

Childhood Exposure to Domestic Violence

Reflections of Young Immigrants of Indian Origin

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Abstract

In this qualitative investigation, four young adults of Indian ethnicity reflected on their childhood experiences of exposure to domestic violence within their immigrant families, including the nature of their exposure, the effects it had on them, and their responses to their situations. Among the themes that emerged were their powerlessness as children, their lack of mothering, and the loneliness of their role as “the responsible one” in the family. An unexpected finding was the significant part played by school counsellors in enabling these resilient young people to develop their strengths and move forward in their lives with hope.

Motivation to undertake this research arose for Meera from working as a volunteer at a women’s refuge with a group of children aged three to ten who had been exposed to domestic violence and who were immigrants of Indian origin. Immigrants often grieve the loss of community, friends and personal networks, and replacing these is a lengthy and difficult process (Hernandez & McGoldrick, 2005). For immigrant children and adolescents who are exposed to domestic violence, these losses of support structures, including extended family, could potentially leave them quite isolated in the new country.

Defining domestic violence

Domestic violence, sometimes referred to in the literature as intimate partner violence, family violence, or violence to women by known men, is defined as:

any violent or abusive behaviour (whether sexual, physical, psychological, emotional, verbal, financial, etc.) which is used by one person to control and dominate another with whom they have or have had a relationship. (Hester, Pearson, & Harwin, 2000, p. 14)

Culture, gender and family socialisation are among many factors that influence an individual's judgement about what particular actions characterise domestic violence (Levendosky, Bogat, & von Eye, 2007).

Literature review

Children as victims

When referring to children's experiences, Holden (2003) recommends using the term "exposed" rather than "witnessed" or "observed" because it is inclusive of the different ways in which children may experience domestic violence (Edleson, 1999), without assuming that a child has actually observed the violence. Exposure includes prenatal events, being victimised, participating, intervening, being an eyewitness, overhearing, observing the initial effects, experiencing the aftermath, hearing about the violence, or being ostensibly unaware (Holden, 2003).

Domestic violence disrupts the one place children would normally associate with safety: their home (Card, 2004; Eggert, 2005). Like refugees, these children frequently experience family disruption and personal uprooting, being forced to flee for safety from an intolerable and dangerous environment (Berman, 1996). The perpetrator of the violence is usually a parent who would normally be the child's protector, while the other parent is a terrified victim, often unable to support the child (Edleson, 1999; Eggert, 2005; Flores, 2001; Kilpatrick & Williams, 1997, as cited in Card, 2004).

The secretive nature of domestic violence also inhibits the recognition of children as victims; parents try to hide the violence from the outside world, from their families, from their children, and sometimes from themselves (Peled, 1996). "Fights" the children witness may not be defined as violence or discussed with them by their parents. Children may be silenced by fear for their mothers, fear of getting hurt themselves, and/or fear of undesired changes in their lives as a result of the violence or their mothers' responses to it. They are, therefore, only likely to disclose when they are somehow given permission to do so (Hester & Pearson, 1998, as cited in Hester, Pearson, & Harwin, 2000).

Professionals' efforts have concentrated on the "direct" victims of domestic violence, i.e., usually the women, but less consideration has been given to the needs of their children (Berman, 1996), who have been seen as secondary victims by the battered women's movement (Peled, 1996). Furthermore, the extent of children's exposure is not fully known (Osofsky, 2003), hence the references to them as "invisible," "silent," "forgotten," or "unintended" victims.

The impact of domestic violence on children

Children's exposure to domestic violence may be traumatic, and may increase their long-term risk for a multitude of psychological, behavioural, social and educational problems (Geffner, Igelman, & Zellner, 2003). One investigation found that 84% of children studied could probably be diagnosed with DSM-IV disorders (Diamond-Haas, 2005). In school-age children, low self-esteem and depressive symptoms seem common, and these children have been described as more anxious, sad, worried, fearful, and withdrawn than their peers (Onyskiw, 2003). While some studies have revealed no effects attributable to exposure to domestic violence, others have indicated that exposed children may tend to handle frustration poorly, have more difficulty regulating their emotions in interpersonal interactions, and lack effective problem-solving skills and conflict-resolution strategies, misinterpreting ambiguous interpersonal situations as potentially threatening, and attributing hostile intent to another person (Onyskiw, 2003). Exposure could therefore have significant adverse effects on children's development (Zuckerman & Augustyn, 1995).

