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article

Heroes and others: tensions and challenges in implementing Mentors in Violence Prevention in Swedish schools

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This article explores the challenges that were detected in the first evaluation of the violence prevention programme Mentors in Violence Prevention at senior levels of compulsory schools and upper-secondary schools in Sweden. In particular, we analyse how the gender-transformative dimension and the bystander perspective aspect of the programme played out in the classroom. What are the implications of implementing a gender-transformative violence prevention programme such as Mentors in Violence Prevention when it is carried out by teachers in the school setting? The empirical basis for this study includes classroom observations during all seven Mentors in Violence Prevention sessions in two schools, and group interviews with a total of 14 teachers and 26 pupils (aged 13–19) from five schools. Our findings suggest that most teachers did not appear to be comfortable with either the Mentors in Violence Prevention programme's pedagogical model or its theoretical approach. Consequently, they occasionally worked in manners contrary to the programme's intentions. However, observations and interviews demonstrated that a learning process about gender-based violence had been initiated. It may be necessary to make further adjustments if Mentors in Violence Prevention is to be used in schools in Sweden, particularly if teachers are to be the programme leaders.

Key words violence prevention • schools • bystander • ethnography • qualitative evaluation

Key messages

- When implementing gender-transformative violence prevention programmes in schools, teachers need extensive training and support.
- The risk of othering associated with the bystander approach, as well as the tensions between this approach and feminist understandings of gender and violence, must be dealt with in a mindful way.

To cite this article: Bruno, L., Joelsson, T., Franzén, A.G. and Gottzén, L. (2020) Heroes and others: tensions and challenges in implementing Mentors in Violence Prevention in Swedish schools, *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, vol 4, no 2, 141–155, DOI: 10.1332/239868020X15881856376347

Introduction

Both in Sweden and internationally, a number of initiatives aimed at the broader population to prevent gender-based violence have been instituted (for an overview, see [Flood, 2019](#)). These initiatives are the consequence of a more general call for systematic and universal violence prevention to address the high prevalence of (male) violence in society. In Sweden, efforts have often taken the form of awareness-raising activities, such as shorter campaigns and educational activities addressing male violence against women and children (see [Anderson and Whiston, 2005](#); [Lonsway et al, 2009](#); [Sjögren et al, 2013](#)). However, these types of short-term, periodic activities have no major preventive effect ([Flood, 2009](#)). In recent years, more universal initiatives featuring longer interventions and deeper consideration of the context have been implemented ([Barker et al, 2007](#), [Flood, 2019](#)).

The need to involve men and boys in violence prevention has been deemed crucial, as has the creation of violence prevention programmes that aim to transform gendered norms, conceptions and attitudes. Gender-transformative programmes informed by feminist theory have been reported to have a greater impact on attitudinal change, which is seen as being indicative of behavioural change ([Barker et al, 2010](#)). Also, some studies suggest that they have an effect directly on behavioural change ([Barker et al, 2007; 2010](#); [Jewkes et al, 2015a](#); [Crooks et al, 2019](#)). In addition, gender-transformative prevention programmes that employ a bystander perspective are described by some researchers as a further promising development in addressing the social problem of male violence ([Cissner, 2009](#); [Fenton and Mott, 2017](#)). The bystander perspective builds on the idea of engaging bystanders in preventing and stopping violence: first, by reducing the acceptance of violence in trained individuals; and, second, by the actions that these individuals subsequently carry out to challenge violence-supportive norms in their own social networks. Addressing boys and men as potential allies in stopping violent acts and intervening in violent situations, rather than as potential perpetrators of violence, has been found to be a useful strategy for building rapport with participants ([Banyard et al, 2004](#); [Katz et al, 2011](#); [Coker et al, 2019](#)). In addition, bystander intervention has a potential significance to meet victims' justice needs and to reduce the perceived harm of sexual harassment ([Fileborn, 2017](#)). Recent reviews indicate that programmes employing the bystander perspective may be successful in increasing the probability that young people will intervene in violent situations, as well as increasing their belief in their ability to intervene in episodes of partner violence and sexual violence ([Storer et al, 2016](#); [Coker et al, 2019](#)).

