

## MENTORS IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

### **Abstract**

*Objective* The Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program originated in the US and adopts a bystander approach to gender-based violence prevention by harnessing group processes using a peer-learning model. This paper presents the first qualitative evaluation, within a European context, of a pilot application of MVP within a Scottish High School setting. *Method* The evaluation comprises a series of interviews and focus groups with school staff, and pupils ('mentors' and 'mentees') at three participating schools. The study's research purposes are to explore: 1. Experiences of participating in MVP; 2. Participants' perceived impact of MVP (with regards attitudinal and behavioral change with a particular emphasis upon social norms); and 3. Participants' opinions on the relevance and sustainability of MVP. *Results* All three categories of participant reported generally positive experiences of MVP in terms of recruitment, training, and implementation. The peer-learning model was particularly useful in engaging mentees, and facilitating support networks outside the classroom. Moreover, positive attitudinal and behavioral change regarding gender-based violence was reported by all three participant categories, but was particularly prevalent amongst mentors. However, participants highlighted the importance of ensuring MVP is culturally relevant, and the need for integration into school life to ensure its sustainability. *Conclusions* An initial qualitative analysis of MVP within Scottish High Schools suggests the peer-learning program was experienced positively, with self-reported impact on gender-based violence attitudes and behaviors (including bystander intervention). A number of recommendations have been made to inform future implementation of MVP, and the need for robust, on-going evaluation.

Keywords: Mentors in Violence Prevention; Gender-based violence; Peer-learning; Evaluation;

Social norms

Qualitative Evaluation of the Mentors in Violence Prevention Pilot  
in Scottish High Schools

Gender-based violence (GBV) poses a significant public health, equity, and human rights issue in Scotland (Author citation) and results from “the normative role expectations with each gender, along with the unequal power relationships between the two genders, within the context of a specific society” (Bloom, 2008, p.14). While both genders can be the victim of such violence, GBV disproportionately affects women and girls and is widely used to refer to violence against women (Author citation). For example, official crime data in Scotland for the period 2004-05 to 2013-14 indicate that female victims accounted for 14-28% of homicides, of whom the majority were killed by their partner/ex-partner (Scottish Government, 2014a). Moreover, the most recent crime data for 2012-13 indicates that in 80% of cases of domestic abuse reported to the police involved a female victim and male perpetrator (down gradually from 89% in 2003-04) (Scottish Government, 2013). In addition, self-report data from the most recent Scottish Crime and Justice survey indicates that 4% of women reported having experienced serious sexual assault (compared with 1% of men) and 13% had experienced at least one form of less serious sexual offence (compared to 2% of men) since the age of 16. In both cases the majority (97% and 94%, respectively) reported that the offender was male, and oftentimes their partner (Scottish Government, 2014b). Furthermore, women reported having experienced greater levels of stalking and harassment than men. Thus, not only does GBV blight the lives of those women (and men) who directly experience or fear it, but also it indirectly impacts upon their families, communities, and wider society (Author citation).

In an attempt to address the issue of GBV in Scotland, the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program, which originated in the US (see Katz, 1995) was piloted in a number of High Schools. The rationale for delivering the program to this age group is that this cohort is defined by considerable developmental and interpersonal change, including the negotiation of interpersonal relationships, exploring gender roles (Katz et al., 2011), the emergence of gender stereotyping, and the

establishment of gender identity (e.g. Basow & Rubin, 1999). Bullying is a pertinent issue for this population. In a representative sample of Scottish High School pupils, 13% of girls (11% boys) reported having been bullied at school at least twice a month; 2% of girls (6% boys) reported having bullied others at school at least twice a month; and 4% of girls (11% boys) reported having been involved in a physical fight three or more times in the last year (Currie, van der Sluijs, Whitehead, Currie, Rhodes, Neville & Inchley, 2015). Moreover, there was a significant increase in the proportion of High School pupils in Scotland who reported having been bullied more than twice in the past two months between 2010 (8%) and 2014 (13%) (Currie et al., 2015). Addressing issues of GBV at this time can promote enduring attitude and behavior formation across the lifespan. This paper provides the first qualitative analysis of the experience and impact of MVP in a Scottish High School context.

### **Mentors in Violence Prevention**

Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) is a violence prevention program to encourage non-violent bystander intervention with a particular emphasis on GBV (verbal, physical, emotional and sexual; see Katz, 1995, 2006). The bystander approach, which aims to increase the likelihood that bystanders will intervene to prevent or halt violent incidents, is recognised as a potentially effective tool in the prevention of gender violence (see Fenton, Mott, McCartan & Rumney, 2015; Neville, 2015). However, Fenton et al. note that in order to maximize effectiveness a bystander approach must, be theory-based and comprehensive; develop positive relationships; be socioculturally relevant, delivered at the appropriate time, and for a sufficient duration by trained individuals; and include a robust evaluation, with a consideration of unintended consequences.

The MVP program was first introduced in the US within professional and collegiate sports teams, which accounts for some of the sporting terminology used (e.g. ‘MVP’ alternatively standing for ‘Most Valuable Player’; ‘Playbook’ of scenarios) and was adopted more widely in military, university, and high school settings. It is designed to provide bystanders with the tools to intervene

through discouragement and interruption. This is achieved through group sessions in which realistic social scenarios (taken from the ‘MVP playbook’; e.g. witnessing a boyfriend pushing his girlfriend in a corridor, sharing explicit sexual images of other people, etc.) are presented and role-played, and followed by interactive discussion of the issues covered therein, in single-sex and/or mixed-gender workshops, which are facilitated by a peer mentor (an individual[s] older or more senior from the same peer group). The sessions also consider responses to the scenario presented, thereby serving to inform the participants of appropriate actions and empowering them to become proactive bystanders in the face of GBV. The fact that MVP aims to deliver practical intervention strategies makes it congruent with Berkowitz’s (2004) assertion that men are more receptive to positive practical messages than negative approaches which focus on blame.