Women exposed as children may experience long-term symptoms of depression, trauma and low self-esteem, men may experience trauma-related symptoms, and both may experience greater distress and low social adjustment. They may also carry violent and violence-tolerant roles into their adult intimate relationships (Edleson, 1999).

Not all children will react to, or be affected by, exposure to domestic violence in the same way (Geffner et al., 2003). Contextual, family and environmental factors moderate the impact, and a number of factors interact with each other to create unique outcomes for different children (Allen, Wolf, Bybee, & Sullivan, 2003; Fosco, DeBoard, & Grych, 2007; Hester et al., 2000). The nature, intensity, and frequency of the conflict influence their levels of distress and the effects of their exposure (Diamond-Haas, 2005; Grych & Fincham, 1990). Important factors also include perception of threat, and children's belief in their ability to cope with the situation (Kilpatrick & Williams, 1997, as cited in Card, 2004); personal characteristics also influence children's perceptions and interpretations of interactions (Grych & Fincham, 1990). Concurrent factors, including direct experience of aggression, poverty, community violence, parental mental illness, and parental substance abuse, could compound the effects of the exposure (Eggert, 2005; Onyskiw, 2003). It is essential to establish each child's circumstances, to gain understanding of his or her experience.

Ethnic minority group membership may be a protective or a complicating factor for children exposed to domestic violence (Lewis-O'Connor, Sharp, Humphreys,

Gary, & Campbell, 2006). Racial factors have been influential for black children whose family homes, often their refuge from racism, have become unsafe (Iman, 1994, as cited in Hester et al., 2000). Many Indian young people are exposed to racism here in New Zealand, as are other immigrants (Wali, 2001). Violence that invades their homes can only intensify children's insecurity and vulnerability.

Maternal well-being and adjustment, parenting style, and the quality of the child-parent relationship could also mediate trauma effects on child witnesses (Eggert, 2005; Hughes & Huth-Bocks, 2007; Kalil, Tolman, Rosen, & Gruber, 2003). Healthy attachment between parent and child can be disrupted in families exposed to domestic violence (Eggert, 2005), and Lieberman (1997, as cited in Eggert, 2005) found an association between the psychological and emotional unavailability of battered mothers and anxiety in young children. Children are at higher risk of developing negative internal working models when domestic violence creates such chaos that parents become unavailable, unresponsive, or punitive towards them (Flores, 2001). Mothers who are emotionally drained may take out their frustrations on their children, from whom they become emotionally distant (Abrahams, 1994, cited in Hester et al., 2000).

One of the few studies that elicited responses directly from young people found that, despite all that they had experienced, many were able to rebuild their lives with hope and optimism for the future (Berman, 1996). Protective factors included the children's interpretation of their experiences; their ability to cope with stress; the availability of a protective, non-offending parent or other support people to act as surrogate parents; psychological "hardiness" to resist negative factors in the home; development of positive self-esteem and strong social skills; a sense of hope for the future; respect and empathy for others; and the development of some sense of control over one's life (Geffner et al., 2003). In addition, individual protective factors include a positive temperament, a child's intellectual capacity, and social competence (Gewirtz & Edleson, 2007).

Limitations of the research

As studies vary widely in the use of definitions, samples, and methodology (Geffner et al., 2003; Golob, 1997; Levendosky et al., 2007; Wolfe, Crooks, Lee, McIntyre-Smith, & Jaffe, 2003), it is difficult to make comparisons and draw conclusions. Researchers have not distinguished between children who witnessed domestic violence and those who were directly abused themselves (Edleson, 1999; Geffner et al., 2003; Golob, 1997).

