ABSTRACT

Background: School based, peer-to-peer sexual harm is under-researched despite its prevalence and adverse effects on young people across the globe. Understanding barriers to victim disclosure and peer reporting might help towards the prevention and protection of young people.

Objective: This study explores dual perspectives of young people and educational staff about school-specific environmental barriers to 1) young people’s disclosure of sexual harm experienced, and 2) young people’s reporting of sexual harm on behalf of others.

Participants and setting: Participants include 59 young people aged 13-21 and 58 educational staff, drawn from seven schools across four local authorities in England whom formed part of a wider study on harmful sexual behavior and safety in schools.

Methods: Focus groups were carried out with young people and education staff. The sessions were thematically analysed and focused on barriers to disclosure within the school context.

Results: Peer groups set powerful ‘rules’ that influence the ability and willingness of young people to report sexual harm. Some school responses for addressing sexual harm are sub-optimal and sexual harm is not adequately prioritised. Some schools appear to struggle to manage more subtle forms of sexual harm compared with more recognized forms of violence and abuse. A significant proportion of sexual harm is so prevalent that it is ‘normalised’, and therefore under-reported. This resigned acceptance to sexual harm consequently shapes young people’s disclosures.

Conclusions: School systems of responding to sexual harm require strengthening to increase feelings of safety and empowerment of young people.

KEYWORDS Harmful sexual behavior; sexual violence; sexual harassment; schools; disclosure; report; bystander

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1. Introduction

‘Harmful sexual behaviour’ (HSB) is an umbrella phrase applied in research and practice in the United Kingdom (UK) and some English-speaking nations to capture a wide range of problematic and abusive behaviors displayed by children and young people (Hackett, Holmes & Brannigan, 2015; Shlonsky et al., 2017). Hackett et al. (2015; p. 12) define HSB as “sexual behaviours expressed by children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, that may be harmful towards self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult”, proposing a developmentally specific continuum of inappropriate, problematic, abusive and violent behaviors. The term encompasses a spectrum of behaviors characterized variously in the international literature as ‘sexual violence’, ‘gender-based sexual violence’, ‘sexual harassment’, ‘sexual behavior problems’ and ‘problematic sexual behavior’ (see, for example, Chaffin et al., 2008; Ey & McInnes, 2018; Greene, Robles, Stout & Suvilaakso, 2013; McNeish & Scott, 2018; Shlonsky et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2017), and include behaviors displayed online (Lewis, 2018).

Sexual harm resulting from HSB in school/ educational contexts, committed by young people against other young people, has been raised as a global concern since the mid-1990s (Greene et al., 2013; Lundin & Wesslund, 2016; Pinheiro, 2006; UN Women, 2016). There are, however, no accurate figures that encompass the full spectrum of HSBs (Chaffin et al., 2008; McNeish & Scott, 2018), or HSB which occurs in school contexts (Ey & McInnes, 2018). There are, however, studies from North America, Europe and countries in the developing world that demonstrate that sexual violence and harassment are commonly reported among secondary school students at rates between 40% and 85% (AAUW, 2001; AAUW, 2011; Chiodo, Wolfe, Crooks, Hughes & Jaffee, 2009; Dunne, Humphreys & Leach, 2009; Felix & McMahon, 2006; Landstedt & Gillander Gadin, 2011; Leach, Fiscian, 2018).
Kadzamira, Lemani & Machakanja, 2003; Lichty & Campbell, 2012; Lundin & Wesslund, 2016; Ormerod, Collinsworth & Perry, 2008; Skoog, Özdemir & Stattin, 2016). Such wide variation is likely to be explained by the inconsistent use of definitions and measurements across studies, given the range of behaviors that may be considered. In England and Wales, a Freedom of Information Act request to all police forces revealed over 5,500 sexual offences recorded in schools between 2012 and 2015, with nearly 4,000 of these relating to physical sexual assault and more than 600 rapes (BBC, 2015). While these figures helpfully draw attention to a previously neglected problem, they cannot offer an accurate picture of the proportion of school-aged children affected by these offences because of inconsistencies in police recording and reluctance to record such incidents (House of Commons, 2015). Sexual violence and harassment in schools adversely impacts young peoples’ physical and emotional wellbeing (Bendixen, Daveronis & Kennair, 2018; Bucchianeri, Eisenberg, Wall, Piran & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014; Landstedt & Gillander Gådin, 2011; Lichty & Cambell, 2012; Skoog et al., 2016) and educational outcomes at both the individual and school levels (Lichty & Cambell, 2012). While global contexts and patterns of HSB observed in schools vary (Lundin & Wesslund, 2016; Pinheiro, 2006; UNESCO, 2017), the urgent need for effective prevention and response is globally shared.

Disclosure of sexual abuse by children has garnered considerable research and practice interest given the need for earlier identification and timely protection and support (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina & Lateef, 2017). While rich knowledge has emerged from this literature, its focus is typically on: experiences at the ‘abusive’ and ‘violent’ end of Hackett et al.’s (2015) continuum or intra-familial or adult-to-child extra-familial sexual abuse contexts. Many studies also lack sufficient detail on the identities of extra-familial perpetrators, making it unclear whether the findings are applicable in cases of peer-perpetration in school contexts.
Finally, this literature tells us little about barriers that others may experience as witnesses in reporting sexual harm (Lichty & Campbell, 2012).

