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## **Containment and denial:**

### **Raising awareness of unconscious processes present when teachers are working with children and families where there is domestic abuse**

*This paper presents findings from a small-scale mixed methods research project exploring the perceptions and experiences of primary school teachers who have worked with children where there has been domestic abuse in the family. The paper focusses on the psychoanalytic concepts of containment and denial present in such situations. Questionnaire findings suggested that there was a significant difference between teachers who had attended relevant training and those who had not in their confidence levels in a) responding to disclosures and b) recognising whether a child was exposed to domestic abuse (n=165). Semi-structured interviews, analysed using thematic analysis, were then carried out with teachers experienced in teaching children exposed to domestic abuse (n=8). Four overarching themes were identified: emotional factors of the teacher's role; working within the school system; the relationship with the child and family; and uncertainty about what teachers need to know. Findings from the two phases were connected and are discussed in relation to the psychoanalytic concepts of containment and denial at the individual and organisational level. It is hoped that findings could be used to raise awareness of unconscious processes and so help to provide holistic containment for those working with vulnerable families.*

*Keywords: domestic abuse, containment, denial, education, psychology*

## INTRODUCTION

Experiences of violence in the home can be overwhelming for the victim and for the children of the victim, and the destructive effects of domestic abuse can pervade the emotional life of the child whether at home or at school. Teachers may need to respond to a child who has disclosed domestic abuse, and so be faced with a situation that draws heavily on their practical and emotional resources. For some teachers this can be a daunting and worrying experience that demands a certain openness and resilience; it may evoke uncertainty beyond any knowledge gained from formal training in child protection and it may lead to fear, anger and confusion. This research explores the responses of a group of teachers in the United Kingdom to domestic abuse in school children in their care. Through focussing on possible unconscious processes that may be present in difficult times, it is hoped to shine a light on what support those working with vulnerable children and families may need in order to better understand themselves and those around them.

Domestic abuse continues to permeate the lives of approximately 1.3 million women a year (Office of National Statistics, 2016). The World Health Organisation estimates that one third of women (30%) who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner in their lifetime (WHO, 2016). A gendered approach is adopted within this paper so that unless specified in the literature or by a participant, perpetrators of domestic abuse – abusers – will be referred to as him/men and the abused as her/women. This is in no way meant to negate the existence of violence against men in the home or in same-sex relationships – for example ONS also report 716,000 men as being abused annually (ONS, 2016). However, it more closely reflects the statistics and the literature on this area with the understanding that domestic abuse persists within a wider context of degradation and denigration of women and girls in society (c.f. Hester, 2013).

There is no statutory definition of domestic abuse so the non-statutory cross-government one is offered here:

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 (Strickland and Allen, 2017: 4).

Research shows that around one in five children have been exposed to domestic abuse (Radford, 2011) and it is a factor in over half of all serious case reviews (Sidebotham, Brandon, Bailey, Belderson, Dodsworth, Garstang, Harrison, Retzer, and Sorensen, 2016). Children who have been exposed to domestic abuse are more likely to have behavioural and emotional problems (Humphreys, 2006) and to be at risk from other types of abuse (Radford, 2011).

This research was carried out in an outer London authority in the United Kingdom as part of an educational psychology doctoral programme. A further account of the study with a focus on staff wellbeing can be found in a previous paper by the same author (Author, 2012). It is the aim of this paper to provide in depth analysis of two unconscious processes that seemed to be apparent when analysing the accounts of the teachers interviewed. These are connected with the psychoanalytical concepts of containment and denial.

### **Containment**

In Bion's work (1959; 1984) he writes about the container/contained concept. In the first instance, this concept describes the way that the main caregiver holds onto the baby's upsets and frustrations. The caregiver then returns them in a more manageable way when the baby is ready – for example providing words or reassurance or sustenance for their difficulties. To feel contained therefore is to feel safe in the knowledge that something or someone else is holding onto the unmanageable (Bion, 1984). As Douglas (2007: 33) says:

Containment is thought to occur when one person receives and understands the emotional communication of another without being overwhelmed by it, processes it and then communicates understanding and recognition back to the other person. This process can restore the capacity to think in the other person.

### **Denial**

Denial is a fundamental idea in psychoanalytic thinking. Hinshelwood describes denial as occurring when “a piece of perception is obliterated” (Hinshelwood, 1991: 270). Denial is part of the unconscious defences that are used when feelings become overwhelming. It is a denying of the reality that exists in part of the mind. Freud described defence mechanisms as a way to protect the ego against anxiety, and denial is one such mechanism (Freud, 1915).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A systematic review of the literature was carried out before the research took place (see Author, 2012). At that time there was no literature exploring the perceptions and experiences of teachers working with children and young people where there was domestic abuse. There was however extensive literature on the impact of domestic abuse on children and young people and how it might manifest in their behaviour and learning (c.f. Baldry, 2003; Fantuzzo, DePaola, Lambert, Martino, Anderson, and Sutton, 1991; Dodd, 2009; Huth-Bocks, Levendosky and Semel, 2001). Within the systematic search, no literature was encountered that explored primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of supporting children exposed to domestic abuse in the UK. However, there is an extensive literature focussing more generally on the potential impact on children of exposure to domestic abuse. Studies tend to focus on the social and behavioural aspects of children's functioning, but there is also literature looking at the impact on learning, future relationships and mental health of children exposed to domestic abuse. It was this initial literature that enabled the researcher to develop the research questions and see the absence of findings on the views and perceptions of teachers.

