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Barriers to domestic violence education in Northern Ireland: Pupils' views and experiences

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Abstract

Domestic violence (DV) in adult and young people's intimate partner relationships is a social and public health problem across the globe. Education can play an important and unique role in addressing DV; however, it remains relatively under-investigated. The aim of this qualitative study set in Northern Ireland, the first of its kind, was to explore young people's views and experiences of DV education. Focus groups were conducted with 188 pupils (97 males and 91 females) aged 16 to 18 attending post-primary school. The data were analysed using thematic analysis and reveal five barriers to DV education: (1) absence of DV teaching and learning; (2) DV is a taboo topic; (3) lack of teacher training and expertise on DV; (4) religious influence; (5) prioritisation of academic achievement over pupil wellbeing. The results demonstrate that changes are needed in schools to improve the role of schools in addressing DV. From this qualitative study, we make recommendations for how school-based DV education may help prevent and protect young people against intimate partner violence.

KEYWORDS
domestic violence education, post-primary school, relationships and sexuality education, young people

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Education can play an important role in addressing domestic violence (DV), however the views and experiences of those who receive DV education have been limited. With the aim of improving DV education, this study identifies barriers to DV education that may need addressing to help prevent and protect young people against DV.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This paper provides insights into adolescent dating violence (ADV) and the need for addressing this enduring problem through prevention, early intervention and education. Through seeking the perspectives of pupils, valuable insights and important lessons for the improvement and future development of domestic violence education have emerged.

INTRODUCTION

The terms 'domestic violence' (DV), 'domestic abuse' (DA) and 'intimate partner violence' (IPV) are often used interchangeably in the scholarly literature to refer to 'behaviour within an intimate [romantic] relationship that causes physical, sexual or psychological harm, including acts of physical aggression, sexual coercion, psychological abuse and controlling behaviours' (WHO, 2010: 11). The wide range of harmful partner-directed behaviours can occur in person or electronically across adult and adolescent relationships (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017) has conceptualised the violence which occurs in adolescents' relationships as a type of IPV or DV. Whilst both men and women may experience DV, women are considerably more likely to experience repeated and severe forms of abuse, including sexual violence. They are also more likely to experience sustained physical, psychological or emotional abuse, or violence which results in injury or death (WHO, 2013). Thus, DV is considered a gendered phenomenon as it affects primarily women and girls and to a much lesser degree men and boys, regardless of their culture, religion, class, age or other demographic characteristics (WHO, 2013). This evidence supports a gender-based violence theoretical approach which claims that violence in intimate romantic relationships is largely asymmetrical, with women being more negatively affected than men, and that this warrants examination within a patriarchal socio-economic context (Dobash et al., 1992; Hester, 2013; Johnson, 2006; Stark, 2010). Within the gender-based violence theoretical approach context, the main motive of DV has been the attempt to exercise control, which both reflects and reinforces gender inequality (Pence & Paymar, 1993; Stark, 2007). Globally, one in three (35%) women have been a victim of violence by an intimate partner, and as many as 38% of all murders are committed by intimate partners (WHO, 2013). Recent findings from the Crime Survey for England and Wales estimate that in the year ending March 2020, 1.6 million women aged 16 to 74 years had experienced DV, and women were more likely to experience this form of abuse than men (ONS, 2021). In Northern Ireland the police service reported 12 female victims of domestic abuse homicides from August 2020 to July 2022 (PSNI, 2022), a substantial number given the population of 1.9 million.

DV can begin as soon as people start dating and having intimate romantic-type relationships (Spencer et al., 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017). Some researchers investigating DV

within the context of adolescent romantic or intimate relationships have adopted terms such as 'adolescent dating violence' (ADV), 'teen dating violence' (TDV) and 'adolescent interpersonal violence and abuse' (IPVA) (Aghtaie et al., 2018) that may more accurately describe the nature of DV in young people's romantic relationships. The UK government's definition of DV was broadened in 2013 to include young people aged 16 and 17 (Home Office, 2013), and current debates suggest that the age range may be lowered still further in recognition that ADV can occur at an even younger age (Fox et al., 2013). The term ADV will be used throughout this paper as it encompasses both adolescent dating violence and adolescent domestic violence.

Prevalence rates for ADV vary considerably, depending on the populations sampled, definitions used, forms of ADV included and acts incorporated (Herbert et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2015; Stonard et al., 2014; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021; Wincentak et al., 2017). A meta-analysis of 101 studies indicated that 20% of adolescents aged 13 to 18 reported being victim of physical dating violence (ranging from 1% to 61%) and 9% of sexual dating violence (ranging from <1% to 54%) (Wincentak et al., 2017). Similar wide-ranging variability in the prevalence rates of victimisation was found in a European-wide systematic review of 34 studies with participants between 10 and 20 years old (Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021). In England, a survey of 14 to 17-year-olds found that 66–75% of young women reported IPV victimisation, compared to 32–50% of young men (Barter et al., 2015). Numerous studies show that greater proportions of adolescent females report more severe forms of ADV, and greater negative impact from physical and sexual dating violence, such as more serious injuries, more serious health problems and more fear (Barter, 2009; Barter & Stanley, 2016; Barter et al., 2009, 2015; Hamby et al., 2012; Jackson et al., 2000; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019; Tomaszewska & Schuster, 2021). Furthermore, the disproportionate negative impact on young females is reflected in homicide victims (Adhia et al., 2019). According to a recent United States-wide study, between 2003 and 2016, 90% of adolescent homicide victims murdered by their (ex)boyfriend/partner were girls/young women with mean age 16.8 years (Adhia et al., 2019). This evidence—akin to that of adult DV—reveals the asymmetrical nature of ADV (Eisner, 2021) and hence supports ADV as a gendered phenomenon (Barter & Stanley, 2016).