Only a small number of studies in this field report findings related to peer-perpetrated CSA. In a study about unwanted sexual experiences (USEs), Kogan (2004) found that disclosure is less likely when USEs are perpetrated by a peer. Priebe and Svedin (2008) found that young people are more likely to disclose peer-perpetrated CSA to another peer/friend rather than an adult, a finding supported by Hershkowitz, Lanes and Lamb (2007). Lahtinen, Laitila, Korkman and Ellonen’s (2018) more recent study of sixth and ninth graders in Finland found that youth participants disclosing sexual abuse by a young person aged between 11 and 19 were more likely to tell a friend (78%) than an adult (22%). These findings suggest that a significant proportion of peer-perpetrated CSA is likely to remain hidden from adults. Only one qualitative disclosure study, Crisma et al. (2004), reported a barrier to disclosure of peer-perpetrated CSA; they found that a fear of parents curtailing young people’s freedoms could inhibit disclosure.

A slightly wider sub-set of disclosure studies include mixed samples of adults and young people whose abuse was perpetrated by someone under 18, although findings are not disaggregated by perpetrator identity. Broadly speaking, these studies have found that disclosure can be inhibited by: fears of being ridiculed by peers (Münzer et al., 2016); concerns (mainly for men) over being labelled as ‘gay’ and the impact of generalized oppressive norms associated with masculinity (Easton, Saltzman & Willis, 2013); general mistrust of others (Easton et al., 2013); fears of not being believed/taken seriously (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Münzer et al., 2016; Schönbucher, Maier & Mohler-Kuo, 2012); lacking a trusted person to talk to (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Münzer et al., 2016; Schönbucher et al., 2012); past negative responses to disclosure and general anxieties about others’ reactions (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Easton et al., 2013); fear of the perpetrator and perpetrator tactics
for silencing victims (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Easton et al., 2013; Münzer et al., 2016; Schönbucher et al., 2012); a conflicted desire to protect the perpetrator from negative consequences (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Münzer et al., 2016); and reluctance to burden families with the problem or disturb family dynamics (Allnock & Miller, 2013; Münzer et al., 2016; Oaksford & Frude, 2003; Schönbucher et al., 2012). Oaksford & Frude (2003) (whose sample included a significant number of participants reporting that their abusers were under the age of 18) reported that taboos against, and stigma related to, sexual abuse inhibited disclosure.

The bystander literature offers insights into barriers to proactive responses after witnessing violence (Hamby, Weber, Grych & Banyard, 2016; Latane & Darbey, 1969; Mabry & Turner, 2016; McMahon, 2015; Storer et al, 2017; Sulkowski, 2011), although most studies in this field focus on the broader idea of bullying rather than sexual violence, and do not disaggregate what constitutes an ‘intervention’: witnesses’ interventions may include disclosure, but this is not always identified in the study. The majority of bystander studies focusing on young people do so within the context of North American colleges/ universities where bystander interventions have most commonly been introduced and evaluated (Mabry & Turner, 2016; McMahon, 2015; Storer et al, 2017). Sulkowski (2011) identified barriers to college students’ willingness to report witnessed violence such as a lack of trust in the college support system, feeling disconnected from campus life and feeling staff are ill-equipped to respond to violence. Storer et al’s (2017) study on young people’s bystander behaviors when witnessing bullying or teenage dating violence found that young people were generally reluctant to proactively intervene within the school environment because of a lack of student power, ignorance about dating violence and pessimism about teachers’ capacity to stop bullying or violence. Where young people did intervene, influencing factors included positive relationships with teachers and teachers modelling action.
The present article explores the research question: what are the school-specific environmental and cultural barriers to victim disclosure and peer reporting of sexual harm, committed by peers, within school contexts? The findings are drawn from a larger study on school safety and HSB in England. Hackett et al.’s (2015) definition of HSB was used to guide the study and frame the types of HSBs reported to occur in school contexts and the organizational responses to it. Qualitative accounts elicited from focus groups with young people and education staff provided rich insight into social and organizational contexts within schools that prevent victim disclosure or peer reporting. A social ecological approach framed the analysis, and, while this framework has been applied elsewhere in the broader CSA disclosure literature (Alaggia et al., 2017), the paper extends the field in relation to 1) the barriers to victim disclosure of different forms of HSB across Hackett et al.’s (2015) continuum; 2) barriers to peer reporting HSB/sexual harm they have knowledge about; and 3) disclosure and reporting of HSB/sexual harm in school environments. Additionally, it is one of few studies that offers insights on educational staffs’ views about HSB and provides a comparative account of youth and educational staff perspectives (Altinyelkin & Le Mat, 2017).

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

2.1.1 Selection of local authorities

Four local authorities (administrative bodies in local government) in England (of 346) were opportunistically selected as the study sites for ease of access and expediency. These four were recruited from a group of 14 with whom the research team had previously worked to develop local responses to peer abuse. The final four represented those whose Safeguarding Partnerships (bodies within local authorities designated to lead on safeguarding...
issues) expressed interest following initial invitation and which were in a position to commence data collection.