Much of the research evaluating gender-transformative or gender-sensitive violence prevention programmes has been quantitative, and mostly conducted through surveys. These analyses have generated valuable knowledge regarding the (self-reported) effects of the programmes in terms of aspects such as attitudinal change concerning violence and gender norms ([Flood, 2019](#)). The need to evaluate violence prevention programmes qualitatively has been raised due to its potential to illuminate and analyse some of the challenges in violence prevention in more depth ([Fox et al, 2014](#); [Flood, 2019](#)).

The present article addresses how the universal approach to violence prevention, together with the gender-transformative dimension and the bystander perspective, play out in the classroom. Our aim is to explore the challenges in implementing the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) violence prevention programme at senior levels of compulsory schools and upper-secondary schools in Sweden (pupils aged

13–19). The following research questions have guided the analysis: how are gender norms, in particular, in relation to violence, negotiated in the classroom during the programme sessions? How are explanations of violence articulated and negotiated during sessions and interviews? How is resistance articulated and addressed? Empirically, we draw on ethnographic material – observations and group interviews with pupils and teachers – thus contributing to the call for more qualitative evaluations of violence prevention programmes.

Evaluating violence prevention

Most primary prevention programmes targeting young people have been developed in North America. According to one international review, more than 80 per cent of rigorous evaluations of such programmes have been conducted in six high-income countries (Sweden excluded), representing only 6 per cent of the global population (Ellsberg et al, 2015). A recent review of 104 peer-reviewed articles and 42 websites on the prevention of gender-based violence among young people and young adults concluded that comprehensive programmes that target attitudes and develop skills show promising results (Crooks et al, 2019). Duration appears to be a key issue in violence prevention: intensive and lengthy programmes using multiple pedagogical strategies have more positive and lasting effects on both attitudes and behaviour (Flood, 2019).

One of the few examples of an evidence-based primary prevention programme for reducing sexual violence is Safe Dates, which includes nine 45-minute sessions, a theatre production performed by peers and additional school and community components (Foshee et al, 2005, 2014; DeGue et al, 2014). A randomised controlled trial (RCT) evaluation found that four years after the programme, sexual and physical perpetration and victimisation were still lower among adolescents who had participated in Safe Dates compared with a control group. A subsequent evaluation showed significant effects for adolescent girls with high exposure to domestic violence (Foshee et al, 2016). Fourth R is another systematic and evidence-based primary prevention approach, which includes a range of programmes that vary according to grade level and format. An RCT evaluation indicated a 2.5 times higher level of physical dating violence in a control group compared to students who had participated in the programme at a 2.5-year follow-up (Wolfe et al, 2009). In addition, a later evaluation of the programme demonstrated an increased ability in participants to identify healthy coping strategies (Crooks et al, 2015).

Most evaluations of the widely implemented MVP programme have been quantitative and conducted in the US. Based on a survey of 894 high school students, Katz et al (2011) found that students who had participated in MVP were more likely to view forms of violence as wrong and feel empowered to intervene than students who had not participated in the programme. Similar results were indicated in a preliminary quasi-experimental design study using data from 820 college students (Cissner, 2009). Fenton and colleagues (2016; 2019) emphasised that in order to be effective, the bystander approach must be theory-based, comprehensive, socioculturally relevant and delivered by trained leaders for a sufficient length of time.

As the number of violence prevention initiatives increases, so does the need to evaluate and investigate which of them work. It is seldom possible to conduct RCTs in community-based projects due to a lack of funding, resources and the skills necessary

to carry out such evaluations. Further, there may be ethical, methodological and other practical reasons as to why experimental design may not always be appropriate (Flood, 2019).

Qualitative, ethnographic research on prevention programmes in general is scarce. Studies focused on the role of facilitators are even less common. Fox (1999), for instance, studied adult prisoners enrolled in a cognitive treatment programme aimed at changing the way inmates think as a method for reducing violent behaviour. She found that the facilitators were co-constructing the prisoners as different and deviant, that is, as criminal types with faulty mindsets that need to be corrected.¹ Likewise, Schrock and Padavic (2007) analysed the interactional processes in a batterer intervention programme and found that the men enrolled in the programme were shamed by the facilitators into taking rhetorical responsibility for their violent acts by using egalitarian language and by learning to ‘talk the talk’ (see Fox, 1999). Schrock and Padavic (2007) argued that the programme failed to achieve the feminist goal of convincing the men to take full responsibility for their actions. Using video-recorded observations allows researchers to investigate data that are not ‘staged’ or specifically elicited by the researcher (for example, as with interviews), but rather could be considered naturally occurring (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). When applied to the implementation of prevention programmes, this method is important in creating opportunities to open up the black box (see Franzén, 2015) of manualised practice and in allowing for analyses of what is actually going on in the classroom. However, this does not imply that the data should be considered as completely unaffected by the presence of the researcher and the camera.