Rather than being gender-neutral, MVP takes a social justice approach by positioning GBV within structures of power and control (Katz, Heisterkamp & Fleming, 2011). Bystanders - often treated as peripheral to interpersonal violence - are defined to include those physically present during a violent incident, and more broadly anyone involved in the peer-culture in which the violence occurs (Katz et al., 2011). Rather than framing males as possible perpetrators, the bystander approach conceptualizes them as potentially empowered bystanders who can challenge abusive peers. This approach is designed to decrease male defensiveness or hostility to GBV prevention efforts, and encourage participation. Likewise, females are not seen as potential victims, but rather as active bystanders who can confront abusive peers (Katz et al., 2011).

**Social norms approach to gender-based violence prevention.** Social influence research shows that behavioral responses are shaped by the perceived social norms of fellow group members (Turner, 1991). A key dimension to MVP is its use of peer-learning such that ‘in-group’ members (mentors) are trained to deliver sessions to their peers (mentees). The fact that ‘mentors’ are in the same social group as ‘mentees’ (i.e. high school pupils) is designed to qualify them as representative of prototypical group norms, and therefore credible messengers of information regarding how to feel

and act. This is important because antisocial behavior (including violence perpetration and non-intervention) can be driven by a misperception of how fellow group members view the behavior (Author citation). For example, while the majority of males may disapprove of GBV, the position may not be articulated if peers are mistakenly not thought to share this view (Fabiano, Perkins, Berkowitz, Linkenback & Stark, 2003). An absence of peer disapproval can then be used by perpetrators as tacit ‘in-group’ approval of their actions, leading to future violence. Peer groups with one or more members who engage in GBV, but are not challenged can inadvertently create a group norm supportive of violent sexual behavior (Tharp, DeGue, Valle, Brookmeyer, Massetti & Matjasko, 2013).

Addressing social norms are, therefore, critical to the success of GBV prevention programs that operate at a group level. MVP is expected to influence social norms in at least three ways. First, participants are encouraged to discuss issues of GBV with other in-group members, and to reach a consensus position in opposition to it. Secondly, the program aims to shift social norms to facilitate empowerment and bystander intervention. Third, interventions should then reinforce and validate the social norm that GBV is unacceptable, and that intervention is normative (Author citation).

**Previous evaluations of MVP.** A number of evaluations have been undertaken of MVP implemented in US High Schools (e.g. Heisterkamp, Fleming & Waitt, 2011; Katz et al., 2011; Mentors in Violence Prevention, nd) the majority of which have employed quantitative methods to explore the impact of MVP on a number of specific outcomes. While Heisterkamp et al. (2011) report that MVP was implemented in high schools as part the Sioux City Project, this was just one of a number of components, with several other distinct high school and elementary school initiatives. However, the way in which the survey-based evaluation was reported made it difficult to isolate the impact of MVP. Katz et al. (2001) also used a purpose-made survey to examine any differences between a school in which MVP was implemented, and

a non-MVP comparator school in the way in which a range of violent behaviors was viewed and the likelihood of intervening when witnessing associated behaviors. It was found that MVP school pupils were statistically more likely to perceive the range of violence behaviors as wrong, and were more likely to intervene in more serious instances of violence than the non-MVP school pupils. There was no difference in the likelihood to intervene for less severe incidents.

In contrast, the multi-method, multi-year approach reported on the Mentors in Violence Prevention (nd.) website, combines quantitative impact evaluation and qualitative process evaluation for a different cohort in each of three consecutive academic years. To evaluate the impact of MVP a repeated pre- and post-test design was employed with a control group added in years two and three, using a purpose-made survey. It was found that those pupils whom participated in MVP demonstrated a statistically significant increase in knowledge and awareness of GBV; decrease in sexist/inappropriate attitudes regarding violence against women; and increase in confidence in the ability to intervene. It was also found that young women reported less sexist attitudes or were less accepting of sexist and violent behaviors, and exhibited a higher level of self-efficacy than young men; however, it was noted that while these patterns were not confirmed statistically, focus group data indicated that MVP played a role in increasing the young women's feelings of safety and empowerment. Indeed, the benefit of undertaking a process evaluation involving interviews with key stakeholders and an open-ended questionnaire with female participants, was further realized in developing more detailed understanding of the nature and extent of the problem posed by GBV, contextualizing the findings from the impact evaluation, and highlighting a general sense of satisfaction with the program.

In order to fully evaluate violence prevention initiatives, evidence should be gathered on outcome(s) *and* process(es); however, evaluations tend to focus on the former using quantitative

methods (Author citation). Qualitative methods address issues that are not possible with quantitative methods, and can provide invaluable insights in an evaluation. Specifically, process evaluation enables an understanding of the context and implementation of an intervention, and the interpretation of outcomes (Oakley et al. 2006).

### **Present Study**

This paper describes a qualitative evaluation of MVP within three Scottish secondary/high schools (2 west coast, 1 east coast) during the 2012-13 school year. These schools were not chosen because they possessed specific GBV issues, but rather were self-selected due to their recognition of the problem posed by GBV, their voluntary engagement with the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) who led the development and implementation of MVP in Scotland; and their readiness (in terms of resource and motivation) to implement the program. The MVP mentors were 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> year pupils (aged 15-18; hereafter referred to as S5 or S6, respectively), and the mentees receiving the sessions were 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year pupils (aged 11-14; hereafter referred to as S1 or S2, respectively). In order to maximize the relevance of MVP to the Scottish high school context, the scenarios in the original MVP playbook were adapted by the VRU, for example by substituting some American phrases for language more commonly used by the target population. This paper represents the first time MVP has been implemented in Scotland, and evaluated within Europe.