2.1.2 Selection of schools

Schools within these four authorities were then selected for inclusion using a stratified sampling technique. All schools in each of the four authorities (n=179) were mapped to form the overarching sampling frame. This frame was stratified by: school type, gender breakdown, academy status, the Office for Standards in Education grade (Ofsted; the inspection and regulation service responsible for children and young people), faith provision type and engagement history with their local authority safeguarding partnership on issues related to HSB. From each stratum, schools were selected until the target number of twelve schools (three from each local authority) had been identified and the sample represented a mix of characteristics. Ofsted, as the commissioner of the research, reviewed the sample to exclude schools where an inspection was on-going or planned to ensure schools in these situations were not unduly burdened by the research. One school was excluded on this basis, following which another school bearing similar characteristics was selected to replace it. All 12 schools were invited to take part in the study. Seven of these responded positively and were able to commit to the study and accommodate the research team within the study timescales. The final sample of schools comprised seven schools from three local authority sites: three schools from Site A, two schools from Site B and two schools from Site C. Despite strategic support for the work in Site D, the research team were unable to secure the commitment of schools in this site (see Table 1 below). The seven participating schools were: two comprehensive secondary schools (one was also a faith school), two colleges, two pupil referral units (PRUs) (educational provision for children deemed unable to attend a mainstream school due to exclusion or illness), and one special school (these specialise in
special educational needs such as sensory and physical needs, communication and interaction needs, and autistic spectrum disorders).

**Table 1: Final sample of local authorities, schools and youth and staff participants within them**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of local authorities sent invitation to participate in the study</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
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| Selected local authorities |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Site A | Site B | Site C | Site D | Totals |
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 |
| No schools participated from this site | |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of schools in each selected local authority</th>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Number of youth participants in each school</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>59</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Number of staff participants in each school</th>
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<tr>
<td>58</td>
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**2.1.3 Youth participants**

The team aimed to conduct two focus groups per school, engaging up to six youth participants per group. Young people aged 13 to 17 could be invited to participate, although in the two colleges, young people up to age 21 could be invited to take part. Young people were not recruited on the basis of experiences of HSB, instead recruited to comment generally on HSB in their school environments and school responses to it. A total of 59 young people took part in the groups (see Table 1), and the average age of the overall sample was 15.

Recruitment of youth participants proceeded via a gatekeeper who was the school’s designated safeguarding lead (a person appointed to take lead responsibility for child protection issues). Sampling was, of necessity, purposeful and opportunistic to the extent that
gatekeepers were responsible for extending invitations to their pupils. The school contact disseminated an information sheet to young people, offering an opportunity to opt in. As part of the agreed safeguarding protocol with schools, school contacts could refrain from extending invitations to young people where there was an on-going safeguarding concern, or if there were concerns about bringing particular young people together in a group setting (where, for example, two young people may have been involved in incidents where it would be inappropriate to engage them in a single group).

The use of gatekeepers in this way means that the research team are unable to state with confidence the response rate of youth participants. The team were not made aware of the numbers of young people who may not have been invited to participate on the basis of safeguarding or other relevant issues. In light of this, and the purposive sampling technique applied, the sample is likely to contain bias and the findings must be seen in this context.

2.1.4 Staff participants

The research team asked the school contact to identify a range of education staff (for example mentors, teachers and designated safeguarding leads) to participate on a voluntary basis. Some schools nominated education staff dependent upon local needs; one school desired strategic education staff to participate and in others, front line education staff was prioritised. Once nominated, the school contact distributed information sheets about the study to the nominees. All staff approached in this manner assented to participate. Further consent was taken by the focus group facilitators verbally and in writing on the day of the focus group. A total of 58 staff participated (see Table 1).

2.2 Procedures

The University research ethics committee approved all study procedures.

2.2.1 Youth focus groups
Between one and six youth participants (an average of three) participated in each focus group. Due to the subject matter of focus groups, and to foster the best possible atmosphere where youth participants could feel comfortable, the focus groups were designed to be single-gendered. Fifteen of the 17 groups were single gendered; ten were boys only groups and five were girls only. The two mixed gender groups occurred in the colleges where schools felt this was the most feasible option. The groups were conducted in a private room on school premises during timetabled classes, lasting, on average, 62 minutes. The sessions were led by two members of the research team who applied direct questioning alongside scenario-based activities focussing on the following topics: 1) types of sexual harm young people experience within the school setting; 2) how young people in the school might respond to sexual harm (including disclosure of sexual harm they experience and reporting sexual harm they witness or know about – central to the analysis in this article); 3) areas of safety in the school; and 4) how the school responds to HSB incidents. Questions and activities were designed using a ‘third person’ approach to avoid placing youth participants in a position where they felt pressured to disclose their own experiences of sexual harm.

Participants provided verbal consent ahead of the focus group and, where participants were under 16, parental consent was obtained. Written consent was taken on the day of the focus group. Youth participants were assured that the focus groups were voluntary and they had the right to withdraw any comments made up to four weeks following the focus group.

Even in light of the approach described above, the research team acknowledge the limitations of focus groups relating to sexual harm in schools. Youth participants who may have experienced, or committed, sexual harm may have been unwilling to share their views openly amongst peers. The team hoped that by holding a majority of single-gender focus groups and ensuring that, where known, victims who may have experienced sexual harm were not placed in groups with young people who may have perpetrated sexual harm, this
might minimize any distress or discomfort. The facilitators ensured participants were aware they could leave the groups at any time without giving a reason and provided breaks where appropriate. Young people were provided with contact details of local and national support services, and were also given a pastoral contact within the school to provide support following the sessions.