For the purposes of this paper a systematic search of the literature was carried out again to see if there was any additional up-to-date literature. Therefore the same inclusion and exclusion criteria were in place except that the date was altered to between 2011 to present day (2017). The focus was on finding peer-reviewed, English language articles that met the aims of the systematic search (previous research around teachers and domestic abuse, psychologists and domestic abuse and impact on children of domestic abuse) and that were deemed relevant.

In 2016 Young, Lehman, Faherty and Sandefer published their research on the long-term effects of domestic abuse training for educators. They looked at 22 rural school districts in America and found that after four years there was a significant increase in confidence in working with families where there was domestic violence (Young et al, 2016). This links to the quantitative findings of this research where teachers expressed more confidence in working with children and families where there had been domestic abuse if they had received training (Author, 2012). Turner, Broad, Drinkwater, Firth, Hester, Stanley, Szilassy, and Feder (2015) carried out a systematic review of the interventions to improve responses of professionals to children exposed to domestic violence and abuse. The authors based at the

University of Bristol, England, found that training programmes could improve the knowledge, attitudes and clinical competence of professionals up to a year after delivery.

Guggisberg (2017) looked at the role of teachers in terms of prevention work in Australia. She found that the more understanding that teachers had of intimate partner violence and the impact that it can have on women and children the more invested they became in promoting preventative programmes in the school (Guggisberg, 2017). Selvik, Raaheim, and Øverlien (2017) focused on the relationship between teachers and children. They explored the experiences of children who have had multiple stays in refuges for abused women, and, how the way that teachers recognised their situations impacted on them.

In 2013 Lourenco, Baptista, Senra, Basilio, Monteiro de Castro Bhone (2013) based in Brazil carried out a review of the literature exploring the consequences of exposure to domestic abuse for children. They highlighted the work of Sani who stresses that “children exposed to violence between parents can be considered forgotten victims, since they do not fall into the direct victim category (Sani, 2006, quoted in Lourenco et al, 2013: 267). The literature reviewed indicated a range of consequences from witnessing tension and conflict in the home, ranging “from physical marks and deprivation of basic needs (biological and psychological) to the emergence of physiological, emotional, cognitive and behavioural problems” (Lourenco et al, 2013: 268). This could also include post-traumatic stress disorder and feelings of anxiety, insecurity and shame. The limitations of this study could be seen as the lack of focus on specific ages of children and delineation of types of what was referred to as ‘interpersonal violence’. There was also a focus (from the systematic review) of articles from America and Brazil and predominately from one author.

Since the original literature search for this research, there have been further studies as highlighted above which discuss the role of teachers in terms of training and their role with mothers and children where there has been domestic abuse. These however have not focussed on their direct experiences and the unconscious processes at play which is the central objective of this paper.

#### RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH

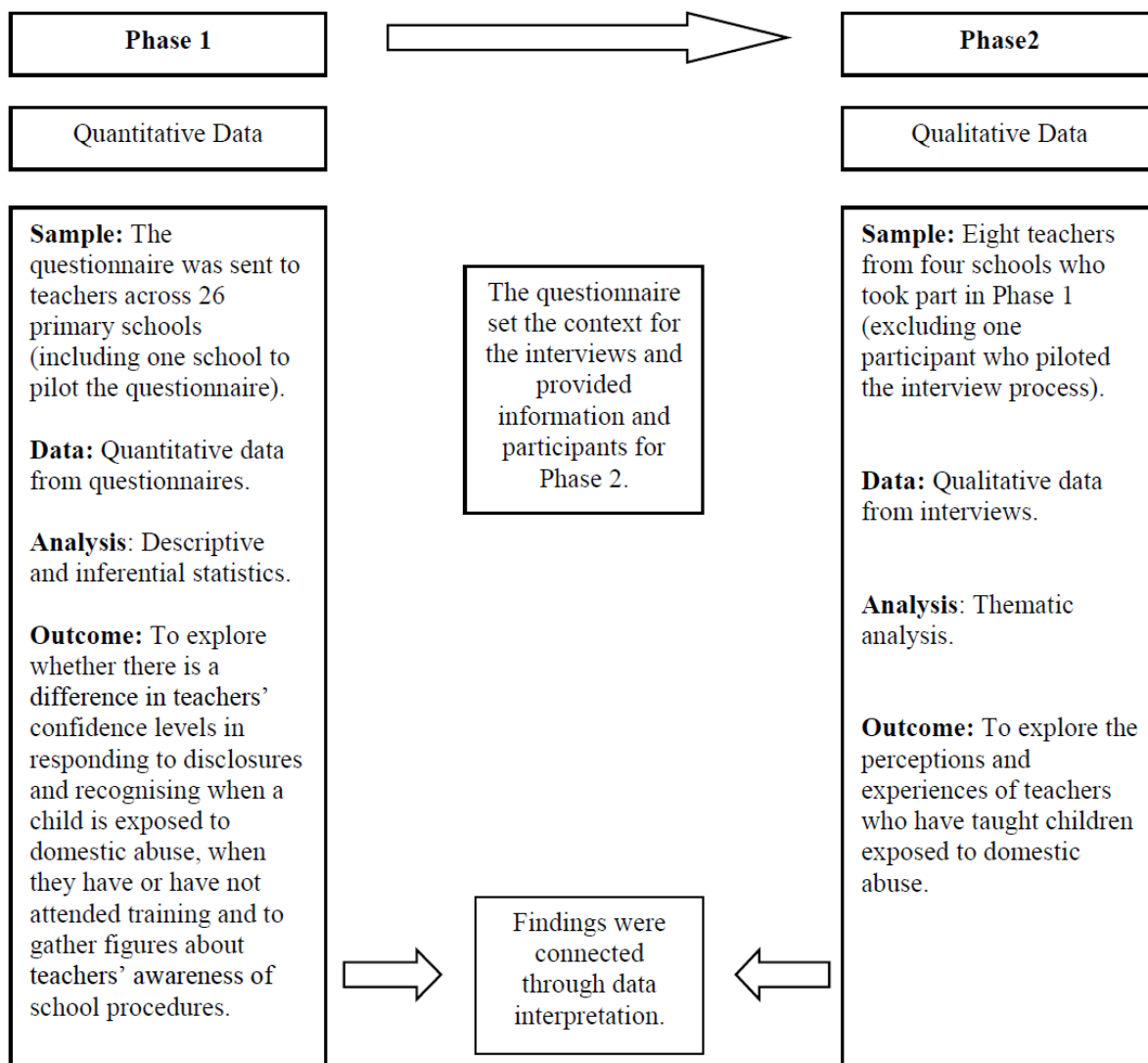
Domestic abuse was highlighted as a research topic for the Local Authority where the study took place, as there was little knowledge of whether teachers had attended training, whether