As this study involves the process evaluation of the pilot implementation of MVP, it was recognized that its role would be to identify what has worked well and what requires further refinement in preparation for the next occasion it is implemented. Thus, the three primary research purposes of this study were to explore:

1. Experiences of participating in MVP
2. Participants' perceived impact of MVP upon attitudes and behaviors
3. Participants' opinions on the relevance and sustainability of MVP

### **Method**

A series of semi-structured interviews (teaching and non-teaching staff) and focus groups (mentors and mentees) were undertaken. The interactions were semi-structured such that they were based around broad, pre-defined research questions, but were reflexive to allow participants' own interpretations of questions, the space for additional issues to be identified and discussed, and to address issues that had emerged in previous interviews/focus groups.

The interviews and focus groups were arranged through the MVP lead at each school. In each case the type of participants for inclusion was outlined (e.g. S1 male mentees), but final selection of participants was made by the MVP lead. The researchers visited the sites to undertake data collection on days that were convenient for the school. Both DJW and FGN attend all sessions except for four mentee focus groups and one staff interview at Site 3, which were attended by FGN only.

### **Staff Interviews**

Requests were made for interviews with members of staff who had different levels of involvement with MVP. Four staff were interviewed at Site 2 (three female, all teaching) and five at Site 3 (all female, two non-teaching), but it was not possible find a time suitable for Site 1 to interview staff members. Interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes and were completed at a convenient time for the individual staff members; however, one member of staff at Site 3 requested additional time, and was interviewed on two separate occasions lasting a total of 90 minutes. A pre-determined interview schedule was developed that covered four main issues: 1. Nature of involvement in MVP; 2. Impressions of MVP; 3. Integration into school/curriculum; and 3. Impact of MVP.

### **Mentor and Mentee Focus Groups**

Although MVP had been delivered differently in each school (some single-gender, some mixed gender sessions) requests were made for mixed-gender mentor focus groups and single-gender mentee focus groups both comprising six to eight participants. A total of 33 mentors and 58 mentees participated across the three sites. The length of focus groups was determined by the length of a class in each school, which averaged between 40-50 minutes. A pre-determined focus group schedule was

developed for both mentors and mentees, which addressed three main issues: 1. Experiences of MVP; 2. The role of mentors; and 3. Impact of MVP.

### **Method of Analysis**

All interviews and focus groups were recorded using two digital recorders, and the researchers took notes in order to record their observations, and identify emergent themes to inform analysis. A professional transcription service was employed to provide verbatim transcriptions of the recordings, which were then analyzed using Thematic Analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic Analysis is shaped by dual goals; to accurately represent participant experiences without forcing their responses into a priori categories, while approaching the data in terms of specific research questions. In this sense Thematic Analysis operates as a compromise between the top-down approach of Content Analysis and the bottom-up approach of Grounded Theory, and is particularly suited to the analysis of semi-structured focus groups and interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All transcripts were coded by each author, and the resultant coding schemes were compared and discussed. The various codes were grouped into “themes” and “sub-themes”. This ensured accurate representation of participants’ experiences, while also approaching the data in terms of the three specific research questions and issues. For each of the themes and the various sub-themes therein, appropriate illustrative excerpts were identified from the transcripts that supported and, where available, countered the theme.

### **Results**

Findings from the focus groups and interviews are grouped under the key themes of: experience of MVP, impact of MVP; and relevance and sustainability of MVP. These, along with their sub-themes, will be discussed in turn. The codes used in the excerpts are as follows: I: Interviewer, S: Staff, M: Male, F: Female, [ ]: Content omitted for brevity.

### **Experience of Participating in MVP**

Participants’ experience of MVP was shaped by various activities involved in recruitment,

training, and implementation (including the delivery of MVP, role of staff, session delivery context, and the mentors as a mentee resource) of the program.

**Recruitment to participate MVP: Methods and experiences for staff, mentors, and mentees.**

Recruitment of staff, mentors and mentees differed across the three MVP sites. Staff members were either selected or invited to volunteer to receive the MVP training and oversee the delivery of the program. Despite some initial reluctance, there was considerable interest among teaching and non-teaching staff, which continued throughout the initiative. It was acknowledged that a range of staff members (teaching and non-teaching, male and female) needed to be recruited, however, one site specifically targeted recruitment of male staff as a means to offer male pupils a role model in challenging GBV:

S: Well, because they [pupils] need to see that these tough, macho guys challenge violence, find violence unacceptable, find negative attitudes towards women unacceptable and yet, they are tough, sporty, respected guys. That was my thinking behind it.

(Site 3 female staff)

In all three sites, a member of teaching staff acted as the MVP lead, and in one site, this was supplemented by a school-employed youth worker who was able to devote additional time to MVP implementation. Indeed, when this model was discussed with staff at another site, it was agreed to be a more effective way of delivering the program due to the time commitments of teaching staff.

There was considerable interest in becoming a mentor in all three sites. The strategy of recruiting mentors differed across the sites but focused largely on S6 pupils. For instance, in two sites all S6 pupils were invited to participate voluntarily, while in the third site an interview process was used. Staff explained that these interviews were designed to offer prospective mentors the opportunity to practice and develop interview skills, and identify the pupils who would benefit from a mentoring leadership role and contribute most to the initiative. Both staff and mentees suggested that recruitment of mentors could take place in S4 and S5 in addition to S6. For staff this would offer an

opportunity to ensure “leadership skills and organizational skills are developing at an earlier stage” (Site 2 female staff). Moreover, mentees argued that widening the mentor pool to include S4-S5 would increase mentor availability throughout the year, since the exam commitments of S6 meant they were unable to act as mentors for a large period of the year.