2.2.2 Staff focus groups

Between one and eight staff participated in each focus group. Five of the 12 groups were single gendered. The groups were conducted in private staff rooms on school premises. The interviews lasted, on average, 60 minutes. Staff participants were provided an information sheet and verbal and written consent was obtained prior to the session. The team were keen to ensure staff did not feel pressure to participate, and were clear with schools and staff that participation was voluntary. The sessions were led by two members of the research team, who explored four topics including: 1) general feelings of school safety; 2) physical space; 3) school response; and 4) multi-agency working.

2.3. Data analysis

All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed, with the exception of five focus groups where youth participants did not consent to being recorded. In these cases notes were taken by facilitators, typed up following the sessions and analysed as part of the main dataset alongside transcriptions of recorded groups. Two members of the main research team initially conducted rounds of independent thematic coding according to a four-fold framework within N*Vivo11, software for managing and analysing qualitative data: 1) identification of HSB in schools (which included all references to disclosure or reporting of HSB in schools); 2) response and intervention to HSB; 3) prevention of HSB; and 4) systems and structures.
Following this, the authors of this paper thematically coded all relevant extracts related to (1) above into ‘disclosure’ or ‘reporting’ categories. The Social-Ecological Model (SEM), a theory-based framework for understanding the multi-faceted and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that are thought to shape behavior (in this case, disclosure and reporting of sexual harm in schools), was then applied in the analysis of data with specific focus on environmental barriers to disclosure and reporting. The SEM derives from Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological framework of human development, who argued that to understand human development, the whole ecological system in which growth occurs must be considered (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The SEM, as a person-in-environment perspective on understanding behavior, has been widely adopted in the child development and maltreatment fields (Belsky, 1980) and more recently within the CSA disclosure field to provide a more nuanced understanding of what influences children and young people’s disclosures of abuse (Alaggia, 2010; Alaggia et al., 2017; Collin-Vézina et al., 2015). For this analysis, the authors coded data according to relational, organizational and broader social barriers to disclosure and reporting. The final stage analysis involved comparing and contrasting staff and youth participant perspectives. Whilst staff perspectives have been incorporated where relevant, the focus of the findings remains on the voices of youth participants in this study.

To increase the dependability of the analysis, the authors conducted stepwise-replication of a sample of coding at the start of analysis. Inconsistencies were addressed through discussion which increased confidence in the emerging categories and supported further refinement of these categories.

3. Results

Across all seven schools, HSBs crossing Hackett et al.’s (2015) continuum were qualitatively evidenced within focus group transcripts. The most prevalent forms of HSBs mentioned by participants in this sample were gender-based verbal sexual harassment and use
of inappropriate sexual comments/ language observed in hallways, classrooms and school grounds. This could include ‘wolf-whistling’ (usually at girls); explicit sexual comments related to appearance, for example, ‘you have big tits’ or ‘you’re really fit’; sexual name calling, such as the use of terms ‘slut’, ‘slag’ or ‘sket’ and homophobic name calling such as ‘poof’, ‘queer’ and ‘faggot’; verbal threats against a young person, for example, ‘I’m going to violate you after school’; and derogatory descriptors for sex (usually targeting girls), with use of terms such as ‘beat and delete’ and ‘fuck and chuck’. HSBs in the online environment were also prevalent, including ‘sexting’; young people sharing sexual images or video, sometimes under pressure to do so; re-sharing of sexual images and video amongst peer networks by the recipient of the image or video; young people watching pornography in school; and the use of the online environment to spread and exacerbate sexual rumors about students. Less common, but evidenced across a number of schools, were HSBs at the abusive and violent end of Hackett et al.’s (2015) continuum, including: grooming for child sexual exploitation (CSE), CSE perpetrated both by individuals and within gang contexts, rape and attempted abduction. While male and female participants said that both male and female students could be targets of sexual harm, they also acknowledged that males are more frequently the aggressors and females the targets of sexual harm.

Two primary environmental, school-specific barriers emerged from the data: the social context of sexual harm in schools and organizational systems and responses. These findings demonstrate how school context and environment directly impact on pupils. In light of this, the findings in the discussion are considered in the context of Cohen, McCabe, Michelli & Pickeral’s (2009) school climate framework.

3.1 Social context in schools

The focus group discussions suggest that the ways in which young people recognize some forms of sexual harm, the prevalence of some forms of sexual harm, and accepted
responses to sexual harm within peer groups may shape disclosure and reporting behavior among at least some young people.