Most research has involved children who were in shelters, where there was an over-representation of low-income families (Edleson, 1999; Hester et al., 2000).

Mothers have been the source of most data about children, and differences between adult and child perceptions have been ignored (Edleson, 1999; Hester et al., 2000). Mothers' perceptions of their children may have been distorted when they were themselves in crisis (Onyskiw, 2003). Clearer understanding is needed about children's resilience and factors in their environment that lessen or increase the effects of the violence, including seeking their perspectives.

No studies could be found on the impact of domestic violence on children of Indian ethnicity, and specifically on those who are also recent immigrants. Meera's own experience of immigrating, the experiences of her children, and the stories of fellow immigrants have heightened her awareness of the challenges that immigration presents. Without the support of extended family and friends, close family members are forced to depend on each other in negotiating this new experience. The destruction of this family unit by domestic violence presents further challenges for these children.

Method

To give voice to the perspectives of Indian immigrant young people on their exposure to domestic violence as children and its consequences for them, a qualitative approach was indicated (McLeod, 1999). It was hoped that the insights of these young people would provide further understanding of the nature of such experiences, potentially contributing to improving support for those in similar situations. As Koverola and Heger (2003) have observed, it is ultimately the children who will inform us if we have responded effectively.

Participants

The study was open to immigrant young people aged 17 and older, of Indian ethnicity, who had been exposed to domestic violence as children. As they develop a stronger sense of self, young people in this developmental stage are able to reflect on, and make meaning of, their childhood family experiences in ways that would be beyond younger children (Dacey & Kenny, 1997). The four participants recruited included three females and one male, aged between 17 and 23. Two participants were brother and sister, but were interviewed individually. None of the participants had extended family or support networks in New Zealand when they arrived, and some had themselves been the direct victims of abuse.

Anika, aged 23, immigrated with her family at age 13, was a victim of her father's anger and physical assaults, and witnessed her father's physical and emotional abuse of her mother and younger brother.

Mala, aged 20, the eldest of six children, arrived aged 16 with three siblings and her father, who left her mother behind in their country of origin. Prior to immigration, she witnessed her father physically and emotionally abusing her mother, physical assaults between other members of the family, and her siblings being maltreated. She was also sexually abused by other members of the family prior to arrival. After immigrating, she and her siblings were direct victims of their father's anger, and emotional and physical abuse.

Kay, aged 19, the third eldest in her family, immigrated with them when she was about four years old. She witnessed physical, emotional and financial abuse of her mother by her father, assaults on her mother by her older brother, and physical abuse of younger siblings by her father. She was also sexually abused by an older sibling.

Kay's brother Kiron, aged 17, was about two years old when they arrived in New Zealand. He was physically assaulted by his father and witnessed similar events to Kay.

Procedure

An interview guide was developed, informed by literature and by Meera's experience of working with young people exposed to domestic violence. Permission to undertake this study was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited through school counsellors who were likely to know of former clients who would fit the criteria and could be interested in taking part in this project.

In semi-structured, individual interviews, participants discussed their exposure to domestic violence and its effects on their lives. Each interview was audiotaped and transcribed, then participants were given the opportunity to check and verify the transcripts at a second interview. Throughout the interviews there were opportunities for them to confirm or clarify interpretations and understandings of their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, they were subsequently invited to add any further insights they may have had.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns in the transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006), and verification was provided by a colleague who acted as an independent

analyst (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Reflection on the research process and on the substance of the interviews evoked “moments of illumination and insight” (McLeod, 1999, p. 129), as well as questions that were discussed with colleagues and in supervision.

Results

Key themes that emerged from the data are grouped into three major sections: themes related to the young people’s reflections on their childhood and their exposure to domestic violence; the psychological consequences; and the ways in which they have responded and built their futures. Pseudonyms have been used when referring to individual participants.

Through the eyes of the child

All participants vividly recollected their exposure to domestic violence, including both the events and the feelings they experienced. Their reflections revealed themes of powerlessness, a lack of mothering, and having to be “the responsible one.”