In general, the impact of abuse in young people's relationships has adverse effects on adolescents' health and development, such as higher risks for depression (Exner-Cortens et al., 2013; MacGregor et al., 2019), suicidal ideation (Chiodo et al., 2012) and poor educational outcomes (Klencakova et al., 2021). Additionally, the abuse is associated with incident HIV infection among women (Kouyoumdjian et al., 2013), higher risks of reproductive health problems (Abramsky et al., 2011) and pregnancy among teenage girls (Silverman et al., 2001). The long-term psychosocial outcomes of ADV may include fear of new relationships, difficulties in establishing meaningful communication, social isolation, loneliness and increased risks of subsequent DV victimisation and perpetration (Duerksen & Woodin, 2019; Jouriles et al., 2017; Park et al., 2018; Taquette & Monteiro, 2019). Given the significant implications for current and long-term adjustment, ADV constitutes a significant public health problem with gendered implications.

The extent and consequences of abuse in young people's lives has led to the acknowledgement of schools being an important setting for conducting DV prevention efforts (Barter et al., 2009; Harris et al., 2015; Lagerlöf & Øverlien, 2022; McKee & Mason, 2015; Stanley et al., 2015; WHO, 2010, 2019). Schools have repeated contact with a large population of children and young people (Harris et al., 2015; McKee & Mason, 2015) who have yet to experience or are just embarking on their own intimate relationships (Stanley et al., 2015). Even though education can play an important role in addressing DV, the views and experiences of those who receive DV education (e.g., pupils) have typically been limited internationally (Fox et al., 2013; Stanley et al., 2015). In particular, there is no research

evidence of pupils' views and experiences of DV education in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, which is why this research is important. Although DV is a global phenomenon, it takes on specific forms in different geo-political and cultural settings, such as that of Northern Ireland (Doyle & McWilliams, 2019, 2020). Northern Ireland is a country with a high level of contestations along political, ethnic and religious lines. Furthermore, it has a patriarchal structure and socially conservative attitudes; all of which affect the experiences of and responses to DV (Doyle & McWilliams, 2019, 2020).

Having briefly introduced DV and acknowledged the role of schools in addressing DV, this paper will now turn to outline the delivery context of DV education in the four countries (Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales) comprising the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, DV education is delivered through the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) curriculum. As education is a devolved issue, RSE teaching differs around the United Kingdom as well as across the school sector (Houses of Parliament, 2018). Since the revised Northern Ireland Curriculum was introduced in 2007, RSE in Northern Ireland has been statutory for both primary and post-primary pupils—to be taught within the Personal Development (PD) area of learning. The Department of Education requires all grant-aided schools to develop their own policy for addressing RSE in lessons, in line with the school's ethos and in consultation with parents and pupils (NI Department of Education, 2015). In England, Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHEE)—the equivalent to Northern Ireland's PD—and comprehensive SRE remained non-statutory within the National Curriculum until September 2020. However, following the passing of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, RSE became statutory in all secondary schools in England and relationships education became statutory in all primary schools in England from September 2020, with guidance available for schools to plan their own curricula (Long, 2020). Parents do not have the right to withdraw their children from relationships education but do have the right to request that their child be withdrawn from non-science RSE if they wish, until their child is three school terms before their 16th birthday. At this point, the young person can request to opt back into RSE without parental consent (Gadd, 2021). In Scotland, RSE is taught through Relationships, Sexual Health and Parenthood Education (RSHP), but it is not currently compulsory. However, most schools do deliver RSHP. Parents do not have the statutory right to withdraw their children from non-science RSHP, but they can request it, and schools are advised to respect their wishes (Gadd, 2021). Since September 2022, RSE is a statutory part of the new curriculum in Wales (Renold & McGeeney, 2017). RSE is being taught across the whole-school curriculum in all schools, both primary and secondary, and guided by a mandatory code which sets out the themes that must be encompassed in RSE. Parents no longer have the right to withdraw their children from RSE lessons (Gadd, 2021). In summary, all four countries of the United Kingdom have recognised the importance of DV education and continue to strengthen RSE curricula. Within this context of improving DV education curricula, the aim of our study was to explore pupils' views and experiences to inform future DV education during post-primary schooling.