3.1.1 Hierarchy of harm

Discussions across ten youth focus groups relating to five (of seven) schools revealed a ‘hierarchy of harm’ in these schools that appears to influence disclosing and reporting behavior. First, we observed that HSBs were generally viewed by the participants as ‘less serious’ than racist or homophobic behaviors, a view that appeared to be aggravated by sub-optimal school responses to HSB. Racism in particular was viewed by participants as being ‘worse’ than sexual harm, in some cases appearing to relate to a better awareness of inequality related to ethnicity than that sex/gender. One youth participant described racism as ‘being worse’ than sexual harassment because racism is “about your skin color” and “you can’t help being black, it’s your skin colour” [Sch6a, female youth]. The young person in this case was unable, without prompting in the discussion, to apply a similar logic to being born a female sex. Another young person commented that you “can’t do anything about the color of your skin, but you can help being a slag” [Sch3a, male youth]. Here the evident assumption is that calling a female a slag means she has done something to warrant it, when the evidence in this study suggests that females are called ‘slags’ for no reason whatsoever. The quote also suggests this young person believes that having a ‘choice’ about your sexual behavior removes any right to protection from harassment and abuse as a result of that choice. School responses to racism were perceived as stronger than responses to HSB, which may have had the effect of reinforcing young people’s views that racism is ‘worse’ than sexual harm. In response to a question about whether racism is addressed by education staff, one young person said ‘They have to’ [Sch4a, male participant], but the focus group participants agreed that sexist language is not addressed similarly. In another focus group at the same school, a young person explained that if a pupil uses a racist word, that they will
“get talked to by [teacher] and probably get excluded”, whereas “If they say slut or slag to you, they just lose a point, or if it's outdoors you tell a teacher, the teacher will tell you to ignore them” [Sch4b, female participant].

Second, particular forms of HSB were viewed by the youth participants as ‘less serious’ than other forms of HSB. Verbal sexual harassment, unwanted touching and groping and ‘sexting’ - the most prevalent forms of sexual harm described – were viewed by some participants as unlikely to be disclosed or reported. Instead, young people are more likely to ‘do nothing’ or handle the situation on their own within their peer groups. In comparison, physical sexual violence such as rape or sexual assault were largely perceived as being ‘more serious’ and, at least hypothetically, more likely to be disclosed or reported. In one focus group where different scenarios were considered, young people felt that rape was serious enough that it should be reported to the police: ‘Its rape. I would go to the police, not the teacher’ (Sch5a, male participant). This is qualified by the apparent mediation of peer group rules of behavior and the influence of organizational factors, both of which will be addressed further on in the findings.

3.1.2 Normalisation of sexual harm

There was evidence in eight youth focus groups relating to five (of seven) schools that verbal sexual harassment is so prevalent in schools that it is ‘normal’. Sexually derogatory name calling – for example, terms such as ‘slut’, ‘sket’, ‘slag’ and ‘poof’, ‘queer’ and ‘faggot’ - was seen by youth participants as part of the fabric of school life:

P1: Oh, that happens every day.

P2: Since I got this haircut yeah, I've been getting comments.

P1: Like lesbian.

P2: Like straightaway I come in and someone went, “Transgender,” or, “Lesbian.” This is my daily life literally since I joined this school, “Tramp.”

P1: And the thing is, every day you either get called a slut, a slag, a ho [Sch5b, female participant].
Sexually derogatory insults are reported to be so common in these schools that most youth participants thought that no one would bother to disclose or report them. There was variation by gender apparent, however. Some male youth believed in an unquestionable rule that “no one would say anything” [SchB5a, male participant]. Others thought that to disclose would make them look foolish: “Because its deemed as not a big deal. Like this person hurt my feelings or whatever. Which sounds a bit childish” [Sch3a, male participant]. The boys appeared to lack awareness of how sexual name calling can adversely impact those being targeted: “No one cares about name calling” [Sch5a, male participant]. The girls’ focus group discussions revealed a different story. Many girls felt resigned to being called sexually derogatory names and that it is something that you ‘get used to’ and has to be tolerated. Female participants said “I hear that word every day” and “You’ve got so, like, used to it you’re like ‘okay’” [Sch5b, female participant]. Other female participants hinted that witnessing verbal sexual aggression is not comfortable but that stepping in to intervene is not always possible:

“When its verbal, it’s either the students will face it head on, or they won’t say anything. I know there are times when I’ve kicked myself, like I wish I’d stood up for this person. But I was too afraid because it’s really scary going up to this guy twice as tall as me, like ‘please can you stop?’ . So sometimes yeah, when it comes to verbal stuff like that, not a lot gets done and the school definitely doesn’t get told about it” [Sch3b, female participant].

Staff perspectives confirmed that these forms of sexual harm are part of everyday life for young people. There was a common view that younger children who have only recently arrived at secondary school are more likely than older children to seek help from a teacher if they experience sexual harassment or abuse. As children become accustomed to secondary school life, they become less likely to seek help because the behaviors they are confronted with are so common place that they become desensitised to it:

“And it is again definitely the older year groups that think it’s normal, they think that’s part of what you should be putting up with, or if you’re going out with someone
that’s what it means. That’s a real big problem I see with a lot of the girls… things that they think are the norm if you’re going out with someone I have to say that is not the norm, you do not have to put up with that” (Sch2, staff).

Staff attributed this ‘normalisation’ to a number of different influences including the music industry, which was thought to normalise sexualised language heard in school hallways. More frequently, staff participants pointed to insufficient attention to sexual harm in schools and complacent school approaches. This issue will be addressed in further detail under organizational barriers.