Powerlessness

The young people recalled experiencing an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. Although fully aware of the violence that was occurring, sometimes witnessing it or being victims themselves, they knew there was nothing they could do about it. Their powerlessness intensified the trauma of the experience, as reflected in their stories.

I remember standing at the bottom of the stairs. I could hear Mum pleading with Dad to stop. I could hear crashing, banging—Dad was just yelling at her—that was so hard. (Anika)

Dad was arguing with my brothers—he wanted to hit my brother with a chair and Mum went in front and took the full blow—I was just there—that was it. I just stayed there. (Kay)

Kiron’s sense of powerlessness was not just about his inability as a young child to stop the violent attacks, but also about feeling that neither parent cared about how it affected their children. Anika also reported: “There were never any explanations. There were no apologies.”

Powerlessness was accompanied by fear:

I was very afraid. All the children were crying. I believed he would hurt us all. I was just scared—we cried and cried. We just were listening and can’t do anything

... We never questioned his decisions. His force was strong. He didn't need to hit us. It was just his voice that made us afraid. (Mala)

Despite their distress, these young people accepted this environment of violence and abuse as “just part of life” (Anika), and did not talk about it.

This just was normal life. There was no discussion about what happened. I didn't really talk with siblings about things. We just knew we were all unhappy so there was no need to talk. (Kiron)

They managed as best they could:

I just tried to work around it. I tried to make it all as normal as I could. There was not much else! (Kay)

As a result of the trauma, Kiron recalled “when I was young, when anything bad happened to me I didn't remember it.”

The lack of mothering

Participants recalled being conscious of their lack of parenting, with fathers locked into their role of abuser and mothers into their role as powerless victim. All emphasised the lack of mothering or their mother's inability to provide a safe, loving, and caring environment.

Kay sadly recalled an incident that symbolised this. Having accidentally burnt her feet in the bath, she was treated for burns at the hospital. Her mother showed no concern or sympathy for her, expecting Kay to walk around, seeing to her mother's needs, despite being told by the nurse that she had to stay off her feet. She described her unsupportive mother as having “shut out everything.”

Kiron remembered, “Mum would not do stuff that we needed, e.g., for school.” He recalled being upset because his parents fought and argued in front of the younger siblings, the home had not been maintained, and the children were neglected. Their mother's lack of care and concern for the impact the situation had on her children was confusing.

The cry, “Why did we have to see all of this?” reflected Anika's sense that her parents had not provided a safe environment for their children. While she expressed anger towards her father for resorting to violence against his wife and children, she showed even more resentment towards her mother: “I think she was so stupid for getting into a relationship like that.”

The circumstances for Mala and her siblings were different, for their mother was

prevented by their father from being in their lives. This was “a huge loss,” resulting in extreme loneliness for her:

Dad didn't understand. For years we lived closely with her. We didn't have a big house and we all slept on the floor in one room with her.

Snatched from that close relationship, she had to cope with her father's cruelty and lack of care or support.

The consequences

The consequences for these young people included shouldering responsibilities and experiencing psychological pain.

The responsible one

Lacking parental support, these young people became responsible for the well-being of their younger siblings.

As I was growing up, I used to take the younger siblings and sit in another room until it was all over—go to another room to get away from it all. (Kay)

Willing to sacrifice herself for her siblings, Kay spoke of taking the blame to protect them. This role then passed on to her younger brother when she left home.

Mala also became the key caregiver of her siblings, a major challenge:

No one understood that I was in the role of mother at the time. I had to look after my siblings but it was hard for me too.

As immigrants, their mothers were socially isolated and some had difficulty communicating in English, so they had to rely on their children for various forms of support. Kiron reported having to miss school to act as an interpreter for his mother. Kay expressed sympathy when describing their mother's reality at the time:

She didn't know good English and it was scary for her too. It was only a few years after we came to New Zealand and she did not know what was going on. She had no one to really support her.

Kay became their mother's spokesperson and support person, privy to all the details of her situation:

She put all the responsibility onto me. When I was growing up, it was up to me to support my mother after Dad left. Life was pretty difficult and we were just trying

to get by. I had to help my mother talk to social workers, set up life, and take care of the younger children.