Mentees comprised S1 pupils in two sites, and S1 and S2 pupils in the other site. All pupils in the selected year groups received the MVP classes. There was an expectation and recognition of the benefit among mentees of receiving MVP beyond S1 (up to the first three years): It would be good if we could miss some things like stuff about drinking and we could get a taster of it in S1 and S2 but then more higher like S3/S4/S5 maybe” (Site 3 S1 Female Mentee). This was also acknowledged by staff: “I personally feel if you only do that in first year, you’re missing an opportunity” (Site 3 female staff).

**Training of staff and mentors to lead MVP: Methods and experiences.** The training for staff and mentors (delivered separately) involved exposing them to the Playbook scenarios as if they were mentees. Training was delivered by a VRU representative, which in one case was supplemented by a MVP representative from the US. Staff training was well-received, and described by one staff member as “excellent, [ ] it gave you an insight into what can be done to help violence and crime and things” (Site 3 Female Staff). Mentor training involved a variety of activities. One site organized an over-night retreat which participants experienced as productive and enjoyable: “we all had a lot of fun, we worked in groups just discussing what we thought we could get out of it, how it could work in our school, what kind of things we could do to make it work” (Site 2 Female Mentor). This site then joined-up with a second site to receive further training, referred to as a ‘team-building week’. This opportunity supported the development of collaboration, which was recognized by mentors as a critical aspect of their role:

F1: Because it was going to be important, throughout the whole year we’re going to have to

work as a team, we're going to have to speak to people that we don't usually speak to.

(Site 2 Female Mentor)

Additional external training to complement MVP was also provided (i.e. on the Child Protection Act), to inform mentors "how to deal with if some pupil comes to us about a really serious issue, how to deal with that and to know what to say to them and who to go to about it [ ] It was really useful" (Site 2 Female Mentor). This helped to equip the mentors with a broader understanding of relevant issues beyond the program.

**Implementation of MVP: Methods and Experiences of Staff, Mentors, and Mentees.** The program was implemented in three different subject classes depending on who was the lead member of staff: Physical Education (Site 1), English (Site 2), and Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (Site 3). The participants discussed various aspects of the implementation, including the delivery of MVP, role of staff, session delivery context, and mentors as mentee resource

***Mentor and mentee experiences of delivering and receiving MVP sessions.*** The model of having older pupils (S5/6) act as mentors to younger pupils (S1/2) was generally appreciated by mentors and mentees alike:

I: Did you like the model, then, of sixth year students working with 1st and 2nd years?

F3: Yeah. It's like passing on experience that we've obviously just been through.

(Site 1 female mentor)

F2: It wasn't like a lecture. It wasn't as if they were telling you, you could put your input in and you could talk about it if you wanted to, so it wasn't as if they were just speaking directly at you, you could talk to them as well.

(Site 2 S1 female mentee)

However, mentees at Site 3 engaged in a discussion regarding the ability of the mentors to address sensitive topics, and the impact on the class.

I: What were the topics where you felt the S6s were feeling a bit awkward?

F3: The sex things.

F1: That was a bit weird already.

F3: Because you could tell when they were feeling uncomfortable because they'd get quieter and stuff. [ ]

F1: when they're doing something and they're acting quite awkward we're going to act awkward.

(Site 3 S1 female mentees)

Mentors felt they were generally able to use their MVP training to make the sessions fun and engaging where possible, such as through icebreaker exercises. There was, however, also the need for them to be flexible in their session delivery in order to address issues raised through mentee discussion. Moreover, some staff at Site 3 discussed the support provided to mentors in terms of feedback and the opportunity to review the delivery of sessions so as to inform future sessions.

S: ... and do a little chat about things, how's it gone, what's worked well, what's not worked so well. But as we've worked through the sessions, that review has not been such a big thing as the kids themselves have improved.

(Site 3 male staff)

#### *Role of staff during MVP session delivery*

Mentees, mentors and staff recognized the importance of mentors delivering MVP sessions with minimal staff input to facilitate open conversations and mentee participation. In some instances teachers would leave the classroom altogether, but remain nearby to intervene if necessary. Even when they did stay in the room for classroom control, it was recognized that they needed to take a back seat role and not interrupt too quickly. There was, however, a difference in attitude toward the teaching and non-teaching staff (e.g. learning assistants). The different role of non-teaching staff and their relationship with the pupils meant that their presence was seen as more acceptable:

F3: I think it was better to have it with S6s than with teachers because when you're with teachers

you're not as honest as you are with pupils.

F4: There was a learning assistant in the room as well but that was fine because they're learning assistants.

(Site 3 S1 female mentees)

***Mentee group structure during MVP sessions: Class size and gender make-up.*** An important consideration in delivering MVP was class size. It was suggested by staff that approximately 15 mentees was the maximum number that could be managed by the mentors in order to maximize engagement. Moreover, the gender-makeup of classes during MVP sessions was also discussed, which differed across the sites: two sites used same-gender classes (with same-gender mentors) and one used both mixed and same-gender classes (with mixed-gender mentors). The benefits of same-gender classes rested largely on the reluctance of pupils to discuss the topics seriously or at all, when in the presence of the other gender:

F2: I think there should be more gender-specific groups. I felt as if the girls were more quiet when the boys were there. When the boys weren't there they were just like "rah rah rah" telling you loads of stuff. Just because the boys were there, it was like they felt kind of embarrassed.