3.1.3 Culture of ‘not snitching’

In schools within this sample, peer groups appear to powerfully set the boundaries of permissible disclosing and reporting behavior through unspoken ‘rules’. Strikingly common across youth participants’ focus groups (in ten focus groups across all seven schools) was the perception that disclosing or reporting sexual harm would have adverse social repercussions for the discloser or reporter. Fears of being labelled a ‘snitch’, ‘a snake’ or ‘a grass’ pervaded the discussions, and were a clear barrier to help-seeking for youth participants:

“I’m not a snitch because everyone who ever tells a teacher, they say snitches get stitches. That’s what they say so I don't snitch” [Sch2a, male participant].

“I think one of the biggest problems is that there’s this whole idea that if you tell someone you’re a snake, you’re a snitch. That’s this really negative view that you can get” [Sch3a, female participant].

This culture of ‘not snitching’ underpinned some young people’s complacency in intervening on behalf of others. Discussions revealed that some young people would not get involved in other people’s business, or believed that their youth counterparts would take this view: “You rarely find someone that will actually care to solve it (help-seek). They’ll just be like, ‘I understand you’ and stuff like that but ‘I can’t get mixed into this because it’s not my business’. This is what they usually say” [Sch2a].
Staff participants were aware of this culture within their schools, and reported this to be one of the most significant barriers to learning about sexual harm: “There is a big culture of ‘don’t grass’” [Sch7, staff participant]. They acknowledged that young people would rather get into trouble themselves than be seen as a snitch:

“It's huge. The code that kids have is worse than the mafia in school, because they are so adamant they don't want to be a snake, to the point where they happen to get into trouble and it's ridiculous sometimes. They won't do that” [Sch2, staff participant].

3.2 Organizational barriers

Youth and staff participants also named deficiencies in school responses to sexual harm as direct barriers to disclosure and reporting by young people.

3.2.1 Lack of positive relationships with teachers or pastoral staff

One of the more common organizationally-related factors named by youth and staff participants was the absence of a positive relationship with a teacher or other educational staff member (such as someone with pastoral responsibilities). While some youth participants felt they knew someone that they could approach who was friendly, non-judgemental, caring and who they trusted to disclose or report sexual harm, many others did not feel this way: “You might not want a teacher to know. Like, I know that I’m not comfortable around a lot of teachers to tell them that sort of stuff. I don’t really have that sort of relationship with any teachers. So, it would be very difficult” [Sch4b, female youth]. Youth participants also perceived that teachers develop relationships with vulnerable students because of the need to support them, which means that students who are not identified as vulnerable are not prioritised. Teaching staff were aware that they could not devote the time they wished to students to develop relationships that would allow them to notice concerns and provide a safe space to disclose or report their worries: “It’s not having that time for them, that’s the real let down...where we let them down” [Sch5, staff]. Staff acknowledged that teachers were not always best placed to be that trusted adult given their workloads and
responsibilities for teaching and learning. It was thought that someone with pastoral responsibilities would be better suited to build relationships and be seen, by young people, as independent of the teachers they see every day. However, in some schools, pastoral support was unavailable or staffed by individuals with little experience of supporting young people around issues of sexual harm as a result of funding cuts:

“So, that type of role you are doing (speaking about another focus group member with pastoral responsibility), it’s sort of like because of government funding, college funding has been eroded away and the importance of that (pastoral care). People like David (staff member being referred to – name changed) who are really experienced and really know that are being replaced by less experienced people, who may not have the ability to deal with that. That’s coming down to numbers and budgets” [Sch1b, staff].

3.2.2 Complacent school attitudes towards enforcing policies on sexual harm

Some youth participants felt that their school does not do enough to combat HSBs, leading to reduced confidence that any disclosure or report of sexual harm would be taken seriously:

“Honestly, I have to say schools don’t really put as much into it as they should. Because outside of school, sexual violence or sexual crime is punished much more harshly. Where here, sometimes sexual crime will just be overlooked.” [Sch2b, male participant].

Relatedly, there was a perceived lack of follow-through by schools in relation to sexual harm: “They [the school] might say ‘Oh this is a serious incident, you’re excluded for three days’. Then they’ll [the student who was excluded] will come back and it’s just dropped” [Sch2b, female participant]. Some staff perspectives supported youth perspectives, suggesting a culture of complacency that results in unsatisfactory responses. A staff member at the college believed that their institution’s response drives a culture of silence among its students because the policy is not strong enough nor are there effective consequences for such behaviors:
“I think there is a lack of consequences for bad behavior in college, never mind some of the more serious stuff. A lot of it’s just a slap on the wrist and a Stage 1 disciplinary, doesn’t go nowhere and so there’s no fear of consequences. They’ll say whatever they want to say to you, in that moment, the students” [Sch7, staff].

This view was also evident at a mainstream secondary school:

“We had a student who reported that she was sexually assaulted by another student, and I don’t know if anything ever happened from that. I don’t think she knows. She didn’t feel like anything happened from that, so she was really…it definitely upset her, because she was….really angry” [Sch1b].

Unfortunately, such a response from the school left the staff member feeling helpless, and that all she was able to offer the student was a lame piece of advice: “You’ll leave school and encounter situations like this outside of school, you’ve got to learn to, like, be resilient” [Sch1b].

3.2.3 Insensitive handling of disclosures or reports of sexual harm

Youth participants felt that education staff does not always handle disclosures or reports of sexual harm sensitively. Some of the ways in which education staff are perceived to handle disclosures or reports of sexual harm are clearly at odds with the prohibition on ‘snitching’: “If you do tell a teacher, the teachers should, like, not tell anyone. But the teachers end up just telling everyone, and then they’re called a snitch” [Sch2a]. Youth participants also described the practice of openly pulling pupils out of class as a barrier to disclosing or reporting sexual harm:

“When she (named teacher) walks into a classroom, it’s very rarely that it will be about something good.” [SBsch2, female youth].