Qualitative evaluations of violence prevention programmes are used more often in Europe than North America. A British evaluation of the Relations without Fear (RwF) domestic abuse prevention programme, for example, suggested that it achieved poor results. Drawing from five focus group interviews with a total of 32 school pupils aged between ten and 14, the researchers found, among other things: recurrent misunderstandings of the topic of domestic abuse, especially issues of power and coercive control; challenges in handling sexist and other prejudices; and disengaged boys who experienced the programme as being sexist towards them. One of the findings was that teachers who are carrying out these kinds of programmes need the support of specialist facilitators as the messages must be delivered in a more open manner and thoughtful way that is responsive to the needs of the group (Fox et al, 2014).

The first qualitative evaluation of MVP in Europe, conducted in three high schools in Scotland (Williams and Neville, 2017), is highly relevant to our research. Drawing from a series of focus group interviews with a total of nine school staff (‘mentors’) and 91 pupils (‘mentees’), the results suggested both positive attitudinal and positive behavioural change. However, some of the girls explicitly claimed that the programme did not have any effect on their male peers: they were ‘still horrible’, as one informant said (Williams and Neville, 2017: 19). The gender composition of sessions emerged as a critical issue in the Scottish evaluation. Sessions were carried out in both gender-mixed and gender-separated groups, and teachers noticed that the girls seemed more embarrassed and reluctant to talk during the gender-mixed sessions. Despite this, the evaluators concluded that MVP had been generally well received and successfully transferred to Scotland from the US. However, they underlined the need for the programme to be implemented with enough resources, as well as the importance of

a process of continuing bottom-up refinement to ensure age-specific and cultural relevance (Williams and Neville, 2017).

Research context and study design

The MVP programme was developed by Jackson Katz in the early 1990s, with the aim of combining a gender-transformative approach with a bystander perspective. In its original format, MVP was developed for boys and young men participating in sports, and invited pupils to be role models and mentors in violence prevention (Katz, 1995). Later, the programme was expanded to target female students (Crooks et al, 2019). MVP has been adapted for a Swedish context by the organisation Män för Jämställdhet (Men for Gender Equality). Part of the adaptation included shifting the mentorship from pupils to school staff (mostly teachers).

The programme was introduced in seven elementary and upper-secondary schools as part of a larger project entitled 'En kommun fri från våld' ('A municipality free from violence') during 2015–17, the ambition of which was to tackle violence using a community-based approach. Six of the schools were in the process of implementing MVP and one school functioned as the control group. The evaluation consisted of both a quantitative portion (a questionnaire) and a qualitative portion (details to follow); this article draws exclusively on the qualitative study. In total, 832 pupils have participated in the study.

Our evaluation was carried out at an early stage in the implementation process.² The schools varied with regard to organisational and practical conditions, such as readiness to devote the time and allocate the resources needed for conducting all sessions in accordance with the programme manual. MVP requires a great deal of preparation in terms of familiarisation with the manual, as well as in terms of moderating and facilitating the discussions using the proposed method. The teachers who were to function as leaders participated in a three-day course in order to become acquainted with the programme and the manual, and were also offered tutoring once a month from the Men for Gender Equality organisation on a regular basis during the time that the lessons were being carried out.

The qualitative part of the evaluation consisted of observations in two schools, as well as interviews with pupils and teachers in five schools. Participant observation was carried out during the programme's educational activities (the training and guidance of teachers), the staff's planning sessions and the programme's core, that is, the seven lessons with the pupils. Observations were documented in field notes. All sessions in one class at one compulsory school and one upper-secondary school were video-recorded. Field notes were also taken in these settings. The video-recorded material was transcribed according to the principles of discourse analysis (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Video observation is a relatively new but already established qualitative research method, with a background in anthropology and psychology (Pink, 2007). In Sweden, the method has been used to study group processes with youths in schools (Tholander, 2002) and detention homes (Franzén, 2015). It has also been used to study group processes in violence prevention work and to explore how gender norms are negotiated among children and young people (Andersson, 2008a; 2008b). One advantage of video observation is that the researcher can return to the recorded interactions and events; this makes the researcher less dependent on memory and field notes, and enables others to partake in the analytical process, strengthening

the credibility of the study. As discussed by [Duranti \(1997\)](#), in all ethically conducted research on interactions, they will be affected to some extent. Researchers can take measures to minimise this effect, such as placing themselves out of the way and spending time making participants comfortable with their presence. In our study, these types of measures were taken; furthermore, the students in particular appeared to take little notice of the camera.