(Site 2 female mentor)

However, a group of female mentees expressed an interest in learning what the males felt about the topics they had discussed:

F2: You want to know how they [male peers] felt about that sort of thing happening and whether they were okay with that happening because that'd be kind of weird if they were okay with girls getting hit.

F3: Like the overprotective boyfriend one [Playbook scenario], it would be interesting to see how they thought.

(Site 3 female mentees)

Indeed, mentors at one site identified the importance of offering the opposite gender's perspective

to their single gender group. The benefit of this was based on their own experiences of having participated in mixed gender scenario groups during MVP training:

F1: I used it a lot, like when you're actually taking a lesson, me and the person I'd do it with, I would always take the boy perspective and put a spanner in the works so that gives a different opinion on it. So the boys, in that way, helped to give us different perspectives.

(Site 1 mentors)

***Mentors as mentee resource.*** While the peer-learning approach was an effective strategy for session delivery, it could also provide a valuable resource for mentees outside the classroom. Mentors informed mentees during the classes that they could approach them with concerns more informally at other times. Mentees explained that they felt able to talk to the mentors outside of the formal sessions because they had relevant recent experience of dealing with comparable issues within the school. This was framed in contrast to a reticence in approaching school staff who could be viewed as out of touch:

F2: [You could] tell a mentor because it would be easier to talk to someone closer to your age than it would be an adult. [ ]

F1: Because they probably went through it recently if it has happened to them but if it was teachers, they probably went through it.... <laughter> and you feel more comfortable as well talking to an older pupil instead of a teacher.

(Site 2 Female Mentees)

Importantly, discussing issues with mentors outside the classroom was generally not regarded as breaking social norms of 'snitching', in contrast to approaching members of staff whose interference could exacerbate a problem:

M2: Because it can feel if you're telling a mentor, whereas if you are telling a teacher you get guilt that you're snitching [agreement from others]. Whereas if it's a mentor it's somebody just over your age so it seems as if you're just telling them.

(Site 2 S1 male mentees)

There did seem to be an understanding, however, that if mentees brought a serious issue to the mentors, that they would have a responsibility to pass this on to an appropriate member of staff. Indeed, some mentees explained that they would prefer to take serious issues to staff than to mentors because of their increased responsibility, different perspective from pupils, and greater experience:

M3: I guess because you've [staff] got a lot of responsibility, more than a 6<sup>th</sup>. Basically that.

I1: What do the rest of you guys think? If you had a problem who would you be more likely to go to?

M4: If it was a major problem I'd probably go to a teacher because a 6th year, I always think if I can't solve it myself they're much closer to my mindset than a teacher and the teacher's much further away so there's a better chance they'll have a different view of the problem.

M1: They've had a lot more life experience as well.

(Site 2 Male Mentees)

Although mentors expressed a willingness to help mentees outside of the classroom, and mentees generally indicated a desire for this resource, some mentees reported problems in facilitating these interactions (e.g. difficulty locating mentors). Furthermore, when the mentors could be found in public places (e.g. the dining hall or corridors) this was seen as offering inadequate privacy:

M1: I wouldn't go up to a mentor in a canteen and go "I've got a problem, could I get an interview?" [ ]

I1: Why wouldn't you be able to do that?

M1: It's in public and when you go up all your friends will go "what are you going up there for?" and you'll say "nothing". And people are like "why is he talking to them?"

(Site 2 Male Mentees)

In some of the focus groups, participants discussed additional ways of overcoming the barriers to mentor/mentee interaction. One potential solution suggested by both mentors and mentees involved a

scheduled ‘mentor surgery’ in which mentors would be present in a private room at a specific time to discuss issues with mentees. Indeed, in one site the issue was partially addressed through the provision of a common room for S6 pupils, which provided a “safe” location in which mentors could be found, and approached away from the gaze of fellow junior students. There was, however, also the problem that mentors could be hard to identify from other S6s who were not involved in the MVP program. This was overcome in one site through the provision of identification badges.

### **Participants’ Perceived Impact of MVP Upon Attitudes and Behaviors.**

There was agreement amongst mentors that immersion in the MVP program (both training and delivery of sessions) had raised their awareness of GBV. For some of the participants, this shifted their attitudes and behaviors regarding GBV, and engendered a more proactive approach to intervention:

M2: MVP makes you see that you have to do something because if you don’t, you’re partly responsible for something really bad happening.

I: Have these experiences changed your behaviour in any way?

F1: You notice it more. You’re more aware of around you, like when something’s happened.

F2: Yeah, especially at a party and that as well, if you see something a bit dodgy, you try and do something yourself to stop anything from taking off. [ ]

M1: You try and intervene in some way, try and make it awkward for them.

I: Is that different after the MVP training?

M1: Yeah, because before that I would probably have went “that’s nothing.”

(Site 3 Mentors)

This change in behavior toward intervention was explained by some as a consequence of a shift in their expectations of peers’ attitudes and likely behaviors:

F1: it’s not just going to be you trying to stop it, you’re not going to be the only bystander. If there’s other people there that know all this information, all this violence is going to die out,

almost. [ ] if that person is feeling the same as you, you're going to have more confidence in a team to be like "what can we do about this?"

F2: Rather than you being confident and your friend going "No, don't do anything. It's fine"

(Site 3 Female Mentors)

Indeed, some staff remarked upon the impact that MVP participation had upon the mentors:

S1: I think if you said to me who benefitted most, I wouldn't say the First Years that they were working with; I would say without a doubt it was the people that were trained in the MVP. I think they then had a better understanding themselves of the kind of issues involved, the sexualisation of women, looking at the adverts and "well what is behind this?"

(Site 2 Female Staff)

Several mentors also noted specific instances of how they had used the MVP program to intervene in conflicts within their school:

I: Any other instances where you've put the MVP training into practice?