Pulling students out of class in this way could result in pressure for young people to tell other students why they were pulled out of class. In the absence of giving a reason, young people may face rumors spreading around the school or being labelled a ‘snitch’. There was also a common perception that teachers would blame young people for any situations they found themselves in, so youth participants saw little point in telling them: “I
just feel like that’s the norm these days, you don’t do anything about it because they’ll just
tell you it’s your fault and they won’t really care.”

3.2.4 Anxieties over escalation of disclosures and reports of sexual harm

Anxieties about what would happen to disclosures or reports of sexual harm were
evident in youth participant accounts, and generally supported by the views of staff. Young
people, for example, perceived that any disclosure that is made is immediately passed on to a
young person’s parents whether the young person wants that to happen or not: “And also, if
you tell a teacher about it, they are basically going to tell your parents about it” [Sch2a,
male youth]. Youth participants were aware that teachers have a responsibility to pass on
safeguarding issues, but were clear about wanting a separation of home and school life. They
thus viewed safeguarding procedures as inflexible, which raises clear challenges for
encouraging young people to disclose and report sexual harm. This was also an issue with
reporting sexual harm on behalf of someone else, where intervening on someone’s behalf
could aggravate the context for the young person they are seeking to help:

“I have a scenario that I know the person... that he had something about himself and
it got out. Then that person told the teacher and it wasn’t about his business and the
teacher went and told the parents, if that makes sense? The teacher told the parents,
and there was a sort of like, “Why did you tell my parents, I don’t feel comfortable
with you as a teacher.” [B2girls]

4. Discussion

HSBs across Hackett et al.’s (2015) spectrum were evident in all schools in the study
sample. Inappropriate and problematic forms of sexual harm appeared to be most prevalent,
as identified in other studies of sexual harassment and violence in schools (Bendixen et al.,
2017; Ormerod et al., 2008; UNESCO, 2017). While the highly gendered nature of the
sexual harm described in schools was qualitatively observed in this study, larger
observational studies of adolescent sexual harassment confirm that males are most typically
the aggressors and females the victims (Vega-Gea, Ortega-Ruiz & Sánchez, 2016). Ormerod
et al. (2008) also notes that sexual harassment in schools appears to be a gendered phenomenon that is directly and negatively associated with outcomes for girls.

Cultural factors at the structural level have been previously identified as both accounting for the gendered nature of HSB, as well as being influential in preventing the disclosure of CSA at the abusive and violent end of Hackett et al.’s (2015) continuum (Alaggia et al., 2017). In this study, we found negative cultural and societal attitudes towards females and males which reflect powerful, heteronormative school environments via the use of terms that constrain young people’s behavior. These constrained environments are the context in which HSB play out, and shaped young people’s ability and willingness to seek help through disclosure or reporting of a range of forms of sexual harm.

‘School climate’ is a relatively new area of study that is useful in framing both cultural and organizational environmental factors identified in this study. This field of study investigates how the school environment impacts on its students and attempts to understand how to improve these environments. School climate is defined by Cohen et al. (2009; p. 182) as the “pattern of students', parents', and school personnel's experience of school life [that] reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures”. They identify four key domains of school climate as: safety, relationships, teaching and learning, and institutional environment. Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, and Higgins-D'Alessandro’s (2013) later review identified a fifth dimension relating to school improvement process. Three of these five - safety, relationships and institutional environment – are most relevant to the findings and are discussed below.

4.1 School climate (safety)

The school climate dimension of safety refers to perceptions of safety within the school environment, and relate to social, emotional, intellectual and physical safety as fundamental needs (Thapa et al., 2013). Feeling safe in school promotes learning and healthy
development (Devine & Cohen, 2007), but the pervasive nature of some forms of sexual harm documented in many of the schools in this study sample suggest that some students, particularly girls, may not feel either physically or emotionally safe. Ormerod et al. (2008) found that a school climate that is tolerant of sexual harassment was associated with feeling unsafe at school, for both boys and girls. While some forms of sexual harm were ‘normalised’ and therefore youth participants appeared ‘desensitised’ to these, it was apparent that girls felt resigned to such behaviors. Remarks by the male participants suggest they act with impunity in the context of sub-optimal school responses to this form of sexual harm.