METHODS

This paper is based on qualitative findings from focus groups which were part of a larger mixed methods study (Maguire, 2020). A total of 30 group discussions were carried out with 188 pupils (97 males and 91 females) attending post-primary schools in Northern Ireland from September to December 2017 (see Table 1). The number of participants in each group varied from five to nine. Pupils from Years 13 and 14 (aged 16 to 18 years) were purposely chosen due to their cognitive and emotional competency to discuss the sensitive issue of DV (Sundaram, 2016). This target group had also undertaken at least 6 years of post-primary schooling and were

in a good position to provide insights into their experiences and perspectives of DV education. Same-sex focus groups were employed to enable pupils to express their views openly and honestly (Yin, 2016). Convenience sampling was utilised to gain insights into pupils' views and experiences, rather than generalising from the sample of post-primary schools in Northern Ireland. The number of group discussions conducted was an emergent process, which operated under the notion of 'data saturation' (Saumure & Given, 2008). Schools were added until no new findings were generated, and the collection of more data appeared to have no additional interpretive worth (Bryman, 2016). The groups were facilitated by the first author, an experienced post-primary educator. Semi-structured focus groups and mind maps were used to engage participants to express and expand upon their views and experiences of DV education. A focus group guide and guiding questions were also developed and used to guide the discussions (see Table 1). Collectively, these tools proved to be very valuable as a lively discussion ensued in all the groups with minimal input from the researcher.

A distinctive characteristic of the education system in Northern Ireland is segregation (Campbell, 2021). The system is segregated: by religion, in that most children and young people attend predominantly Protestant ('Controlled') or Catholic ('Maintained') schools—only a small number attend Integrated and Irish Medium schools (see Table 2); by academic ability, in that a selection system operates at age 11 to decide which children are selected for admission to grammar schools (more than a third of children in second-level education); and often by gender (particularly in second-level education, where a quarter of secondary schools and almost half of all grammar schools are single-sex). Participants in this study attended Controlled (3), Catholic Maintained (10) and Integrated (1) post-primary schools. Of these, eight schools were single-sex (five all-boys, three all-girls) and five were co-educational (see Table 3).

Ethical considerations

Prior to the focus groups, each pupil read an information sheet and signed an 'opt-in' consent form. Due to school policy requirements, some pupils also obtained parental consent to take part. At the beginning of each focus group, the research was explained, participants were reminded that they could leave at any time and that they could refrain from answering questions they preferred not to answer. Pupils were asked not to repeat the discussion to others outside the group, but because confidentiality within the group could not be guaranteed, the importance of only sharing information that they were happy for others to know was highlighted. Permission to record the discussion and use short quotes was gained from participants before the focus group commenced. Pupils were provided with a visual mind map to

TABLE 1 Focus group discussion guide.

Theme	Guiding question
Understanding of DV	What does the term 'DV' mean to you? Who experiences DV? In your opinion, why do you think DV happen?
Experience of DV education	What are your experiences of DV education? How have you learnt about DV to date? Can you give an example or examples of when you learnt about DV?
Perception of DV education	Do you think it is important for young people to know and learn about DV? If so, why? In your opinion, where is a good place for young people to learn about DV and why? Do schools have a role to play in educating young people about DV? If so, how can schools educate young people about DV?

TABLE 2 Pupil characteristics.

School management type	Setting type	School type	Focus group number	School year	Number of pupils
Catholic Maintained	Non-grammar	Single-sex (male)	1	13	5
			2	14	6
Catholic Maintained	Non-grammar	Single-sex (male)	3	13	5
			4	14	5
Catholic Maintained	Grammar	Single-sex (male)	5	13	7
			6	14	6
Catholic Maintained	Grammar	Single-sex (male)	7	13	5
			8	14	6
Catholic Maintained	Grammar	Single-sex (female)	9	13	8
			10	14	8
Catholic Maintained	Grammar	Single-sex (female)	11	13	7
			12	14	6
Catholic Maintained	Non-grammar	Single-sex (female)	13	13	9
			14	14	9
Catholic Maintained	Non-grammar	Co-educational	15 (male)	13	5
			16 (female)	14	6
Catholic Maintained	Non-grammar	Co-educational	17 (male)	13	5
			18 (female)	14	6
Catholic Maintained	Grammar	Co-educational	19 (male)	13	6
			20 (female)	14	7
Controlled	Non-grammar	Single-sex (male)	21	13	6
			22	14	6
Controlled	Non-grammar	Co-educational	23 (female)	13	7
			24 (male)	14	5
Controlled	Non-grammar	Co-educational	25 (female)	13	6
			26 (male)	14	6
Grant Maintained Integrated	Non-grammar	Co-educational	27 (male)	13	6
			28 (female)	13	6
			29 (female)	14	6
			30 (male)	14	7

facilitate discussion and engage participants. Mind mapping is a powerful and flexible thinking tool that can be used for brainstorming, collaboration and much more (Serrta, 2010). Afterwards, pupils were thanked for their contribution and provided with a handout that directed them to sources of support, should they need it. The focus groups lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes. Ethical approval was granted by the relevant University Ethics Committee.

Data analysis

The focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify group patterns across the data, utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006)

TABLE 3 School management types in Northern Ireland (Department of Education, 2016).