M2: I've not been in any sexual scenarios but I've split a fight up. That was, I don't know, it just seemed more instinctive. I wasn't going in all guns blazing like "leave him alone", it was in a controlled way. I've learned from MVP. [ ]

I: What had you learned from MVP that was useful?

M2: Like not to put myself at risk as well as any of them. I never ran in. I just sort of diffused it in a non-outburst way.

(Site 3 Male Mentors)

Mentors also reported noticing a change in mentees' attitudes as the MVP training progressed, highlighted by a shift from proposed retribution to non-violent intervention:

M1: The group we did when we first went in, they [mentees] were saying if they were in this situation they'd get a baseball bat and bat the guy or something. And then after the second session their minds started to change a little. By the third session their whole perspective were

completely changed.

(Site 3 Male Mentor)

This was reflected by some mentees who noted a shift post-MVP in how pupils dealt with conflict more generally, explaining that “Everybody’s calmer, everybody’s nicer to each other.” (Site 1 Female Mentee). Mentees’ also explained that intervention could be eased if all of the relevant parties had undergone MVP training:

I1: Can you think of any instances of where you've used what you've learned from MVP?

M2: The rumour situation is always one. See if someone is spreading a rumour about you, the easiest thing is to go up and talk to them and be mature. That's happened more than once. [ ]

Well because everybody's done MVP everybody's mature about it, so it's easy to talk to them.

(Site 2 Male Mentees)

However, it should be noted that not all mentees believed that behavior had changed. In the following extract, female mentees contradicted a group of male mentees who claimed MVP had changed their behavior towards their female peers:

I: Do you think they [male peers] treat you differently [post-MVP] from the way they talk to you?

All: No.

F2: Still horrible.

I: I just spoke to some boys and they said “we've changed and are much more respectful to girls”.

F1: No.

I: You don't think that's right?

F3: Oh! Especially the people that were in that group, some of them haven't changed at all.

(Site 3 Female Mentees)

### **The Relevance and Sustainability of MVP: Participant Opinions on the Suitability of Session**

### Topics and Ensuring Long-term Implementation

A variety of activities were used during the sessions, with the majority of the time spent collectively working through scenarios from the MVP Playbook. The original Playbook was adapted by the VRU to be more culturally- and age-appropriate in the current context. The final selection of scenarios differed across the three sites, and the way the selection process operated differed between the schools. For instance, in two sites the scenarios were chosen by staff, while in the other site mentors played a role in their selection. The suitability of the suite of scenarios was discussed by some mentors and staff. For example, it was suggested that some of the topics were more suitable for older pupils (“although the [S1] guys are aware of it [sexting<sup>1</sup>], they’re little first year boys who are chasing one another round the playground and chucking bottles at one another, you know?” Site 3 Male Staff). However, some mentees expressed a desire to be exposed to scenarios that addressed issues that they may not yet have experienced, but would affect them later in life, drawing parallels with sex education:

I: So are you too young for that [sexting scenario] do you think?

F2: It could happen higher up the school and it probably does still happen lower down the school as well and also I'm friends with some people that are a wee bit older, S2 and stuff and that sort of thing probably happens in their year.

F4: But I know of an S1 girl who’s had that happen to her and it's been sent on and stuff. That's the kind of thing they were talking about and how you would feel.

I: So do you think that’s right to give that to first years then?

F4: Yeah.

F1: Yeah. If we’re told earlier on, it's like with sex ed., for total safety about these sorts of things early on then we’re not going to want to risk it later on in life.

(Site 3 Female Mentees)

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<sup>1</sup> Exchanging sexually explicit text or photographs, usually using mobile phones.

The relevance of the scenarios was highlighted as an important consideration in the success of MVP. For example, at times mentors felt the need to elaborate on the MVP Playbook to ensure the session was appropriate for the class:

I: Did you change any of the scenarios, then?

M2: Not the scenarios, but the way you say it. Like just redirect it from the book, try to explain something because it's difficult to understand.

F1: Sometimes you have to kind of give examples and they're like "oh right, I know what you're talking about now."

(Site 2 mentors)

Although the focus of MVP is GBV, some mentees spoke about the salience of general "bullying" in everyday school life, reflected in the content of informal mentor-mentee interactions.

Consequently, some mentors suggested that bullying warranted more attention within MVP:

F3: we touched on bullying but that wasn't a proper scenario. And I think when people were coming to you one on one, outwith MVP, that was the main thing, bullying. I don't think we did a big enough lesson on that because it wasn't in the book. I think it was even more serious matters that were in the book.

F2: It feels like the simple things need to be dealt with fully before you go onto big things.

(Site 2 Female Mentors)

In addition, both mentors and mentees argued that much of the antisocial behavior they witnessed or experienced occurred via social media. While this issue was briefly covered in the MVP Playbook, there was agreement across mentees, mentors, and staff that it required greater prominence in the MVP scenarios:

I2: And so you mentioned, just briefly Facebook and things. How important is that to the issues that you covered in MVP?

F2: Well, most of the scenarios really relate to Facebook, the one about your friend's

boyfriend shouting at her all the time, that could have happened on Facebook as well and texting could happen on Facebook or pictures getting sent. It could happen through Facebook as well so most of the scenarios related back to Facebook.

(Site 2 S1 Female Mentees)

F2: More social networking involved [in MVP] because you see things, nasty things on Facebook and you're like that.

F3: And there's usually arguments on Facebook can be carried on into school and stuff.

(Site 2 Mentors)

Finally, a number of practical issues were raised by staff regarding the programs long-term sustainability within their schools, which depended in part on integration into school life:

S: I think a lot of initiatives come in and they go out pretty quickly. And it's trying to make something sustainable and effective, really. [ ] If it was kind of ingrained and embedded within the ethos of the school, I think that would probably be the most effective use of it.