Additionally, group interviews with 14 teachers and 26 pupils (aged 13–19) were conducted. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Interviews and field notes from observations were analysed thematically ([Braun and Clarke, 2006](#)). Our process of analysis included three steps. First, an initial analysis of the interview material was carried out, which was transcribed and coded in its entirety to identify participants' accounts of MVP and experiences of the programme, as well as about the conditions of the school, perception of violence and group processes in the programme. This thematic analysis provided an overview of how the informants viewed the programme and its significance at the individual school. Furthermore, it made the general pattern of the perception of violence visible and identified the strengths and weaknesses of the programme and its implementation. In the second stage, the video-ethnographic data were analysed. During this phase, we identified how leaders and pupils positioned themselves in relation to the explicit objectives of the programme, in relation to each other and in relation to norms of violence and masculinity (see [Bamberg, 2004](#)). In doing so, we were able to analyse how teachers and pupils negotiated the content and messages of the programme during the sessions. Additionally, the programme manual was reviewed, and we also looked at how teachers used it in the classroom. All in all, this procedure enabled an in-depth analysis of how the sessions were conducted. Making these comparisons enabled us to validate the results and form an overall picture of the programme.

Carrying out violence prevention in Swedish schools

Both the teachers who led the MVP sessions and the pupils who received training in MVP reported generally positive experiences of the programme in interviews. The quantitative sub-study suggests significant changes as regards knowledge and attitudes. For example, pupils aged 15–19 who defined groping as violence increased from 56 per cent before to 81 per cent after having received the programme ([Eriksson et al, 2018](#)). In addition, some observations and interviews demonstrated that a learning process about gender-based violence had been initiated, and that norms had been discussed in constructive ways and even potentially destabilised. Nevertheless, the qualitative evaluation also points to several challenges and pitfalls of various kinds that may be encountered when implementing the programme. We discuss the main results in the following, dividing the section into three parts: 'A demanding pedagogical model', 'Othering violence' and 'Resistance against feminist framing'.

A demanding pedagogical model

The MVP programme is described as gender-transformative, indicating that challenging gender norms and stereotypes is central to its mission. The MVP manual for upper-secondary schools states that the ambition of the programme is to 'challenge accepted norms around gender, relationships and violence' and 'raise our awareness

of boy's and men's violence' (Men for Gender Equality, 2014: 20). At times, the programme's feminist framework and deployment of a gender-based perspective posed certain challenges (which we will return to). To some extent, both pupils and teachers faced the risk of reproducing rather than challenging stereotypical conceptions of gender; for instance, many of the teachers were aware that certain exercises, such as one called 'The gender box', run a risk of fortifying stereotypical gender norms (see Jewkes et al, 2015b). At the same time, if successful, the exercise may enable revelatory moments in which gender norms are both identified and scrutinised by the pupils, along with the teachers. The exercise demands that the teachers moderate the discussion in the classroom in a specific direction, which requires that the order of the discussion themes specified for the exercise in the manual is carefully followed. The intention of the exercise is to 'show how society is involved and influences the gender repertoire, especially the rules that advocate inequalities between genders', and to 'illustrate how gender rules are linked to control, violations and violence' (Men for Gender Equality, 2014: 69). Both classroom observations and interviews with pupils suggest that these objectives were not always achieved: not all discussion themes were covered, for example, and the ones especially linking gender norms to violence often fell out of scope. In the interviews, many of the pupils recollected the exercise as a fun opportunity to describe what is specific to boys and girls rather than an exercise aimed at destabilising gender norms. In order to critically engage with norms, it is not enough to make them visible; unless gender stereotypes are challenged and destabilised, they run the risk of being reproduced (Hearn, 1996).