Sector	Percentage of pupils	Phase	Overview
Controlled	39%	Nursery, primary, secondary, grammar and special	Provided and managed by the EA through Boards of Governors • Primary and secondary Boards include transferor members (Protestant churches) • Some Controlled Integrated schools (further 2% of pupils)
Catholic maintained (voluntary maintained)	36%	Nursery, primary, secondary and special	Roman Catholic ethos • Boards of Governors include trustees appointed by CCMS
Voluntary non-maintained	15%	Grammar	Voluntary grammars • Self-governing: higher levels of autonomy • Boards include trustee/ foundation governors
Grant- maintained integrated	5%	Nursery, primary and secondary	Integrated ethos • Self-governing • DE has a duty to encourage and facilitate integrated education
'Other' maintained (voluntary maintained)	1%	Nursery, primary, secondary and special	Mostly Irish-medium schools • DE has a duty to encourage and facilitate Irish-medium education

six-step approach. An inductive approach was utilised, given the exploratory nature of the study, generating themes from the data itself rather than examining data in relation to existing theoretical ideas. Its flexibility provided an ideal method for approaching the transcripts to identify patterns within and across individual transcripts in relation to participants' lived experiences and perspectives (Clarke & Braun, 2017). The first author (SM) read through each transcript and then generated initial codes across the data set by systematically coding extracts in NVivo-10. Finally, in consultation with all authors, SM reviewed, refined and named the final themes.

RESULTS

Following thematic analysis, five themes emerged as potential barriers to DV education: (1) absence of DV teaching and learning; (2) DV is a taboo topic; (3) lack of teacher training and expertise on DV; (4) religious influence; (5) prioritisation of academic achievement over pupil wellbeing. The themes are illustrated using verbatim excerpts and pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

Theme 1: Absence of domestic violence teaching and learning during schooling

Across each school type, Personal Development (PD) classes were the most common place within the curriculum where pupils would learn about DV, while pupils from Controlled and Integrated schools mentioned learning about DV in different subject areas such as Religious

Studies, Citizenship, Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PHSE) education, Learning for Life and Work (LLW) and Health and Social Care. Despite this, as the quotes below indicate, pupils characterised DV teaching and learning in schools as both scant and inconsistent:

> *Jack (FG3)*: *PD classes, yeah. I suppose domestic violence was a topic at one stage, but it's never really been a consistent flow of information.*
> *James (FG30)*: *Citizenship. I think maybe we might have touched on domestic violence back in the early years of school, but it would not have been something we would focus on. Lightly touched on it.*
> *Karen (FG25)*: *Yes, in RE a little bit but not that much. We were not really taught about domestic violence, it was all other people's views, you didn't get a chance to voice your opinion. You did not really learn about domestic violence, you didn't learn anything—It was, 'This is what the meaning is'. That was it. It wasn't in depth.*
> *Liam (FG27)*: *I think we've covered domestic violence once or twice like skimming over in form class, like PD sessions. Domestic violence was literally just spoke of and that was it.*

Both male and female pupils alike reported that PD classes addressed the core social issues of drugs, alcohol, bullying, smoking, and so on. However, they explained that the topic of DV was not dealt with explicitly in the curriculum:

> *Louise (FG25)*: *In our PD classes, the focus is on smoking and drugs and alcohol. It's so important to learn about that (domestic violence) and especially bullying, but there's not much on domestic violence.*
> *Katie (FG29)*: *Domestic violence is a very taboo subject and school don't really want to talk about it, because they talk more about drugs and firework safety.*

Other pupils described learning about DV in schools as short-lived, as this issue was usually delivered on a one-off basis with basic content:

> *Eamon (FG19)*: *They went over domestic violence really briefly, like once basically saying there's different types of abuse and if it's happening say it to someone, and that's kind of like all they're going to say.*
> *Finn (FG2)*: *In the whole five years or so I've been here, I think we've had a talk about domestic violence once or twice and that would be it.*

Some pupils felt there was an avoidance among teachers to provide quality time or meaningful teaching and learning on DV. These pupils felt that teachers were required to cover the topic of DV, but in practice it was delivered inadequately. This in turn meant teachers could '*tick off boxes*' to evidence that the topic of DV had been delivered, however in reality pupils felt it was neither beneficial nor worthwhile:

> *Matthew (FG27)*: *Teachers just try to get the topic of domestic violence over and done with, so they can say they have done it essentially.*
> *Ann (FG9)*: *Domestic violence education gives you more of a support network as well, because in school my teachers just say, 'Okay, we're here for you, if you want', and then they just move on as quick as possible. It's like, 'We're here if you want to talk, but let's get back to…' whereas if schools talk about domestic violence more, and schools were actually there for you, if they bring in people, if they took time to do things like this, then you know they are not just saying it so they can tick off boxes by saying that they are here for you. You know that they are actually going to sit and talk to you and be helpful.*

Many pupils, both male and female, reported that it was up to them to learn about DV rather than schools having a role to educate pupils about DV:

> **Dom (FG22)**: *In school it isn't really talked about; domestic violence isn't spoken about in school so there's no education behind it, it's just what you think yourself.*
>
> **Sandra (FG16)**: *We haven't really been taught about domestic violence in school, you don't really get taught about domestic violence at school much and I think you should be. You have to learn about domestic violence yourself.*

As illustrated in the quotes below, females attending a Catholic Maintained school (CMS), who received DV education from an external agency (e.g., Women's Aid) on a one-off basis, characterised the content as informative and beneficial:

> **Vanessa (FG11)**: *Last week we had the Heading for Healthy Relationships programme, we had women in from Women's Aid. They came and talked about domestic violence and everything. It was really good. She did all the warning signs of unhealthy relationships and who to go to if you needed help and they made us all put their number in our phone and everything in case we needed it, or we knew someone else that did. It was the first time we learnt about domestic violence in school.*

Both male and female pupils perceived the inclusion of DV teaching and learning within curricula as important, highlighting that they wanted to receive lessons on DV during schooling. One pupil indicated that DV education should be delivered on an ongoing basis and updated regularly for the retention of up-to-date knowledge on DV:

> **Jake (FG7)**: *I think maybe once maybe two years ago I think there was a women's group, they came in and talked to our year. Women's Aid, I think. Talking about… I think domestic violence was a topic. It was good but it was only one day. You could forget something. Things change as well.*

Many pupils perceived social issues learnt during PD as important, however they reported that the same topics and content were repeated annually. Pupils felt there should be greater variation of topics which are applicable to their needs. As indicated in the quotes below, pupils felt it would be pertinent to include DV teaching and learning within the school's PD programme:

> **Tina (FG20)**: *We have a lesson like Wednesday morning in PD, it feels like we learn about the same thing every single year, like alcohol, drugs, coping with exam stress. It would be better to have something else new and something that would be relevant like domestic violence, especially as you are getting older and getting into more serious relationships.*
>
> **Leanne (FG12)**: *PD, every single year it's alcohol, drugs, don't bully, don't throw fireworks at Halloween; it's the same stuff every year. They should bring in more varied stuff. I know all that stuff is important but there's just so much of it and it's the same thing every year, so if they'd vary it a bit more and brought in different issues like domestic violence.*

Although the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS, 2013) Sexual Health Strategy states that through the delivery of RSE, young people can explore sensitive issues such as DV and sexual abuse in an age-appropriate way and develop appropriate behaviour to protect themselves, data from the group discussions in this study indicate that DV has been taught in schools on an inconsistent and 'one-off' basis. Similar to

Stanley's review of school-based initiatives, it is rare for children to receive regular exposure to DV prevention initiatives across their school careers (Stanley et al., 2015). Overall, pupils in this study reported a lack of DV education during schooling as they failed to receive ongoing, explicit DV teaching and learning. These findings are similar to research conducted on DV education in other parts of the United Kingdom. For instance, Ofsted (2013) reported that SRE required improvement in 42% of primary and 38% of secondary schools inspected in England as important topics, such as DV, were omitted from many school curricula. Also, the Inspectorate for Education and Training in Wales (Estyn) found that RSE was not allocated enough time in the school curriculum (Renold & McGeeney, 2017).

Theme 2: Domestic violence is a taboo topic

Male and female pupils from each school type perceived DV as a taboo topic within schools, as they reported that DV was rarely spoken about during teaching and learning, or generally within the school environment among pupils or teachers:

> **Sarah (FG11)**: *Not much, I think domestic violence is a very taboo subject and school don't really want to talk about it*.
> **Andrew (FG21)**: *At the minute we're not really talking about domestic violence in school, and it is happening*.

One pupil provided an insight into a classroom discussion with a teacher, whereby she was informed that it was inappropriate to talk about DV and thus talking about DV was interrupted and brought to a halt:

> **Ann (FG9)**: *One time during English class we were having a conversation about marriage, about gay marriage and things, and it was leading onto domestic violence, and my teacher turned around and said, 'This is inappropriate' and we asked, 'How is domestic violence inappropriate? Domestic violence is something that is happening' and she replied saying, 'I don't want to talk about domestic violence, don't talk about that'. We were alright talking about gay marriage but as soon as it got onto abuse and how that can happen in any relationship, it was like, 'Do not talk about this, we can't talk about that'.*

Female pupils perceived the prohibition of discussion on DV among teachers and pupils as problematic. These pupils felt that the reluctance of teachers to talk about DV can discourage pupils from disclosing experiences of DV. These pupils postulated that if teachers were more open to discussing DV, pupils would be more inclined to disclose experiences of abuse and seek help during schooling:

> **Kiera (FG18)**: *At the moment if you were experiencing domestic violence you wouldn't think to go to the school for help. But, if they talked about domestic violence more, then you would feel like you could*.
> **Una (FG9)**: *If there are more people talking about domestic violence, there is more people going to come out and say, 'Oh, I think I am being abused' or, 'I think I am in an abusive relationship'.*

One female pupil felt that if adults (e.g., teachers) do not speak out about DV, a rippling effect is created whereby pupils learn that they cannot discuss DV either. Female pupils felt that this produces a '*hush hush*' culture in schools, whereby talking about DV is deemed

unacceptable and leads to a reluctance among pupils to speak out about, or report, experiences of DV:

> **Alanna (FG10)**: *If adults don't talk about domestic violence, how are we supposed to know? It's like teachers can't talk about domestic violence, then how are we supposed to, if we are in an abusive relationship then we can't talk about it. It's like they are cutting you off and they are saying, 'Don't talk about domestic violence', then you think it is not acceptable ever, to talk about domestic violence, so you keep it all in… and you think you are not allowed to talk about domestic violence, it's all hush hush and if domestic violence goes on, it goes on, just don't do anything about it, basically. We are not really learning about domestic violence in school at all*.