The young people's responsibilities included intervening during, or picking up the pieces after, incidents of domestic violence.

Mum came into the lounge and was crying. I was only 12. Why does she come to me for comfort? (Anika)

I saw all these bruises on her the next morning. It was horrible so I called the police ... I now stood up to Dad. I told him I didn't trust him and that it would be much better if he left. (Kay)

Their mothers would not necessarily follow their advice, however. In a situation where an older brother had also become abusive to their mother, Kiron felt frustrated:

I called the police. Mum said that the police should not arrest him. It happened a second time as well. Mum said she wanted him to come back home.

Psychological pain

Participants recalled having no one within their families to look after their well-being. They variously described overwhelming pressure, depression, and isolation.

I felt pressured. My sisters looked up to me, mother depended on me. It was too much ... No one understood my experience as an individual—what I was going through. (Mala)

Three of the participants attempted suicide prior to leaving home at age 16. Kay reported being depressed since the age of 12, and when she overdosed, she hoped that it would “change what my family was thinking about.” Kiron's recurring thoughts were about not wanting to live. Anika was the only participant who remained within the family home, despite the distress she continued to experience.

The young people were also ambivalent about their fathers, poignantly expressed by Anika:

It was confusing. He was like a Jekyll and Hyde dad. We had shared so many lovely times with him too. He read with us, shared my love for animals. Yet not knowing what will happen next. We were walking on egg shells around him.

It was confusing that a parent could be so abusive to his own wife and children: “I hate him but because he is my dad there is that love.”

Kiron described learning “what Dad was really like.” He recalled wishing that his father would come back home because he remembered the “good side of Dad,” when he would take the children shopping or to the park. However, when his father returned he was deeply disappointed when things got worse.

As one participant observed sadly, “The last person you expect to be mean to you is the person who created you.”

Looking to the future

Remarkably, despite their experiences, all participants managed to bounce back to varying extents, taking steps toward gaining a sense of control over their lives. Three participants had left home at 16, but continued their education at school. Two obtained scholarships for tertiary study. When interviewed, two were at university, one had graduated and was working, while the fourth was still at school. The value they placed on education, their determination, their connectedness to school, and the support of pastoral care staff all appear to have contributed to their resilience.

Education as opportunity

These young people saw education as the way to ensure that their lives did not follow the same pattern as their families’. Generally, within the Indian community there is a strong emphasis on education (Wali, 2001), but they had added determination and focus in persevering to achieve a good education. As one said:

I cared about my future. The experience I had did it. I knew what I didn’t want it to be like. I know what I wanted my life to be. I will do that by going to university.
(Kiron)

Interactions with others also revealed alternative ways of being. One participant recalled being aware and taking note of how others lived. Early on, she realised that what went on at home was neither good nor normal. She actively grasped at any rules about how to be that she could learn outside of the family. Her primary school teacher’s rule, “Treat others as you would like to be treated,” was still very important to her: “I just knew that I had to be educated and successful.”

Thoughts of her mother, wanting to bring her to New Zealand to take care of her, as well as wanting to “ensure my life was different,” prompted Mala to work towards academic success. As she said:

The more this was going on, the more I was driven towards study. It motivated me. Now I feel confident I can do anything I want. It gave me the strength.

School as a safe and empowering place

Three participants identified school as a safe and empowering place, where they found the community, care, and opportunities that they lacked elsewhere in their lives. They were deeply grateful for the normality and nurturing it provided:

School was a safe place to be. I had friends there and it was a nice place to be. (Kay)

School was best place to be. I had support/friends so did well at school. Just being here was way better than being at home. I was being treated like a normal person.

(Kiron)

School was fantastic. The only place I felt safe. School was enormous support and I couldn't have done it without their support. (Mala)

As well as the new lenses that education provided, these young people acknowledged in particular the vital support provided by school staff. They recalled their counsellor, principal, and various staff members helping them to leave home, and connecting them with various other support structures in the community.