(Site 2 female staff)

A further potential barrier to sustainability identified by staff and mentors was workload and the strain on time. For example, the logistical and organizational issues involved in running MVP (including the evaluation component) were a significant issue:

S: Often my attitude with MVP is "pain in the arse, pain in the arse" when it comes to organising things together because I've got so many other things to do. [ ] But there's not a hint of resentment in anything I'm saying; that's just the reality of it. Given the choice, if I was asked "do you want to drop it or keep going with it?" I'm going to keep going with it. I don't mind the time because it's worthwhile.

(Site 3 male staff)

## **Discussion**

All three categories of participant (mentors, mentees and staff) were generally positive about their experience of MVP (recruitment, training, implementation and impact). The peer-learning approach was especially praised for the way it engaged younger pupils, provided them with an influential, accessible and credible source of information, and facilitated a network of support outside the formal delivery sessions. Positive attitudinal and behavioral change regarding GBV and bystander intervention was reported by each participant group, but was particularly evident for the mentors who additionally developed leadership and transferrable skills. In order to achieve sustainability and maximum impact, respondents recommended that MVP be fully embedded into participating schools' curricula and cultures, and that program content be continually refined by end-users to ensure relevance and flexibility.

### **Experience of Participating in MVP**

The program was generally well received by mentors, mentees and staff across the three high schools. The peer-learning approach of MVP was considered a particular strength. First, it overcame the taboo of 'snitching' (to teachers) through provision of a network of accessible senior students. Secondly, because mentors and mentees were members of the same social group (i.e. high school pupils) the delivery of information by mentors to mentees regarding how to feel and act when it comes to GBV added credibility to their message and reinforced group norms against GBV. This is important, because violence perpetration and non-intervention can be influenced by misperceptions of how "in group" members view such behavior (Fabiano et al., 2003; Author citation).

The gender composition of the sessions was a source of considerable discussion for participants. There is evidence that single-gender groups facilitate the expression of opinions, particularly in males who are often the focus of GBV prevention programs. For example, a meta-analysis of GBV prevention programs indicated a greater impact on male participants who took part in single-gender groups (Brecklin & Forde, 2001). While the advantages of single-gender sessions were raised in the focus groups by mentors and mentees, there was also an appetite to hear the opinions and

perspectives of the other gender. Thus, facilitating both approaches in future MVP implementation (e.g. through dividing and then uniting classes) could capture the advantages of both single and mixed-gender sessions.

Additional important insights were offered with regards future development of the program, which included expanding the pool of mentees to include the first three years of high school (S1-S3) but also to improve availability of and accessibility to mentors by widening the mentor pool to include the final three years (S4-S6). It was also apparent that there was scope for involving more non-teaching staff as they had a different relationship with the pupils, and could overcome some of the limitations of teaching staff involvement (e.g. pupils unwillingness to express opinions). Furthermore, bringing mentors together (e.g. a retreat) was a positive experience for team-building to develop the type of skills (i.e. collaborative working relationships) necessary for the successful delivery of MVP sessions.

### **Participants' Perceived Impact of MVP**

Previous evaluations of MVP in US high schools demonstrated increased knowledge and awareness of GBV, improved attitudes towards women, and increased confidence to intervene in situations of GBV (e.g. Heisterkamp, et al., 2011; Katz et al., 2011, Mentors in Violence Prevention, nd). In addition, the multi-method study reported on the Mentors in Violence Prevention (nd) website highlighted the utility of undertaking qualitative work to understand the nature and extent of the GBV problem, and to contextualize the quantitative findings. While the nature of the evaluation reported in the current study cannot speak conclusively to the outcomes of the program, there was discussion of apparent increases in awareness of GBV issues, and positive attitudinal and behavioral changes (including examples of *safe* bystander intervention). This self-reported change in bystander intervention could be explained in part as being due to an expectation of peer support since others had also undergone MVP training. Thus, such metaperception of support appeared to be important for collective action on GBV (and bullying).

Beyond the impact on attitudes, perceptions, and intention to intervene among mentors and mentees, there was evidence of a wider impact of MVP on the development of transferable skills (e.g. presenting and time management) and personal attributes (i.e. confidence). This demonstrated the added value of MVP for mentors in terms of the additional opportunities and experiences it provided.

### **Relevance and Sustainability of MVP**

While an attempt was made by the VRU to adapt the language of the program to make it relevant for Scottish high school pupils, there was some debate regarding the suitability of some of the scenarios. Indeed, mentors and mentees felt that a number of important and relevant issues had not been adequately covered (e.g. the ubiquity of social media to all of the GBV scenarios). Thus, in order to ensure the future relevance of the program, it is necessary to continually review the playbook in a recursive manner to ensure the content reflects the issues confronting participants. This is best achieved by directly engaging with the target user group (in this case high school students in Scotland) and empowering them to voice their opinions. However, this approach also raises a tension between fidelity to the original evidence-based MVP program, and flexibility in tailoring the program to fit the specific needs identified by pupils. For example, while MVP is specifically designed to address *GBV*, participants in the current study expressed a desire for the program to additionally cover other forms of bullying.

The relevance of the program also feeds into its sustainability: MVP will only have a sustained impact if it is perceived as relevant to those it seeks to support. However, issues of sustainability extended beyond program content to include logistical considerations such as the added workload and resource (time) required to implement and run MVP. Indeed, school readiness to implement a prevention program (i.e. its ability to allocate sufficient resources and support the delivery of the program) is paramount to its success (Kam, Greenberg, & Walls, 2003). The fact that Site 1 was unable to find a suitable time for its staff to participate in the evaluation interviews could indicate a

lack of readiness of the school to engage in all aspects of MVP. Indeed, the evaluation was viewed by some staff as an inconvenience. But without a robust evaluation there is no way of knowing if a violence prevention program is effective and a wise investment of limited resource (Author citation).