Male pupils also reported that there was a lack of opportunity to discuss DV within schools, which they noted exacerbates the taboo attached to DV. These pupils expressed frustration with the attitude of teachers to restrict teaching and learning and have conversations about DV in school settings. Many pupils like Eamon felt that if they cannot talk about DV, it is even more difficult for pupils who may be experiencing DV to speak out and seek support:

> **Eamon (FG19)**: *Because there's absolutely nothing right now on domestic violence in schools, so literally doing something and having people talking about it can help in some way, even having people talk about it to you. People giving talks or seminars makes people feel more open about talking about it. That can help as well. It might make somebody feel like they can talk about domestic violence, where they couldn't before, just because they have other people talking to them about it*.

Both male and female pupils from each school management group reported a prevailing '*hush hush*' culture in schools regarding the topic of DV. According to female pupils, this culture of silence is an impediment to disclosures of DV and help-seeking behaviours within school settings. This is concerning, as many pupils experience DV at home (Radford et al., 2013) and in their own intimate partner relationships (Barter et al., 2017; Young et al., 2021). DV has a devasting impact on children and young people, and schools should offer support to address their needs. Also, the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA, 2007) confirms that schools, a universal service to which all children have access, are in a unique position to recognise and respond to child protection and safeguarding concerns (which includes exposure to DV). Schools need to be places where pupils can report incidences of DV and receive appropriate support to promote pupil welfare, prevent concerns from escalating and protect the safety of pupils. We would argue that schools should consider finding ways to support pupils to speak out against DV and promote rather than hinder help-seeking behaviours as reported by the pupils in this study.

Theme 3: Lack of teacher training and expertise on domestic violence

Both male and female pupils from each school management group reported that teachers were ill-equipped to deliver DV teaching and learning with competence and confidence. This deficiency was considered problematic as pupils felt that teachers experienced difficulties providing pupils with accurate information about DV:

> **Thomas (FG27)**: *I think it's because teachers don't want to sit down talking to a group of students about relationships, they don't feel it's something they're qualified to do. It's down to knowledge really, because if teachers don't know what they're talking about they're*

obviously not providing their students with the correct information. I suppose teachers wouldn't feel confident enough to do that in front of us if they don't know themselves.

Some pupils reported that they felt the lack of DV teaching and learning in schools was due to teachers not having an awareness or understanding of the importance of embedding the topic within curricula:

Ollie (FG4): *Schools put domestic violence on the backburner and think, 'Well there's more serious topics' and they don't realise how serious it actually is to speak about it and teach us about it*.

Although teachers are well placed to play a pivotal role in identifying and responding to DV since they have contact with children more than any other service (Lloyd, 2018), male and female pupils felt that teachers avoid teaching about DV as they may not have the capability to deal with disclosures from pupils:

Tara (FG23): *I suppose teachers might not be that confident in it to be able to deliver it or know what to say if a child was experiencing domestic violence. Teachers don't know*.

Pupils perceived the lack of DV education during schooling as a result of teachers not having the appropriate skills and training to incorporate DV teaching and learning into curricula. Pupils felt that teachers often lacked the necessary expertise to deliver DV education with competence and confidence. From this, it is probable that teachers need better DV training to provide an education on DV that promotes help-seeking behaviours so that pupils will be encouraged and feel supported to disclose experiences of DV in school settings.

Theme 4: Religious influence

Pupils attending a CMS reported that their faith-based school was a barrier to the inclusion of DV education within curricula. These pupils believed that DV teaching and learning opposed their school's religious beliefs and practices, which they felt led schools to ignore the problem of DV by excluding it from curricula or providing a vague, unrealistic insight into DV:

Eamon (FG19): *I think schools are a touch out of reality and would rather pretend that domestic violence is not happening even though it is. I think society as a whole is trying to change it, but schools don't care. I don't remember ever learning about domestic violence here. We don't do anything about relationships in school because it's such a religious school.*
Lucy (FG20): *We don't have anything on relationships and domestic violence because it's a Catholic school. We're getting taught about it the Catholic way and things, but we're not getting taught about the realistic way. How you should approach things like domestic violence. They're just telling us what they want to tell us. They're not actually telling us what domestic violence is*.