teachers had knowledge about what to do following disclosures or following concerns about domestic abuse in relation to children in the classroom, and what their experience was of supporting these children. It was noticeable when conducting the literature searches for this research that there was a gap in the literature in the UK that specifically linked the perceptions and experiences of teachers with the effects of domestic abuse on the children they work with. A mixed methods research project was proposed to provide information on how many teachers had attended training and how many had information about basic procedural knowledge, followed by an in-depth exploration of the perceptions and experiences of teachers who have taught children exposed to domestic abuse.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A two-phase sequential mixed-methods design was carried out from a pragmatic position.

Figure 1: Visual of research design



The initial questionnaire had an opt-in option for respondents to say that they were happy to be contacted for an interview (appendix 1). All eight who completed the form were invited to take part. Interviews took place in the school where the teacher worked, at a time that suited them (mostly after school). The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The ethical factors were clearly considered and all participants were apprised of the aims and purpose of the study, of what would happen to their data, and of the option to leave the process (c.f. Yardley, 2000; BPS code of conduct, 2009). Gardner and Coombs (2010: 64) state that “the researcher’s ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions form the paradigm or overarching philosophical interpretative framework”. Pragmatism is thus a position that takes into account the complexities of the research world and the possible polarisation of epistemological and ontological positions within qualitative and quantitative research.



Philosophies of knowledge underpin the positions we take in research. A researcher's epistemology is concerned with how we understand the world, the way we know things (Creswell, 2009). The pragmatic approach has a long philosophical history and emphasises the importance of aims being flexible and the necessity of avoiding rigid positions within the epistemological debates. A pragmatist's view is that the researcher can concentrate on what is of interest and of value to them as a researcher at the same time as producing constructive research outcomes and being aware of the impact research findings can have (Teddlie and Tashkkori, 2003). The pragmatic understanding is that what works is important, rather than seeking one 'truth'. Therefore it can also be seen as providing "the new discourse of social science research, which embraces plurality of method and multiple methods philosophies" (Maxcy, 2003: 52).

### *Quantitative data analysis*

Findings from Phase 1 illustrated that if teachers had attended training they were more confident in recognising when a child is exposed to domestic abuse. Attendance on training also meant that teachers were more confident in knowing how to respond if a child disclosed that they were exposed to domestic abuse. The majority of participants could list signs and indicators associated with exposure to domestic abuse; knew who to talk to if they had concerns they suspected a child was exposed to domestic abuse; knew the procedures for recording an incident of concern; and had read the safeguarding policy and procedures. The findings of Phase 1 also showed that there were positive relationships (using inferential statistics) between teachers' confidence in recognising when a child is exposed to domestic abuse and knowing a) the procedure for recording incidents of concern and b) who to talk to about concerns. Findings also showed a positive relationship between teachers' confidence in responding to disclosures and, as above, knowing procedures and who to talk to.