The programme balances challenging gender norms with providing space for boys and girls to address gender inequalities and differences in their experiences. The gender composition of the sessions was a critical issue in the Scottish evaluation of MVP (Williams and Neville, 2017), and our findings also partially confirm the merit, especially for girls, of providing single-gender spaces when discussing sensitive topics such as sexual violence. However, one of the most powerful and potentially effective sessions observed in one of the schools in the Swedish study was a mixed-gender session, with strategies to avoid being subjected to sexual abuse (on the way home late at night) as the topic. During this session, the boys listed only a few strategies, while the girls listed dozens. This gendered inequality in vulnerability appeared to function as an eye-opener for both boys and girls, and the girls took an active role in an engaged discussion about the injustice of this situation and how to bring about change. However, pupils also engaged in an outright questioning of the reasons and justifications for same-gender groups in some of the activities. The tension between destabilising and challenging gender norms and the importance of taking different gendered experiences of violence into account illustrates the need to discuss and make explicit the various feminist theoretical traditions in the programme manual.

Othring violence

The MVP programme is influenced by feminist theories of violence. Theoretically, violence is understood in relation to gendered inequalities on a societal level, rather than seen as a problem of deviant violent individuals. Furthermore, perceiving and understanding violence as a continuum enables us to see less severe acts of violence alongside and in relation to more severe forms of violence (Kelly, 1988). Successful prevention programmes have been found to be related to both organisational factors,

such as support from the management, enough resources for training and supervision, and the theoretical framework and content (Fenton et al, 2016, 2019; Flood, 2019).

When the programme was implemented, the teachers recurrently employed individualising explanations for violence mixed with relating violence to gender norms and societal inequalities. One of the later lessons in the programme brings up issues of homophobia. A film clip is shown to the pupils that illustrates how lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people have been historically persecuted, battered and murdered; thereafter, the pupils and teachers discuss why violence against LGBTQ individuals takes place. In these discussions, homophobia and homophobic violence were individualised. However, at the conclusion, the teachers did provide a more nuanced and complex account of homophobic violence, in which traces of an individual's fear of being seen as homosexual were combined with an emphasis on how heteronormativity impacts people's lives.

Teacher:

'These boys, or for that matter, girls, who also harass people because of the heterosexual norm. And you might not want to be associated with a gay man, my god. As you also said, others may think that you are homosexual, think that you like boys. Ooh, scary.'

MVP was one of the first programmes with a bystander perspective, something that has since become popular in violence prevention and anti-bullying programmes (Storer et al, 2016). The purpose of the bystander perspective is to address the participants as witnesses rather than potential victims or perpetrators. The aim of MVP is to provide tools so that the participants can become 'active bystanders' with the knowledge and courage to intervene in violent situations. Moreover, programmes with bystander perspectives have been developed so that men and boys do not feel accused or pointed out as potential perpetrators (Katz et al, 2011), which makes it possible to take up a positively charged position. However, this position is not unproblematic as it can be argued to construct a new dichotomy. The bystander perspective enables everyone to become a 'hero', where the distinction is between 'us', who are knowledgeable about 'correct' or 'good' responses, and 'others', who are unable to respond correctly or in a 'good' way. In this sense, the dichotomy may make it difficult to discuss grey areas, such as talking about oneself as a perpetrator or bringing up unsuccessful or failed interventions. During our classroom observations, teachers often aligned with the heroic position. One teacher narrated a personal experience during the lesson concerned with sexual violence:

'Until I was 19, I was subject to flashers many times. I have been exposed to it for sure six, seven times.... The strangest thing and actually an almost comical [incident] was in the library, actually, where I sat. There was this balustrade, a small balcony section where I stood and browsed some books. Then I looked down ... and then I saw [laughs] a man who stood with a book while he was satisfying himself, that is, inside the library. [Some students gasp here, someone laughs.] Very strange. I have never been a particularly scared young girl, so I got angry. I didn't get scared, but what I did was that I, with decisive steps, just went down there. I thought that I would like to distract him so that he would stop and, of course, it succeeded.'