Daniel gave an example of how he felt Catholic beliefs and practices (that a marital relationship is valued above the wellbeing of your partner and children, and thus victims are expected to remain in an abusive relationship no matter what the circumstances or personal cost) challenge teaching and learning about DV in a Catholic school he attended:

> ***Daniel (FG19):*** *If you're gay and you're in a domestic violent relationship, teachers would just say, 'That doesn't happen. We're Catholic'. Because with the Catholic church and marriage and the problems of domestic violence you'll be going against what they believe in. They won't tell you to leave your partner because you don't leave your partner, because marriage is for life. It's really stopping us from getting the sort of education about real life things that we actually need as teenagers. I get that religion is really important, but it shouldn't affect education, and same-sex marriages, and what to do in a case of a relationship. The church and the school saying, 'We're not going to educate you on domestic violence' is sort of like they're saying they support it.*

Daniel perceived religion as important, however he felt that his school's religious values and beliefs restricted and deprived pupils from receiving a viable, relevant education about social issues such as DV. Omitting DV teaching and learning led Daniel to believe that DV is supported by his school rather than opposed, which in turn may mitigate against the disclosure of DV. Similarly, as indicated in the quote below, Tina emphasised how she felt religious beliefs influence how Christians respond to DV. In this case, she postulated that the Church teaches that God gives his people challenges, thus suggesting that victims of DV are receiving a challenge from God rather than DV being a '*real-life*' problem that needs resolving:

> ***Tina (FG20):*** *The Church in general stigmatises learning about things like domestic violence because they think that 'Oh. God gives you challenges' and whatever. I think that's why domestic violence is still a problem today, because nobody talks about it.*

The group of excerpts above illustrate that both male and female pupils attending a CMS felt discontented with the impact religion had upon their (lack of) education on DV. These pupils felt that their faith-based school prompted pupils to believe DV was somewhat acceptable. This finding did not emerge from the discussions with pupils attending Controlled or Integrated schools. However, these experiences and perspectives reported by pupils attending a CMS suggest that Catholic schools may need to acknowledge DV as an issue that affects all people and that it is not acceptable in the name of any faith (Izzidien, 2008). As supported by Pentaraki (2017), the religious context of Northern Ireland is a factor that needs to be explored further, as its particular specificities may be a potential barrier to help-seeking and help-receiving behaviour among young people, especially when it intersects with the politically contested environment of Northern Ireland (Doyle & McWilliams, 2019).

Theme 5: Prioritisation of academic achievement over pupil wellbeing

As illustrated in the excerpts below, pupils attending Catholic and Controlled schools felt the lack of DV education during schooling was a result of schools' priority to attain high-achieving results rather than teaching and learning about social issues which may affect pupils' safety and wellbeing:

> ***Zack (FG4):*** *I think domestic violence is not taught in schools because schools think about what will benefit you for getting a job. They don't teach you anything to benefit how to manage or cope with difficult life situations like domestic violence.*

Several pupils attending a CMS acknowledged that schools invite external agencies to deliver one-off programmes to pupils on social issues. As shown in the quote below,

given the constant academic focus in school, these young people perceived add-on isolated programmes as a '*free lesson*' rather than taken seriously or perceived as beneficial:

> **James (FG3):** *In this school it's only academic that they focus on and then they have the occasional person who comes in—they come and go and you're 'back to school'. You see it as a free lesson, you don't see it as you're going to learn—you're just happy days, 'No work that lesson!' rather than 'Oh, this seems important'.*

One pupil recognised that good qualifications may contribute to having a good standard of living, however without an education on DV the chances of having a healthy, happy life may be jeopardised:

> **Leanne (FG25):** *At the end of the day, we come out of secondary school learning how to do this, that and the other to live and get a 9am to 5pm job and work and support our families, but we won't know how to have a healthy family and a healthy relationship without learning the basic knowledge of domestic violence. You're not going to be able to have a career that you've worked so many years for and studied and put thousands and millions of pounds (laughter)—you're not going to be able to enjoy your life without learning how to be in a relationship.*

Pupils from Catholic and Controlled schools reported that schools' academic focus meant less effort and time was put into educating pupils about social issues such as DV. These experiences expressed by pupils are concerning, given that schools are expected to be a central agent for meeting both the academic and pastoral needs of all children and young people internationally (McKee & Mason, 2015).

DISCUSSION

This paper has presented empirical data about young people's views and experiences of DV education during post-primary schooling. This study discovered that pupils from all school types reported a '*hush hush*' culture in schools regarding the teaching and learning of DV. The findings reveal a series of potential barriers to DV education, including:

1. Absence of DV teaching and learning.
2. DV is a taboo topic.
3. Lack of teacher training and expertise on DV.
4. Religious influence.
5. Prioritisation of academic achievement over pupil wellbeing.

In each of the groups, there was consensus among pupils that there is a lack of DV education during post-primary schooling. When DV teaching and learning occurs, pupils reported that it tends to be on a one-off basis with basic content, as noted earlier by Finn (FG2): '*In the whole five years or so I've been here, I think we've had a talk about domestic violence once or twice and that would be it*'. Furthermore, pupils explained that DV is not meaningfully included in RSE during schooling, rather schools seem to teach RSE to '*tick off boxes*'. These views are not dissimilar to what has been reported by the young people in York et al.'s (2021) recent study on sexting education in Northern Ireland, a topic also included in the RSE curriculum. Similarly, the Times survey conducted in Northern Ireland, with 1434 16-year-olds, reported that they received very few, if any, RSE lessons—even though RSE is a compulsory area of study (Schubotz, 2012).