We were new to New Zealand and not aware of our rights ... it was just our school teachers who maintained contact with us. Our real supports were there in the school with the guidance counsellor and staff and friends. (Mala)

Hearing a teacher talk about sexual abuse helped one participant recognise her own past experience as abuse. She confided in the school nurse and the counsellor, who provided support at a time when her mother did not.

School staff assisted her to leave home with her siblings, enabling them to set up their own home and continue their education at school. The staff members' "enormous support" enabled her to manage:

I felt strong because the counsellor and staff believed our story and knew our goals were good. (Mala)

In one case, the young people were given practical support in setting up their new home and were even invited to a staff member's home for a Christmas meal.

Only one participant maintained the "family secret," had not sought support at school nor left home like the others at 16, and was still exposed to domestic violence at the age of 23, when she sought counselling. She felt the least empowered to influence her future. The financial support offered by her father enabled him to maintain his control over her life, and her mother maintained her influence through the belief that she was

owed her daughter's love and support because she had stayed in the abusive relationship "for the sake of the children." When interviewed, this young woman was quite depressed, and experienced difficulty with personal relationships.

Discussion

The stories of these young people provide vivid insights into their experiences of the world of domestic violence, as well as into their ways of coping. It must be noted that this was a small, qualitative study, and participants were obtained as a result of having accessed counselling support. These results therefore cannot be seen as representing the experiences of all young people exposed to domestic violence. The participants' exposure to domestic violence also varied, and some participants experienced other forms of abuse as well. Rather than findings that can be generalised across a wider population, the value of the results from this study lies in the depth of awareness they offer into the nature of some young people's lived experiences. They also have particular implications for school pastoral care systems and the role of school counsellors.

The manner in which the participants were recruited for this study, the fact that all of them had eventually accessed counselling, their specific ethnicity, and their immigrant status characterise them as a unique group of young people exposed to domestic violence. Nevertheless, their accounts of their experiences reflect themes found in previous studies. Domestic violence rarely occurs in isolation (Eggert, 2005; Onyskiw, 2003). These young people's reports of being sexually abused or physically assaulted, and witnessing assaults on siblings, support the possible concurrence of domestic violence and child physical or sexual abuse (Card, 2004; Holden, 2003).

Consistent with Berman's (1996) findings, all participants in the current study described feeling powerless as young children, and their sense of abandonment and hopelessness corresponded with the terror and helplessness that were associated with powerlessness in Card's (2004) study. As they talked, it became obvious how traumatic this powerlessness could be, and how intensely children in this situation can feel distress.

Coping mechanisms such as "working around" it, and blocking out memories of bad things happening, suggest resourcefulness as well as disassociation in response to the trauma. The responsibilities they took on for caregiving, support and protection of others within their families, including role reversal with their mothers, raise questions about the effects on their developmental process (Zuckerman & Augustyn, 1995) and their frustrated personal needs for active parental support.

To some extent the participants' silence about the violence as children reflected a sense of hopelessness, that there was no point in talking about it when there was nothing they could do to change it. Research suggests that other reasons for this silence include the secrecy that tends to surround domestic violence due to fear of consequences (Peled & Edleson, 1999), and the difficulty believing that other adults might be more insightful and understanding than their parents (Kashersky, 2004).

Findings from this study reflect those of previous research which established that a mother's exposure to domestic violence could impair her parenting capacity, including her ability to perceive the psychological trauma being caused to her children (Card, 2004; Hester et al., 2000; Zuckerman & Augustyn, 1995), as well as her ability to protect them and to facilitate their development (Osofsky, 2004). This study also highlights the added vulnerability of immigrants who do not have their extended families to turn to.

The ambivalence and confusion these young people experienced with regard to their fathers was a significant, ongoing challenge, given the affection they expressed for them, while also experiencing resentment, pain and disappointment over their violent behaviour (Peled, 1998, as cited in Edleson, 1999). Edleson (1999) has suggested that this is an area that requires further research.