While variations in practice demonstrated the utility of engaging non-teaching staff in the program to minimize the burden on teaching staff, it was recognized that unless the program was embedded into the curriculum and everyday school life it would be difficult to sustain in the long-term. Indeed, violence prevention programs are often guilty of lacking sustainability, as they are not integrated into routine/core business (Author citation).

### **Limitations**

The evaluation had four notable limitations. First, in order to ensure minimal disruption to the schools, participants were selected by the MVP lead in each school. While some direction was given with regards the size and general composition of the interview/focus groups, those who participated were those whom were invited, available, and willing. Thus, there is the potential that the final sample (particularly of the mentors and mentees) in each school was not representative of the wider cohort, and therefore the views expressed not representative of the full range of experiences and impacts.

Secondly, given the issues raised during the focus groups pertaining to the reluctance of female mentees to discuss issues in the presence of males (albeit peers) it is possible that, as the researchers are adult males, female mentees may have been more candid than if female researchers had undertaken the evaluation. Indeed, in two sites the discussion with female mentees was very limited. In addition, there is the potential that as “out group” members, the researchers influenced participants to provide a “public account” that is impersonal and publicly sanctioned (Cornwell, 1984) thereby portraying their school in the best possible light; however, it should be noted that staff, mentors, and mentees offered a critical reflection on the implementation of MVP in their school, including both strengths *and* limitations.

Thirdly, it is necessary to acknowledge that the understanding and presentation of material generated in the focus groups and interviews is a subjective process, and reflects the interpretation of the researchers. Ideally, transcripts would have been presented to participants for feedback to ensure accuracy, but this was not possible. Nonetheless, it is accepted practice within qualitative research that through a reflexive process, specifying the potential impact of the factors that may have influenced the research process (e.g. personal biases, opinions, and characteristics) enables the appropriate (cautious) interpretation of findings.

Finally, best practice recommends that evaluation frameworks should be developed alongside the development of the program and involve all interested and affected parties to ensure it addresses relevant issues (Author citation). However, this was not possible in the current study as funding was allocated following a competitive process sometime after the program had been implemented within the schools, which may have impacted upon the acceptance and relevance of the evaluation, and the accuracy of its outcomes.

### **Research Implications**

Previous evaluations of MVP in high school settings have mainly utilized quantitative methods with relatively little focus on systematic qualitative analysis (cf Mentors in Violence Prevention, nd). The nature of an evaluation can offer valuable insight for future program implementation: quantitative methods focus on the effectiveness of an intervention in terms of its impact on a specific *outcomes* (e.g. attitudes toward gender violence) while qualitative methods facilitate an understanding of the *process* by which an intervention operates (i.e. understanding the setting, how the program was implemented) and aids the interpretation/contextualization of the outcomes (Author citation).

The current study demonstrated the utility of process evaluation in terms of promoting the future relevance and long-term sustainability, and the wider impact of MVP within Scottish high schools. For example, by adopting a more bottom-up approach to program (re)design (i.e. enabling pupils to

shape program content) it would be possible to identify, and therefore address, those issues of most relevance to the people the program is intended to support. Furthermore, it became apparent that MVP had a wider, unexpected impact on the mentors, including the development of important transferable skills (e.g. presenting and time management) and personal attributes (i.e. confidence), which can themselves directly or indirectly protect against violence.

While the current study only reports on the use of qualitative research, in order to fully evaluate a violence prevention program such as MVP it is recommended that evidence of outcome(s) *and* process(es) be gathered through the use of quantitative and qualitative research methods (Author citation). This requires careful planning and implementation, the availability of appropriate resources, and buy-in from participants from the earliest stages (Author citation).

### **Practical and Policy Implications**

Qualitative research focuses upon generating an account of the experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of participants, which is influenced by the context in which the account is generated. Thus, while it is not possible to “generalize” from the interviews and focus groups - that took place in three specific Scottish high schools over a specific time-period - to other people or contexts, it is possible to extract a number of generic recommendations from the analysis and wider literature that could inform policy and practice regarding future implementations of MVP. The following four generic recommendations compliment the specific issues identified in previous sections of the discussion:

- It is necessary that the site is ready to implement MVP, including the allocation of necessary and sufficient resources to the delivery of the program *and* its evaluation.
- A balance must be struck with regards fidelity to the original, evidence-based MVP program (a top-down approach) and a process of continual development/refinement to ensure age and cultural appropriateness.

- Any modification to the program should be based upon the input of representatives of those that will serve as mentors/mentees, not just adults (bottom-up approach).
- Evaluation must incorporate process and outcome components, be on-going, and fully integrated into the program to inform and update best practice, and assess long-term change.

The final recommendation is imperative: Without an appropriate evaluation it is not possible to know if resources are being used appropriately, particularly as evaluation is often the first thing to be omitted when resource is limited (Author citation). Thus, not only is it necessary to advocate for on-going, robust evaluation of violence prevention programs such as MVP, but this must be backed up by the provision of appropriate levels of funding.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, MVP has been previously found to be effective in raising awareness, and changing attitudes and behaviors concerning GBV in different settings in the US, including high schools. The current study reports the first qualitative process evaluation of a pilot implementation of MVP in three high schools in Scotland. The findings indicate that the evidence-based program has been successfully transferred from the US to Scotland, and is generally well received by the staff and pupils (mentors and mentees). However, a number of specific suggestions have been identified to inform any future implementation of the program, and the need for robust, on-going evaluation.

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