### *Qualitative data analysis*

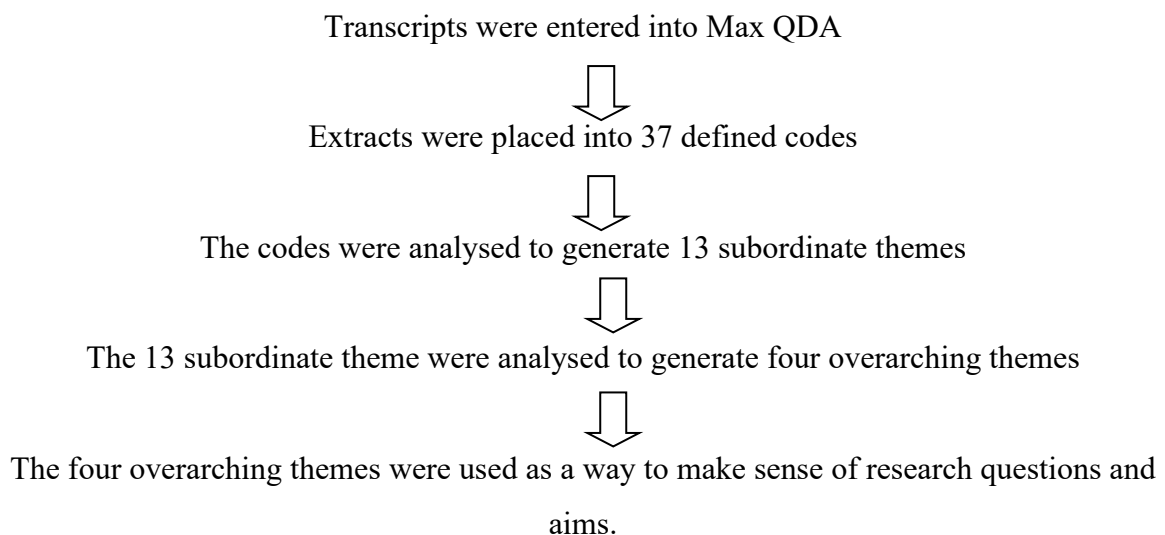
Eight participants took part in the second phase. The inclusion criteria were that all were class teachers in mainstream primary schools who had been working in the school at least one year. All had worked with a child that they knew (not suspected) had been living with domestic abuse. No other demographic information about the participants was recorded. The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis provides an opportunity to make sense of and describe rich data in terms of themes as well as to allow an interpretation and analysis of the meaning of the themes (Boyatzis,

1998). Thematic analysis was chosen rather than Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as this research hoped to find shared themes amongst the participants and to make sense of their perceptions and experiences in relation to the wider context of domestic abuse rather than only their individual thoughts. Grounded Theory (GT) was also considered, however it was not felt that this research was searching for a theory but rather was exploring the area from a broader premise.

Throughout the qualitative process, recommended stages of thematic analysis, taken from Braun and Clarke (2006), were followed. Working pragmatically, a hybrid model of Braun and Clarke's deductive and inductive approaches was used by the researcher. This comprised an iterative approach, going back and forth through the analysis.

A deductive approach means that the research is led by existing research whilst an inductive approach means the research is led by the data. In this research, an inductive approach was the predominant model followed, although the initial literature review meant that some existing research ideas were present.

Figure 2: Illustration of thematic analysis stages: <sup>1</sup>



The research aimed to answer the following three research questions:

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<sup>1</sup> Although this diagram suggests the process was linear, as the details of the stages highlight, this was an iterative process.

- Do primary school teachers who have attended training on domestic abuse feel more confident to a) recognise when a child is exposed to domestic abuse and b) know how to respond if a child discloses that they have been exposed to domestic abuse, than teachers who have not attended training?
- What are the perceptions and experiences of teachers who have taught and supported children exposed to domestic abuse?
- In what way do themes from interviews focussing on primary school teachers' perceptions and experiences of supporting children exposed to domestic abuse provide insights about the relationships found in the questionnaire analysis between procedures, training and confidence levels?

## **ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

This section starts with a summary of the 'answers' to the research questions before a more in depth discussion under the four themes of the qualitative findings that link specifically to the issues of containment and denial – an area of focus for this paper.

### *Research Question 1*

Phase 1 findings indicated that using a 'test of difference', there was a statistical significance, with a small effect size, between attending training and increased confidence levels in recognising domestic abuse and being able to respond to disclosures, to those who had not attended training. There were positive relationships between knowing the procedures to record an incident of concern and having confidence in recognising domestic abuse and being able to respond to disclosures.

The findings from the first phase led to participants being identified and selected for the second phase. Teachers who were known to have taught a child/children exposed to domestic abuse were interviewed in order to explore, in depth, their perceptions and experiences. This enabled further exploration of the link between confidence and training and to consider some of the complexities that could also influence the relationship between the two factors.

### *Research Question 2*

The perceptions and experiences of teachers who have taught and supported children exposed to domestic abuse can be understood in relation to the interplay between the need for teachers

to follow clear procedures and the lack of clarity and the fear of the unknown they experience when working with these children and families. The anxiety about keeping the child safe and doing the right thing by the child seemed to be made more manageable by the form filling and the knowledge that there were other people who were there to support the child and family.

Interestingly, teachers perceived themselves to be vulnerable in terms of personal accusations and their fears about the response of the families to their role, in relation to how to build relationships with children and families exposed to domestic abuse. This was an unexpected finding generated from the interviews with experienced teachers.

Teachers perceived that exposure to domestic abuse had an impact on the child's behaviour and learning as well as how they related to peers and the teacher. All of the experienced teachers interviewed saw this as a negative impact. For example, behaviour was a concern, either in terms of the child being aggressive or confrontational (externalising) or being quiet, clingy or withdrawn (internalising). The teachers described the children as not being able to access their learning because of behaviour or due to learning difficulties. Relationships with peers were occasionally constricted by the child not being in school for long, not being able to have friends home, or being aggressive in their play. Teachers described the difficulties involved in ensuring that the child exposed to domestic abuse was accessing learning as much as possible, and that they were able to have space to express their feelings, while at the same time having to manage their behaviour in the classroom. All of the teachers stressed the importance of knowing the whole child in order to notice and understand a change in the child and in building a relationship with them and helping the child to feel safe.