This narrative contains at least two components that are important in MVP: the commonality of violent or violating experiences; and a successful intervention. At the same time, the narrative simplifies rather than critically engages with violence and bystander interventions. The positions of the ‘hero’ and the ‘other’ in the example are clearly demarcated, and it is also obvious which position the listener should take. The narrative does not invite any discussion on why it is sometimes difficult to intervene. After the lesson, the teacher self-reflexively pointed out that one possible risk of the narrative could be that it minimises the violent act. This instance also points to the precarious task of choosing suitable personal experiences, which neither the manual nor the tutoring of the teachers provided guidance about.

The bystander perspective seems to implicate processes of othering in different ways as well, for instance, when the negative responses to the violence of others is critiqued. This was particularly evident in one of the actual cases used as an entry point for discussion on sexual violence, in which a 15-year-old boy raped a 14-year-old girl in a school toilet in the town of Bjästa in Sweden. The reason that this case was chosen for the MVP programme was to initiate a discussion on the role of social media in cases of sexual violence:

The Bjästa case has many components: first a girl who is not believed. Facebook is used to spread hatred about her. The boy gets support from friends and the local community. Then he commits another rape and eventually the hate is directed at him. All of these components are interesting but Facebook’s role in the case is relevant given the young people’s use of social media. (Men for Gender Equality, 2014: 49)

Both teachers and pupils valued the discussion of this case as it stirred up many emotions and gave rise to extensive and heated discussions. The pupils condemned the perpetrator and the rape but also the local priest, who gave his support to the young man rather than the girl. Moreover, Bjästa as a community was spatially stigmatised through its construction as traditional and backward – and, by definition, not modern, equal or progressive (Stenbacka, 2011). This process of othering was not always questioned by the teachers (for a more in-depth analysis of this case, see Gottzén and Franzén, 2019).

Resistance against feminist framing

The theoretical underpinnings of MVP are seldom made explicit in the manual or by the tutors during supervision. Nevertheless, the feminist framework was recognised by both teachers and pupils, causing discussion, debate and, at times, various forms of resistance. What seemed to be resisted were the treatment of men and women as dichotomous groups or collectives, and the coupling of violence with gender (or, more specifically, masculinity). This resulted in a fear of labelling (all) men as violent as it could be seen to offend the boys. It also resulted in resistance on the girls’ part due to being framed as potential victims.

Resisting categorisation and opposing the relation between gender and violence could be seen as two distinct processes that, when enmeshed, may create conflict and confrontation. The bystander perspective deployed in MVP is a conscious strategy to avoid confrontation (Katz et al, 2011); however, there seems to be an inherent

tension between the non-confrontational intention of the bystander approach and the feminist understanding of gender and violence. In the survey directed at the teachers, the parts relating to men's violence were reported to work poorly because 'boys feel very accused as a sex'. The fear of labelling boys had already appeared during the teacher training:

Participant: 'I think there is a risk that the boys might feel accused because when you say that I am a risk, I end up in a defensive situation.'

Educator: 'I think it is very important to be clear that it is about norms and not individual people, and that it is very important to bring that up at once when you notice someone is getting angry.'

Although one of the central pillars of the programme is the coupling of violence with masculinity norms, the risk of accusing boys was voiced as a matter of concern by many of the teachers. Occasionally, the leaders adjusted exercises in order to minimise the risk. In some ways, the teachers' fears were legitimate. Some of the pupils voiced hesitation around whether women who report violence to the police actually have been subject to violence, or whether it really is men who commit violence:

Girl 1: 'I think the questions were damn stupid.'

Teacher: 'Yes, let's hear.'

Girl 1: 'Because they describe it as if it is only men who do it. And they wrote it like this too, "Why are women sexualised and not men?" They are too but maybe not as much.'

Girl 2: 'But also, the first "How is it that men can write such comments?"

We do not even know that it is men, right? We did not get any information in the video [about online harassment] if it was men who had written it, and then "Breivik's fan club", that might be a group of girls who sent that email to her [sounds angry].'

Resisting the gender binary had two dimensions: resisting the men/masculinity-women/femininity dichotomy; and resisting carrying out exercises in gender-segregated groups.

Conclusion

The present article is one of relatively few studies on violence prevention that builds on ethnographic methods. This methodology for studying classroom interaction during MVP sessions has enabled us to analyse the challenges and contradictions in the implementation process. We have shown how teachers diverged from the manual at times by adjusting or omitting activities, even though evaluations of prevention programmes highlight the importance of programme fidelity (Cross and West, 2011). The MVP manual also emphasises adherence to the manual, while recognising the need to make local adjustments at times. The tension between fidelity to the manual and modifying the programme in order to increase cultural and age-specific relevance might make evaluations more difficult. What are the challenges and possibilities with a gender-transformative violence prevention programme such as MVP when carried out by teachers in the school setting?