Due to the lack of DV education reported by pupils in this study, female pupils reported feeling reluctant to display help-seeking and help-receiving behaviours in school: '*At the moment if you were experiencing domestic violence, you wouldn't really think to go to the school for help. But, if they talked about domestic violence more, then you would feel like you could*' (Kiera, FG18). This is concerning, as research indicates that if adolescents perceive formal sources as supportive, they are more likely to endorse positive attitudes towards seeking help for bullying and violence (Eliot et al., 2010). Also, given that dating and relationship violence victimisation is typically higher among young women than men (Barter et al., 2009, 2017), it is problematic that several females in this study reported that they would be unlikely to ask school for support if they experienced DV. Therefore, schools may need to work towards normalising conversations around DV, removing the taboo attached to DV and exploring ways to support (rather than hinder) help-seeking behaviours within school settings.

In this study, pupils attending a CMS agreed that the Catholic ethos and lack of DV education during schooling prompts them to believe DV is acceptable and somewhat supported, rather than opposed. As noted by Daniel (FG19), '*… the church and the school saying, "We're not going to educate you on domestic violence", is sort of saying they support domestic violence*'. This finding suggests that the lack of DV education in Catholic schools may contribute to normalising rather than opposing DV. Izzidien (2008) argues that schools must acknowledge that DV is an issue that can affect anyone and that DV is not acceptable in the name of any faith. As educational institutions, schools need to be a voice that confirms that DV is not acceptable and empowers pupils to build a culture where DV is not tolerated. The experiences of DV education reported by pupils in Catholic schools MSs indicates that these schools may need to work towards creating a culture where pupils feel more able to disclose issues of DV and feel reassured that appropriate support will be provided. Perhaps, overall, there is a need to break the current '*hush hush*' culture in schools reported by the pupils in this study, and for schools to recognise that DV is no longer a 'private' matter but rather a public issue that needs to be addressed.

Pupils from each school type believed that the lack of DV education obtained during schooling was a result of teachers not having the appropriate skills and training to incorporate DV teaching and learning into the curriculum: '*I think it's because teachers do not want to sit down talking to a group of students about relationships, they do not feel it's something they are qualified to do. It's down to knowledge really, because if teachers do not know what they are talking about they are obviously not providing their students with the correct information. I suppose teachers would not feel confident enough to do that in front of us if they do not know themselves*' (Thomas, FG27). This finding suggests that perhaps more attention should be given to the readiness of schools to deliver DV education, including the availability of specialist teacher training, so that teachers are equipped with the relevant knowledge to provide pupils with accurate information about DV competently and confidently. As found in Bundock et al.'s (2020) review, a possible explanation is that professionals in education (i.e., teachers) need training on ADV and where to signpost for help, as they can be important sources of help for adolescents.

Pupils attending Controlled and Integrated schools in this study felt that schools prioritised academic results over pupils' wellbeing, and this was a barrier to them learning about DV. A noted by Zack (FG4): '*I think domestic violence is not taught in schools because schools think about what will benefit you for getting a job. They do not teach you anything to benefit how to manage or cope with difficult life situations like this (domestic violence)*'. Although schools are under pressure to produce high academic outcomes and place highly in school league tables (Foley & Goldstein, 2012) this should not mean that pupil wellbeing is undermined. Wellbeing and healthy relationships are the foundations of learning. The immediate and long-term costs of DV can be high, affecting children's education as well as having

long-term developmental consequences (Lloyd, 2018). Unless schools address social issues such as DV, the ability of their pupils to succeed academically may be undermined. Where teacher performativity and student outcome measures in the form of examination results are at variance with the more holistic nurturing of students, efforts to support those impacted by DV could be hampered and diminished (Lloyd, 2018). Therefore, there may be a need for a rebalancing of the education system, whereby schools do not give precedence to academic outcomes at the expense of student wellbeing and personal development (Lloyd, 2018). If schools are expected to be a central agent for meeting the pastoral needs of all children and young people (McKee & Mason, 2015), schools should allow sufficient time to provide meaningful DV teaching and learning. We propose that the education budget considers allocating greater funds to enable schools to meet the pastoral needs of all pupils. Schools cannot afford not to teach about DV, especially when there is a strong likelihood that pupils are experiencing DV at home (Radford et al., 2013), and in their own romantic relationships (Barter et al., 2017; Young et al., 2021). Children and young people must have access to this knowledge as well as appropriate supports during schooling, and Northern Ireland (like the rest of the United Kingdom) has considerable progress to make in this area.

CONCLUSION

What happens in childhood and adolescence has profound implications for wellbeing in adult life. The prevalence of DV in early adolescence emphasises the need for addressing this enduring problem through prevention, early intervention and education. If schools are to facilitate education's role in tackling DV, the barriers identified by pupils in the present study may need to be considered as RSE—according to the pupils in this study—is not fit for purpose. Through seeking the perspectives of pupils, valuable insights and important lessons for the improvement and future development of DV education have emerged. From this we recommended improved and increased DV education, investment in teacher training and greater engagement in and preparation of the task. A limitation of our study is that a convenience sample was utilised; therefore, we cannot infer from the findings to the wider post-primary school pupil population from which the participants were drawn. Nonetheless, we did speak to a large amount of post-primary school pupils across Northern Ireland. To ensure young people are provided with information that is relevant and potentially effective, future research should consult with pupils to inform and influence the future development of DV educational interventions.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research presented in this paper was carried out with due consideration to all relevant ethical issues and in line with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research.

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