### *Research Question 3*

The findings from the Phase 2 interviews with experienced teachers offer insights into the significant findings from the Phase 1 initial questionnaire, which showed a positive difference between teachers who had attended training, in terms of their confidence levels in recognising when a child is exposed to domestic abuse and in responding to disclosures of domestic abuse, than those who had not attended training. Overarching themes generated from the interviews with teachers who had previously taught children exposed to domestic abuse illustrated that there were other factors relating to teachers' confidence levels than training alone.

Teachers sought to find ways of managing their emotional response to the work. They wanted to understand and follow the school system and procedures, and they also needed to acknowledge and think about the complexities of building relationships with the child and family and to set a parameter to what they needed to know and what should be kept hidden in terms of information about the child and family. These themes opened up the findings showing positive relationships between knowing who to talk to and knowing procedures for recording incidents of abuse, with confidence levels in recognising and responding to disclosures of domestic abuse. Training courses and knowledge of procedures do not necessarily address the complex feelings and responses of the teachers and how they might be managed.

This paper focuses on the findings from the research questions in relation to the psychoanalytic concepts of containment and denial so the four overarching themes that emerged from the data are discussed within that context. The four themes are used as headings to explore the quantitative and qualitative findings in relation to possible unconscious processes.

### **Emotional factors of the teacher's role**

In this theme the role of the teacher was raised by participants in relation to the emotional factors of supporting children exposed to domestic abuse. Participants talked about experiencing strong emotions and yet receiving little (if any) formal support. Five of the participants talked about the value of informal support, of being able to “just kind of unpack a little bit” (Rebecca, interview 5, line 139). In contrast when they did not feel comfortable about talking to someone, or there was no one available, they were left feeling alone and having to defend themselves. As Laura says “you don't feel you've been supported, you feel actually I'm having to stand my ground here” (Laura, interview 4, line 188). For the teachers who were offered formal support, accepting it was almost seen as not being able to manage and having to let go of the teaching role.

This connects with the idea of being emotionally contained. The ability to have reflective supervision and the space to process what has happened is something that is missing from the teaching world in a way that happens in no other frontline service (Hawkins and Shohet, 2012). Not having a containing and thoughtful space “equates, in Bion's terms, to an

individual's impaired functioning and limited ability to think about and cope with anxiety-provoking situations and to a group's inability to perform the primary task for which they exist" (Ruch, 2007: 675). This containment is not something that is readily available to school staff despite the pressures they are under. As Natalie said in her interview:

I suppose it's actually the whole process of talking about a child, because obviously I haven't really. I've just chatted about the experiences I've had, but I haven't formally sat down and really explored and thought about how I feel, and just the process has been quite nice. That reflection and, um, having the time to just sit down and think about how I dealt with things (interview 1, line 376).

This desire to talk through what they had experienced was ambivalent, mixed with repeated comments such as being "fine because it's, it's your job" (Katherine, interview 7, line 80). The procedures and the boundaries of her role perhaps enabled her to feel contained and 'fine' in continuing to support the pupil.

There could also be an element of protection of what may be too hard to see and bear – perhaps denial of the reality of what is happening? By trying to focus on their role and limitations they could deny (unconsciously) the full emotional impact of what might be happening when working with these children and families. As one of the participants explained "what you want to do is go 'oh my word I want to take you home', but you can't do that, you have to act as normal as possible really" (Jane, interview 6, line 78).

### **Working within the school system**

Findings from the quantitative stage indicated that knowing the procedures and who to talk to, positively correlated with confidence levels in both recognising when a child is exposed to domestic abuse and responding to disclosures. In the interviews, teachers implied that knowing what the procedures were to record incidents of concern and knowing who to talk to about concerns, made them feel more able and more confident to deal with what could have felt like an overwhelming situation. Procedural knowledge and awareness of other people there to talk to about concerns could therefore act as a form of containment for the teacher.

Alongside the systems in place in schools (i.e. procedures and knowing who to talk to) which act as a form of containment, there is also the idea that some participants seemed to (consciously and unconsciously) use the procedures as a defence against the anxiety of the

task of supporting a child exposed to domestic abuse. Protecting oneself is a necessary defence; a certain amount of denial can be helpful to cope with painful and difficult emotions and circumstances. However, reducing those feelings entirely through procedural acts can stop the thinking and feeling which can lead to action and change (Ruch, 2007). Here there is a similarity with the seminal work of Menzies-Lyth (1960). Menzies-Lyth described how staff in a hospital used the systems in place to defend against the difficult emotions aroused when working with sick and sometimes dying people. This could be a helpful way of thinking about the teachers in this study and the ways that they managed the emotional response to seeing the impact on children of exposure to domestic abuse. The procedures in place meant that the teachers had a practical task that they could achieve, rather than working with or thinking about the significant harm of the child being exposed to domestic abuse.

An example of this comes from Jane (interview 6) who was present when a child she was working with disclosed details about turbulence in the home life and about physical abuse inflicted on him by his family. Jane felt that she had “to switch off, and be, be like a robot and sort of do your job” (line 162). One of the ways in which Jane ‘switched off’ and ‘did her job’ was to focus on the procedures and a task that was achievable:

Right, I need to have to concentrate on this and get as much detail as possible, because in the end all the details that I was writing down ended up being evidence and, you know, a report as such, so um you know it’s quite important (line 88).

However, whilst there seems to be an emotional distancing provided by the procedures, it does not negate the reality that there is a vulnerable child central to the situation. This means that “at the same time, you’ve got to think about the child all the time” (line 90). This poses the question of whether there is the space for the child and the teacher’s emotional response within the procedural commitments that teachers have and indeed perhaps choose to focus on and follow.