Participants' reports of depression, suicidal ideation and attempted suicides reflected the potentially devastating effects of exposure to domestic violence (Diamond-Haas, 2005; Edleson, 1999; Onyskiw, 2003). It is interesting to note, though, that these occurred primarily prior to the age of 16, when three of the four participants left home. From that stage on, these young people began to turn their lives around.

Like the children in Berman's (1996) research, participants in this study were able to rebuild their lives with hope and optimism for the future. They could certainly be described as survivors who, despite still experiencing some struggles, have gained new insights and understandings that have enabled them to move forward.

Among the factors considered by the American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Violence in the Family (as cited in Geffner et al., 2003) to promote resiliency in children are their interpretation of the experience, the availability of a protective non-offending parent or other support people to act as surrogate parents, development of positive self-esteem and strong social skills, a sense of hope for the future, and respect and empathy for others. Various factors appear to have worked together to moderate the experience of this group of young people, build their resilience and create hopeful outcomes.

Most important were their interpretations of their experiences and their determination to construct new futures. They seemed to know, even when quite young, that what they had experienced was unacceptable. For one participant, consciously studying the way that others lived and looking for ways of living to emulate seemed important, as well as absorbing the values of role models such as teachers. They actively worked to escape the powerlessness of their past by constructing their own values, caring about their futures, protecting and trying to ensure a better life for themselves and their siblings, and focusing strongly on education as the way to a more positive future.

A notable and unexpected outcome that was apparent in this research was the crucial role played by school pastoral care systems in the life directions taken by three of these young people. Osofsky (2004) suggested that schools, community centres and others provide support to children when their parents are victims of domestic violence and are unavailable to them. As immigrants, these young people had no alternative support available, so school played a very important role in providing safety, care, information, and educational opportunities.

This finding has clear implications for the provision of pastoral care within schools, which are in the unique position of being able to offer both educational and therapeutic support to young people, and afford an “arena of comfort” (Gossens & Marcoen, 1999) that these young people clearly valued. Factors that build young people’s resilience and protect their well-being include strong, supportive connections with important adults such as teachers and school counsellors, as well as feeling connected to school through a sense of belonging, being valued, and feeling safe and secure (Resnick, Bearman, Bauman, Harris, & Jones, 1997). School provided these young people with the caring, normal, trusting relationships they lacked at home, nurturing them in a safe environment that enabled them to achieve their goals.

The extent to which counsellors and others were involved in assisting the participants was admirable, and undoubtedly played a significant part in ensuring they maintained their education and achieved academically. The needs of young people exposed to domestic violence, and the responses that played such a significant part in enabling these young people to create positive futures for themselves, could stretch our beliefs about the limits of our practice. The provision of support is also predicated on teachers’ and school counsellors’ awareness of the prevalence and consequences of domestic violence, particularly for children and adolescents, and sensitivity to the ways in which the effects may manifest.

Conclusion

The findings of this study present a case for further, longitudinal research into the experiences of children who are exposed to domestic violence, as well as research into the particular experiences of children and young people who are immigrants to this country. Although the resilience of this small group of young people is noteworthy, the results highlight the fact that not all children are affected by, or cope in the same way with, exposure to domestic violence. Questions arise as to the influence of their ethnicity on the choices they made with regard to focusing on education and pursuing ongoing contact with their families, and about what could possibly have helped one of the participants to seek assistance earlier. Their shift from the powerlessness of childhood to empowerment for the future was very significant. Their positive relationships within the school environment, and in particular the role of the school counsellor, served as a significant protective factor. This may or may not be the case for other immigrant young people, or for young people in general who have been exposed to domestic violence.

Staff in pastoral care roles in schools need to be aware of the likelihood that some students will be affected by domestic violence in their families, and that the school may well be their only source of hope and support. This has implications for staff development, as well as for school policies and procedures, in order to ensure effective pastoral care for children and young people of all ethnicities who are affected by domestic violence. The participants who accessed help in this study, and those who assisted them, serve as an example of what can be achieved when we support young people in navigating their own pathways through trauma to a brighter future.

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