

## Exploring teachers' perceptions of teaching a preventative child abuse education programme in primary and special schools in Northern Ireland

Aisling McElearney<sup>1</sup>, Joanne Scott<sup>1</sup>, Anne Tracey<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>NSPCC, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom, <sup>2</sup>University of Ulster, Magee Campus, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom

### Background

Empirical data on the prevalence of child abuse indicates that many children experience physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or neglect (Cawson, 2000; Everson et al, 2008). Many more suffer domestic violence and bullying (UNICEF, 2006; Fekkes et al, 2005): all of these experiences can have pervasive and detrimental long term effects that permeate all areas of children's lives, including their mental health and wellbeing, and their engagement and attainment at school (Finkelhor, 1986; Glew et al, 2005). The distress many children experience is often further exacerbated by the fact that many do not seek help and support, particularly from professionals, until such time as they are severely distressed (Tylee et al, 2007; Rothi and Leavey, 2006), if at all. Reported barriers to help-seeking include the fact that many children fail to recognise what is happening to them as abusive and inappropriate (Wurtele and Owens, 1997; Miller-Perrin et al, 1990). Evidence given by young people within the context of the 'Clywch' Inquiry (2004) in Wales and the sexual abuse perpetrated by a drama teacher, highlighted that a lack of knowledge and skills contributed significantly to their vulnerability to abuse (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2004), a fact that is further supported by experienced National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) staff engaged in therapeutic work with children and young people who have experienced abuse.

Children need to learn how to recognise abusive behaviour and understand that abusive and manipulative relationships are never right or acceptable. They also need to have the skills to challenge such relationships, and know how best to access appropriate help and support.

In recent decades, a number of effective preventative child abuse education programmes have been developed in North America, Australia, New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland with a view to teaching children this self protection knowledge and skills (Kenny et al, 2008; Finklehor, 2007, Briggs and Hawkins, 1994; MacIntyre and Carr, 1999). Teacher support and involvement in the delivery of these programmes has been identified as a significant predictor of implementation and effectiveness (Briggs and Hawkins, 1997). However, some teachers are reluctant to be involved citing the sensitivity of content and lack of training and development as key barriers (Whiteside, 2001; Johnson, 1995).

### Research Questions

Despite some localised developments within the United Kingdom (for example, 'Broken Trust Shared Feelings' developed by Essex Safeguarding Children's Board, 2006), there has been little strategic development at government level. Presently, children attending primary school in many parts of the United Kingdom and in Northern Ireland are not formally exposed to a preventative curriculum that teaches them the knowledge and skills required to protect themselves from abuse. In 2008, the Department of Education funded the NSPCC to conduct an exploratory research study into the development of such a programme in Northern Ireland. This paper reports on one element of that study, and is concerned with the perceptions of teachers in relation to teaching a preventative child abuse education programme in primary and special schools in Northern Ireland

### Objectives

- To describe what 'keeping safe' means to teachers who work at all levels in all types of grant aided primary schools (maintained, controlled, integrated, special) in Northern Ireland

- To describe teachers' experience of and attitudes to, the teaching of 'keeping safe' messages within the primary school curriculum in Northern Ireland
- To identify the barriers and factors that would facilitate teachers to teach 'keeping safe' messages within the primary school curriculum in Northern Ireland
- To identify the resource and support implications that would arise out of teaching 'keeping safe' messages within the primary school curriculum in Northern Ireland

## **Methods**

An instrumental case study design was employed. Nine focus groups were held with teachers (7) and other schools staff (2) between November 08 and March 09. A schedule of topics was used alongside a narrative vignette to promote discussion and provide a concrete platform from which to explicate participants' experiences, views and attitudes of this relatively sensitive topic (Hughes, 1998). The sampling strategy sought to include representation from the range of school management/ sector types as well as rural/urban location and school size: five homogenous and two heterogenous groups were facilitated. Ethical approval was granted by the Organisational Research Ethics Committee (NSPCC) and best practice guidelines regarding the conduct of educational research were adhered at all stages of the research process.

## **Frame**

Richie and Spencer's (2000) 'Framework' for analysis was applied to the rich contextual data. The five key stages employed in the analysis procedure were as follows: familiarization; identifying a thematic framework; indexing; charting; mapping and interpretation. The analysis revealed that the 'story' of the data was embedded in six key themes as follows: Introducing the Keeping Safe Debate; A Focus on Intervention - responding to abuse; Approaching prevention; the role of the school; The role of the teacher; and Building a school's capacity.

## **Research findings**

Research findings confirm that the safety and wellbeing of children is of paramount concern to teachers. However, the development and implementation of a strategic preventative child abuse education programme in Northern Ireland has significant implications for the teacher's role, and for their professional development to fulfil at role.

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