The procedures seem to have a containing function in managing and providing answers for what might otherwise be unmanageable. The teachers follow the procedures and appear comforted (or concerned) by their confidence (or lack of confidence) in them. So following the procedures perhaps also acts as a form of containment in managing difficult feelings:

another colleague saw mum in town, with a very, very beaten up face you know?  
Broken nose, black eyes, you know. It was very disturbing and I remember she was so

upset she phoned me at a weekend and said “I’ve seen this” so I said “record what you saw” (Katherine, interview 7, line 40).

However, for the colleague ‘recording what she saw’ might not take away the reality that she would have to go into the school and perhaps working with that child the next day, knowing: it was a really vicious attack. I mean her [the mothers] nose was completely broken and still hasn’t healed very well. She says it will never heal properly now and she [the child] witnessed it all, so it’s so upsetting (line 76).

These procedures act as a type of organisational containment. Ruch argues that it is not enough to have the policies and procedures in place on their own as they can be used (c.f. Menzies-Lyth) as “institutional defences” (2007: 675). Therefore, clear policies and procedures must be “implemented in the context of containing, thoughtful managerial relationships which act as containers for the anxieties that practice and organisational uncertainty generate” (Ruch, 2007: 675). This does not seem to be a practice that features currently within the school system.

### **The relationship with the child and family**

For some of the teachers who were interviewed, being aware of the child and family and their needs was key to noticing the impact on the child of domestic abuse. In particular they stressed the importance of really knowing the child in allowing them to be more aware of changes and differences in the child’s behaviour. It is important to be mindful that these teachers are with the child every day and are in a better position, compared with other educational professionals, to really get to know the child and note any unusual changes. All but one of the teachers talked about poor intellectual functioning, or the difficulties with attitude or behaviour, limiting the child’s learning capacity, again affirming existing literature (Huth-Bocks, Levendosky and Semel, 2001). Teachers, in both research phases, commented that the children exposed to domestic abuse found aspects of socialising difficult (c.f. Fantuzzo et al., 1991). Nonetheless, many of the children the participants talked about in the second phase, did form friendships, although these were affected by not being able to have friends round to the home (Natalie, interview 1), not staying in school long enough (Jane, interview 6), or peers being scared of the child’s behaviour (Carole, interview 8).



It can be difficult in the current climate of schools to have the time to develop relationships with the children and families in the classroom. This can be an institutional form of denial of relationships. Schools are set up with a hierarchy that promotes “performance indicators, evidence-based practice and outcome-driven procedures. The emphasis is on eliminating risk, and such a focus brings with it frequent organizational re-structuring” (Ruch, 2007: 663). To be able to have the space to tolerate not knowing and the ambiguity of working with people, especially when they might be vulnerable like these children and families is not something that is prioritised in most schools. The space to not know can be the way to open up to uncertainty and where making sense of things actually happens (Mercieca, 2013). This is a way of enhancing professional practice in some jobs, for example psychologists, and yet those working directly with the children every day (i.e. the teachers) have no space to think.

It is not enough to have one element of an holistic containment concept (emotional, organisational and epistemological) – all parts are needed for true and effective reflective practice. This is well illustrated in this research where although the value of training was shown there were additional factors needed to ensure its effectiveness and how meaningful it could be to participants. To some extent the training that provides containment through a sense of being initiated into a group of professional experts and knowledge also inadvertently evokes denial in that there can be a disturbing sense that too much information is being given which could be overwhelming.

### **Uncertainty about what teachers need to know**

Interwoven through parts of the interviews there was the defensive process of denial in not being able to face the reality of what was happening in the homes of the children that the teachers were working with. As Halton says, “central among these defences is denial, which involves pushing certain thoughts, feelings and experiences out of conscious awareness because they have become too anxiety-provoking” (Halton, 1994: 12). With the teachers that were interviewed in this research there was a real lived complexity about how much they ‘needed to know’.

It can be helpful to think about how some of the hidden aspects of domestic abuse are reflected on at an individual, group and organisational level within a school (Kelly, 1993). The denial of the impact about what is happening, the normalising of family difficulties, and

what should be public and what should be private, are aspects that the teachers in this study seemed to be struggling with.

For example one of the interviewees Rebecca said “I mean it’s hard to get that balance, you know, that, you know, what I need to know and what I don’t need to know” (Rebecca, interview 5, line 314). There was a very real fear from participants that they were being caught up with the families, accused of something or even vulnerable to the violence being turned on them. Some of the not knowing was a protective factor for the teachers to keep them psychologically safe from the fear of knowing. As Carole explained “So I knew enough to be safe, I knew enough to set up, um, how he could manage in the classroom, but I didn’t know too much to fear the child as it were” (Carole, interview 8, line 22).

Again, the work of Bion (1978) can offer insight. The reality of what the children were experiencing and the relationship that they had with the teacher might have made it too hard for the teacher to have contemplated what they needed to know. In order to protect themselves, teachers do not want too much information. This seems to be the dilemma that Jane struggled with in the extract above. As Bion (1978: 43) says:

The trouble is that supposing we reach that point our feelings of fear or terror might be so great that we couldn’t stand it. So the search for truth can be limited both by our lack of intelligence or wisdom, and by our emotional inheritance. The fear of knowing the truth can be so powerful that the doses of truth are lethal.

