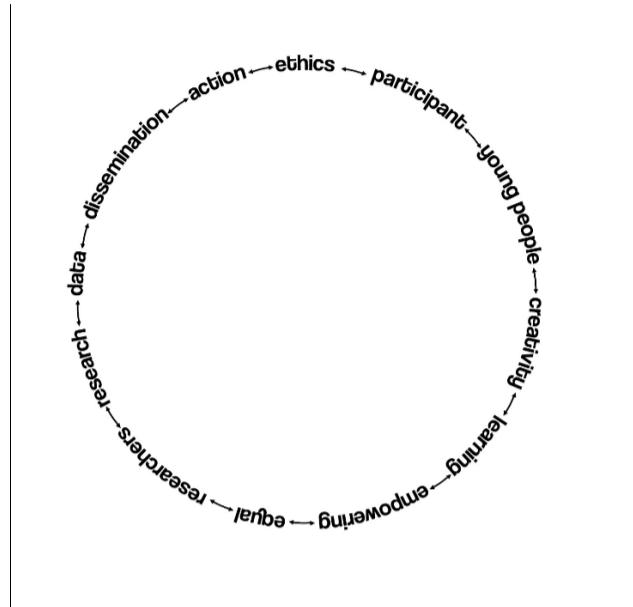


Fig 9: The Action-Empowerment Wheel. Janette Porter 2024

sharing research in real terms guided by its participants

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