Our findings suggest that most teachers were not entirely comfortable with the MVP's pedagogical model and theoretical approach. Consequently, they occasionally worked in ways that were contrary to the intentions of the programme. In particular, discussion topics linking gender norms to violence seemed demanding and fell out of scope. In some cases, when teachers brought up the relationship between masculinity norms and violence explicitly, both boys and girls resisted the message. Although neither the tutors from Men for Gender Equality nor the programme manual are explicit about the programme's feminist framework, both teachers and pupils found the feminist approach troubling. Similar resistance has been found in other studies (for example, [Fox et al, 2014](#); [Flood, 2019](#)). Furthermore, the process-oriented pedagogy – in which open questions are asked and the process itself is crucial – posed certain challenges for teachers accustomed to conventional classroom teaching, in which imparting certain knowledge is the main objective. Moreover, there is also an inherent conflict in the programme's process-oriented approach – in which the search for answers is meant to be carried out jointly – with its clear yet potentially challenging feminist understandings of gendered violence. Due to this, we see a need for more extensive training and support, especially if teachers are to be MVP leaders as educators in Sweden often lack knowledge concerning gender, violence and the links between these ([Ekstrand et al, 2011](#); [Universitetskanslerämbetet, 2015](#)). The challenges associated with manual fidelity and implementation documented in the evaluation point to the importance of clarifying the requirements in terms of organisation and management when introducing MVP in schools, as well as the importance of training and support for leaders carrying out violence prevention programmes (see [Fenton et al, 2016, 2019](#); [Flood, 2019](#)).

Our findings confirm previous research pointing to the risk of othering associated with the bystander approach (see [Hammok, 2019](#)). Instead of understanding violence as a pervasive societal problem that reproduces gender norms and intersectional inequalities, individualising the problem or linking it to rural and cultural others took place during several sessions ([Gottzén and Franzén, 2019](#)). The tensions between the non-confrontational intentions of the bystander perspective and a structural feminist understanding of gender and violence need to be explored in further analyses and evaluations of the programme.

Despite these difficulties, our conclusion is that it is feasible to implement MVP in schools under certain conditions, for example, by creating the appropriate organisational and practical conditions for the programme. Pupils included in our evaluation who received MVP training in the schools became more aware of both their own and others' propensity to use violence, as well as of problematic gender norms ([Eriksson et al, 2018](#)). High-quality sexuality education has the potential to change attitudes, promote more equal intimate relationships and contribute to the prevention of abuse ([Tanton et al, 2015](#)). As previous research has demonstrated, the most effective programmes are gender-transformative ([Barker et al, 2010](#); [Fenton et al, 2016](#); [Flood, 2019](#)). In this regard, MVP differs from most other systematic violence prevention or anti-bullying programmes previously carried out in Swedish schools as they lacked this component. It appears possible to successfully implement the programme; however, it may be necessary to make further adjustments if it is to be used in schools and with teachers in the role of leaders.

Funding

The evaluation study was funded by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions. It has no grant number.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank both anonymised reviewers for valuable comments.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ These kinds of dialogue-based interventions build on therapeutic frameworks that focus on people's inner lives; as such, the individual is both the problem and the solution (Dahlstedt et al, 2011, Kvist Lindholm and Zetterqvist Nelson, 2015). Dahlstedt, Fejes and Schönning (2011) hold that the pedagogical dialogue techniques used in the programmes are employed in order to come to terms with the individuals' identified social and emotional deficits. The effect, they argue, is to 'shape and foster desirable subjects' who work on themselves in order to change their practices and thoughts (see Fox, 1999).

² This project was approved by an ethical board (ERB in Uppsala no 2016/067). The guiding research questions for the qualitative evaluation were as follows: how are the educational activities with the teachers and the pupils carried out? How is the programme content negotiated by the teachers and pupils? In what ways do the teachers, Men for Gender Equality and the surrounding society cooperate with reference to MVP? What are the pupils' and teachers' perspectives on the programme and its implementation?

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