This can help us to make sense of the uncertainty that participants expressed about what they needed to know, and what they did not need to know, and the fear about some knowledge. Such fear can be in terms of the realisation of the overwhelming reality for the children, or in terms of the teacher’s role, including what they then might have to do and have responsibility for. One reason, then, that it is so hard for the teachers to express what they need to know, and so difficult not to get tangled in this dilemma, is perhaps “the fear which is so powerful that it makes thinking impossible” (Bion, 1978: 45).

It is perhaps a process of denial that within many social work organisations (and increasingly in school settings) there is a sense that the “emphasis is on eliminating risk, and such a focus brings with it frequent organizational re-structuring” (Ruch, 2007). Within the education system, time is not given to think and reflect on practice. This is highlighted by the fact that

supervision is not an integral part of school systems and the space to reflect is not valued (whilst seeming to be much needed) as it is in other professions (c.f. Partridge, 2012; Jackson, 2008).

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: TEACHERS AND PSYCHOLOGISTS**

This research has highlighted the complexities for teachers, unconsciously and consciously, of working with children and families where there has been domestic abuse. Psychologists working in schools are in a good position to support the whole school to think about creating a thoughtful and reflective work setting. Individual consultations with senior members of the staff team and training on the findings of research such as that presented in this paper can provide a way of thinking about complexities of school organisations (i.e. Ruch, 2007; Author, 2012). School psychologists are also well trained to facilitate individual and group supervision and promote the need for containment of school staff (Partridge, 2012; Jackson, 2008).

It is also the role of psychologists to facilitate training and in these sessions to highlight the unconscious processes in a way to help teachers to understand and reflect on what might be emotionally happening for them. It is possible that through an awareness of these processes staff wellbeing may increase which could impact the recruitment and retention rates of teachers which is currently a serious concern. The Department for Education (DfE) figures show that in the twelve months to November 2016 over 50,000 qualified teachers in England left the state sector, which equates to one in ten teachers leaving the profession. In October 2016, the Government confirmed that nearly a third of teachers who joined the profession in 2010 had left teaching within five years. This is not only an issue in the United Kingdom. McCarthy, Lineback, Fitchett, Lambert, Eyal and Boyle (2017) state that “teacher stress is a worldwide phenomenon associated with detrimental outcomes for teachers and schools” (157).

Ruch in her work talks about holistic containment, which is something that psychologists would be in a good position to think about with schools:

Holistically containing settings acknowledge the inter-dependence of the diverse contexts and types of containment and provide the optimal conditions for the development of holistic reflective practice (Ruch, 2007: 674).

In relation to the role of teachers, the researcher is aware that working with children who are exposed to domestic abuse is one of the many aspects/stressors of a teacher’s job and not the only contributor to their wellbeing. Teachers are under increasing demands to balance teaching expectations with responding to their pupils’ sense of emotional resilience and wellbeing (Weare, 2010). One off training sessions have their limitations and therefore it is a potential role for EPs to be able to develop relationships with their schools to be available to structure and reflect on what holistic containment could mean for each individual school. EPs are well placed to offer ongoing emotional support through supervision to ensure that those providing a structure of holistic containment are also being contained themselves (c.f. Hulusi and Maggs, 2015).

### **LIMITATIONS**

As this research was carried out in one Authority in England it is not, nor does it claim to be, generalizable across all settings to all teachers. It was a small scale study and therefore needs to be read with that in mind. It is also noted that within the second phase of the research, the interviews, all participants were white and female. Although this represents the main demographic of teaching staff in the Local Authority, this is a limitation of this study.

The author was also mindful of the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies used and considered ways to counter the limitations.

**Table 1:** Strengths and weaknesses of questionnaires

<b>Strengths of questionnaires</b>	<b>Weaknesses of questionnaires</b>
Questionnaires are time efficient in that they can allow the researcher to reach a number of people and the data can be straightforward to analyse.	Information from questionnaires does not allow an in-depth explanation of why the person answered the way they did or other factors that might influence their response.
Questionnaires allow the respondent to remain entirely anonymous.	Questionnaires are not accessible for all. For example those who are illiterate.
Interviewer bias cannot impact on the response.	Bias from participants self-selecting. Those that are more interested, have motivations or attitudes that drive them to want to complete it.

The strengths presented in the table above were relevant to this study. The weaknesses were counteracted by 1) a second phase of interviews with selected participants, 2) the accessibility of questionnaires to teachers, and 3) having the researcher or a member of staff committed to

high participant involvement and therefore encouraging teachers to complete the questionnaires.

**Table 2:** Strengths and weaknesses of interviews

Strengths of interview	Weaknesses of interviews
Researcher is able to explore a sensitive area in-depth with the respondent.	Impact of the interviewer bias both during the interview and during the analysis.
Provides an opportunity to clarify meanings.	Can be time-consuming both in planning, conducting and analysing the interviews.

The strengths of interviewing outweighed the weaknesses. Awareness of interviewer bias was mitigated by use of an interview schedule, by peer discussion during analysis and frequent supervision for the researcher. The time-consuming element was noted and therefore a manageable number of participants were selected.

### CONCLUSIONS

This paper has presented a unique piece of research in an area that is having increasing prominence in schools in the United Kingdom (Ofsted, 2017). An aim of the research was to raise awareness and it is hoped that through the dissemination process and through carrying out the actual research, the topic of domestic abuse will be heightened in teachers’ and EPs’ consciousness. As Rebecca said at the start of her interview:

I think that, a lot of the time, we think about the victims being, you know, the person being actually physically or emotionally abused, but the impact is quite huge and I think that people don’t take seriously enough the impact that has on children in school on a day to day basis (interview 5, line 5).