The culture of ‘not snitching’ also suggests that young people in these schools may not feel safe in their environments. Research suggests that a culture of ‘not grassing’/ ‘not snitching’ is typically associated with marginalized communities where relationships with the police are characterized by low trust and high tension (Evans et al., 1996; Yates, 2006). We found no studies in relation to the patterns of adherence to a ‘no grassing/ no snitching’ policy within school contexts, however Yate’s (2006) qualitative study on young people’s views’ on ‘grassing’ to the police on a working class estate in England provides some insight. Yates found that young people adhere to a ‘no grassing’ rule because: it is the cultural ‘norm’ (‘everybody knows about it’) on the estate; young people do not trust that the police would take their complaints seriously; young people generally distrust the police; and young people lack confidence that police would be able to keep them safe. The young people in this study similarly all seemed aware of / familiar with the ‘no snitching’ rule; many felt the school would not take them seriously and, as a result, were not confident that the school would be able to keep them safe. As a result, disclosing and reporting sexual harm, even where sexual harm is recognized and may be characterized by young people as serious, may not be forthcoming. Where school personnel also fail to recognize or identify sexual harm, young people remain unsafe and as potential targets of HSBs.
4.2 School climate (relationships)

The school climate dimension of relationships refers to the patterns of supportive and caring relationships with adults and peers (Thapa et al., 2013). Research finds that in schools where there are more positive student-teacher relationships, the probability and frequency of behavioral problems tends to be lower. While some youth participants in this study described good relationships with teachers or pastoral staff, other youth participants felt they had no positive relationship with a teacher which, in turn, was noted to be a barrier to disclosing or reporting sexual harm. While this dimension is fundamentally relational, staff identified resourcing problems as central to the lack of capacity for developing good relationships with students. Teachers have less capacity for interacting positively with students, which research finds to be associated with greater engagement from students and fewer behavioral problems (Skinner & Belmont, 1993). With lowered capacity for positive relationship building, sexual harm may remain hidden from schools.

4.3 School climate (institutional environment)

The school climate dimension of institutional environment refers in the main to school connectedness and the physical layout of school (Thapa et al., 2013). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2009) defines school connectedness as the belief by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals. Research has found that school connectedness is associated with adolescent health and academic outcomes (McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; Ruus et al., 2007; Whitlock, 2006), violence prevention, student satisfaction and conduct problems (Loukas, Suzuki, & Horton, 2006). School connectedness has also been found to be a protective factor against risky sexual violence and drug use behaviors (Catalano, Haggerty, Oesterie, Fleming, & Hawkins, 2004; Kirby, 2001). We found that young people who did not feel that the
school prioritises the safety of its students from sexual harm felt it was less likely that
disclosure or reporting of sexual harm would occur.

**4.4 Implications for practice – school improvement process**

Thana et al.’s (2013) fifth dimension of school climate – school improvement process
– is critical to the prevention of sexual harm within schools. School climate has been found
to be associated with successful implementation of school reform programmes (Guffy,
Higgins-D’Alessandro & Cohen, 2011). In this study, the schools’ participation is
encouraging because it indicates a willingness to reflect on their organizational response and
be leaders in improving the identification and prevention of sexual harm. Specifically in
relation to disclosure and reporting of sexual harm, schools may want to consider tackling
awareness and understanding of sexual harm through a ‘whole school approach’: a cohesive
approach that is embedded across the school curriculum as well as wider school systems, and
that involves all members of the school community from the head, to pupils, to all education
personnel and parents and carers (Department of Education, 2009). The culture of ‘not
snitching’ also requires tackling in order to open up pathways for young people to seek help
without fear of reprisals. Schools themselves require consideration of the care they provide
to students via strategies to build relationships between education personnel and students.
While recognising that funding and resources may undermine these types of activities,
investing in experienced pastoral staff may help take pressure off of teachers who are
maintaining the learning environment. Policies and procedures for handling disclosures and
reporting of sexual harm are required, considering the potential harm that young people may
find themselves in as a result of doing so. Policies and procedures, as part of a whole school
approach, should be transparent and open to students so they can make better, informed
decisions about disclosing or reporting.

**4.5. Limitations**
This study involved youth participants without known experiences of sexual harm. Although it is likely, given the prevalence of some forms of sexual harm identified, that at least some young people had either experienced sexual harm themselves, witnessed sexual harm targeting others or, indeed, themselves sexually harmed others, the unknown nature of the sample limits what can be derived from direct experience. Despite this, it is probable that the young people drew on their own experiences and knowledge of the school environment, given that they inhabit these spaces and spend a significant amount of time in them. The non-random approach to, and use of gatekeepers for, sampling inevitably introduces bias into the sample which must be acknowledged. Further, the sensitivity of the topic may have adversely influenced young people’s willingness to share their views about HSB in the school. However, the rich discussions that occurred within the focus groups, and stability of themes across groups/schools, provides some evidence that young people were reflecting on their perceived reality within their school contexts. Given the above limitations, care must be taken in the application of the findings more widely; however, the findings have allowed for some key barriers to emerge, thus providing some direction for intervention.

4.6 Future directions

The findings explored in this paper are unique in addressing the barriers to disclosure and reporting of sexual harm in school contexts. Further research is needed to ascertain robust figures on the extent of all forms of sexual harm experienced in schools. Contexts of HSB in single-gendered schools would be fruitful research to understand the specific needs and experiences of students in these schools. Additionally, future research should focus more explicitly on the relationship between school climate and disclosure of sexual harm. Further qualitative research can help adapt current quantitative measures of school climate to the specific issue of sexual harm.

5. Conclusions
The findings presented here are unique and both support and extend current research into disclosure of sexual harm. The primary focus of current disclosure research is on abusive and violent forms of CSA such as rape and sexual assault, but the findings of this study highlight impediments to more prevalent forms of sexual harm occurring in schools. The barriers to disclosing sexual harm in schools appear to be similar to those for reporting sexual harm in schools, which also raises implications for prevention through attention to bystander interventions.
REFERENCES