The topic of domestic abuse is very much a real world issue and one where there are no answers, no clear ways forward, and no set responses, and this uncertainty has had to be tolerated throughout this research and will be in the future lives of many teachers, children and families.

The purpose of this paper was to focus on the unconscious processes of containment and denial. It is the view of the author that adding an awareness of these unconscious processes to the safeguarding trainings that are currently available for those working with children in schools would help to promote teacher wellbeing and increase their resilience to stay in such

an emotionally demanding job. Domestic abuse is a complex and pervasive act that dominates millions of women and children's lives worldwide. Schools are often the only safe retreat that children have. It is crucial that the impact of children exposed to domestic abuse on the staff working in schools is considered in more depth, and that knowledge of these psychoanalytic concepts, and a language and ambience in which we can make use of them, is made more generally available. By shining a light on the unconscious processes of containment and denial we can acknowledge, recognise and understand the need for them and try to develop greater resilience within educational systems.

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**Appendix 1**

As you may know, X supports an increasing number of families affected by domestic abuse. Estimated figures suggest that over 23,000 women in X could suffer from domestic abuse during their lives. Within X schools, in 2005, there were 120 young people on the Child Protection register – 80% of these children had a reference to domestic abuse recorded on file.

XX, as part of the Educational Psychology Service in X, is conducting research in the area of domestic abuse. We would appreciate it if you would take the time to complete this brief questionnaire. Participation in this research is voluntary and all responses will remain anonymous and confidential.

**There are no right or wrong answers; we are simply interested in finding out what your experiences and thoughts are about domestic abuse. The aim of this research is to highlight good practice and to explore how to support teachers with the possible challenges of working with children affected by domestic abuse.**

If you are willing to take part in the subsequent stage of this valuable research, then please complete the section below. This would provide an opportunity to talk about this area in more depth in an interview with the researcher XX. This discussion will take place in the autumn term and will last approximately one hour – you will be invited to share your perceptions and experiences of working with children affected by domestic abuse. You will receive further information about the interview process before you agree to take part and you have the opportunity to withdraw your participation at any stage.

Thank you for participating in this research.

I am willing to be contacted in the autumn term to find out more about being interviewed for this research. I understand that this interview will be exploring my perceptions and experiences of supporting children exposed to domestic abuse.

Name: .....

School: .....

Email address: .....

If you decide not to complete this questionnaire or would not like to be contacted about interviews, could you please briefly outline your reasons below? This will enable us to explore the relevance of this research for teachers.

.....  
.....

Please return this form along with the completed questionnaire in the designated envelope in your school.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me on \*\*\*.

Many thanks, XX. X Educational Psychology Service.

**Before answering please read the definition of domestic abuse below to help you consider your responses.**

*“... any incident of threatening behaviour, violence or abuse (psychological, physical, sexual, financial or emotional) between adults who are or have been intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality.” (Home Office, 2009).*

*“... abuse can include a wide range of behaviours such as verbal remarks, financial control, intimidation, isolation, threats, sexual assault and physical assault.” (Aitken, 2001).*

*Exposure to domestic abuse is used to captivate all aspects of the abuse that a child can experience. This may include the emotional aspects such as manipulation or distortion of thoughts as well as actually witnessing physical or sexual abuse of their parent. Exposure takes into account both direct (hearing, seeing) and indirect (parental capacity to parent, home environment).*

1. How many children have you taught in the past two years?

1-30  31-60  61-90  91+

2. Of the children you have taught during the past two school years, how many do you **know** to have been exposed to domestic abuse?

	<b>Year group of children</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Gender of the children</b>
<b>Sept -Aug</b>			
<b>Sept -Aug</b>			

3. Of the children you have worked with during the past two school years, how many do you **suspect** to have been exposed to domestic abuse?

	<b>Year group of children</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Gender of the children</b>
<b>Sept -Aug</b>			
<b>Sept -Aug</b>			

**Please look at the following statements and tick the response that best fits how you feel at this time. There are no right or wrong answers; we are interested in your perceptions and experiences:**

4. I know who to talk to if I have concerns about a child who I suspect is exposed to domestic abuse

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>

5. I know what the procedures are, within the school, for recording incidents of concern about domestic abuse

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>

6. I have read the safeguarding policy and procedures within this school

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>

7. I think the following are signs or indicators of a child being exposed to domestic abuse (please list in the space below):

.....  
 .....

8. I am confident in recognising when a child is exposed to domestic abuse

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>

9. I am confident that I would know how to respond if a child disclosed that they were exposed to domestic abuse

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither agree nor disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>

10. I have attended training on domestic abuse in this Authority in the last three years

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>

**Thank you for your participation.** Please return the completed questionnaire into the designated envelope within your school.

*If this questionnaire has raised any issues for you about an individual child please liaise with your designated child protection representative in the first instance.*

*For further information about violence against women please contact X Women's Aid on \*\*\* 10.00am - 5.00pm Monday to Friday.*

*If you have any questions about the research specifically then please contact me, XX, on \*\*\* 9.00am – 5.00pm Monday to Wednesday.*

***FREEPHONE 24-HOUR NATIONAL DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HELPLINE: 0808 2000 247***

*Run in partnership between Women's Aid and Refuge*