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Abstract

Peer-sexual abuse in educational settings is a matter of international concern – featured in mainstream news reports, televised through drama series and documented in research. In 2018 the UK government revised and published a series of policy documents to assist schools in addressing the phenomenon. This paper considers the sufficiency of this policy framework through social field analysis of focus groups with staff and students at seven educational establishments in England that ran from 2015-2017. Analysis reveals four avenues through which staff and students created or reinforced norms the underpinned harmful sexual behaviours and in doing so created contexts conducive with peer-sexual abuse. While policy developments have made initial acknowledgements of school cultures as associated to peer-sexual abuse, significant progress is required if policy is to provide a framework that challenges, rather than reinforces, individualised – and on occasion victim-blaming – narratives of peer-sexual abuse.

Introduction

Legal challenges, televised drama series such as *13 Reasons Why*, and increased media interest has seen mounting pressure in the UK, US and Australia, amongst other Western countries, to effectively prevent and respond to sexual violence between young people in educational settings (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2015; End Violence Against Women (EVAW), 2017; Jenney & Exner-Cortens, 2018). In England this resulted in a series of policy reforms in 2017-18 to guide schools and wider partnerships on their response to sexual violence between students (Department for Education (DfE), 2018; DfE, 2017). For the most part this created a policy framework for responding to individuals involved in, or affected by, sexual violence at school. Yet wider research agendas have established that a) wider school cultures will inform individual student behaviour, and; b) staff responses to individual student behaviours contribute to school cultures (Cowie, 2011; Losel & Bender, 2006).

Building upon this wider evidence base, this paper considers student, staff and government policy contributions to shaping/addressing cultures associated to peer-sexual abuse in schools. Using empirical evidence from focus groups with school staff and students, this paper explores the processes for creating/sustaining school cultures that enable or challenge sexual abuse, and the extent to which national government policies recognise this component of sexual abuse prevention.

Background

Across a continuum from sexist name-calling, through to unwanted touching, coercion into sharing sexual images, rape and other forms of sexual assault, young people display, and experience, sexual abuse in their peer relationships at school (BBC, 2015; Finkelhor, et al., 2009; Firmin, 2017; Ringrose, 2011; Women's Equality Commission (WEC), 2016) – referred to as harmful sexual behaviour(s) for the purposes of this paper (HSB). Surveys examining this form of HSB (BBC, 2015; EVAW, 2010;

Girlguiding, 2014, Letourneou, et al., 2017) all indicate that a significant minority of young people will experience a contact sexual assault at school, and far more will be exposed to sexist language, non-consensual sharing of sexual images, and other behaviours which would sit on the inappropriate and problematic end of the Hackett continuum of sexual behaviour (2011) (Figure 1).

INSERT Figure 1 Hackett's Continuum of Sexual Behaviours (2011:122)

In response, in 2018 the UK government introduced a chapter on peer-on-peer abuse into its statutory safeguarding guidance for schools, which had hitherto focused on safeguarding children from risks posed by some adults. Non-statutory advice on responding to, and preventing, sexual violence between students (DfE, 2017) was also introduced following a legal challenge to the UK government for failing to provide specifically girls with access to education (in the absence of guidelines for safeguarding them from sexual abuse on school premises) (EVAW, 2017).

Young people have signalled that physical and cultural aspects of school environments can enable and/or normalise permit HSB:

Like I could be with my girls and then we would just be standing anywhere in the school and then the boys will come as they are together, they just come and then touch us up...And it usually goes on – it can depend on where you are. If you are in a corner and no one is around then it goes on longer. (Cherelle, 13, School Two) (Ringrose et al., 2011:33)

"My abusers were the most popular boys in the school, they played on all the sports teams. The principal at the time tried to put it down to 'rugby locker-room banter' and didn't seem surprised at all" (a boy who was assaulted in a classroom by three of his friends aged 15) (BBC, 2015)

The relationship between cultural norms and behaviours displayed within schools has also been established within bullying literature (Barnes, 2012; Chambers, et al., 2010; Cowie, 2011; Cowie & Hutson, 2005). This field has identified that staff expectations of student behaviour, and the extent to which a school ethos and design promotes equality and friendship for example, will influence the success of anti-bullying and 'dating violence' interventions with individuals. Cumulatively this work finds that bullying behaviours rarely occur in a vacuum, and instead are facilitated by institutional norms which enable harmful hierarchies of power and control amongst students, the promotion of stereotyped or hyper masculine expectations and victim-blaming attitudes (Barnes, 2012; Chambers, et al., 2010; Cowie, 2011; Foshee, et al., 1998). Likewise, interventions to increase the engagement of bystanders in challenging peer behaviour – whether that is in schools, in the workplace or in communities – tend to be most effective when delivered within organisations/institutions that promote bystander intervention. To elucidate: the organisation itself must be capable of supporting those who intervene, and have an ethos/culture which promotes pro-social behaviours, equality and respect. Telling people to support one another within institutional cultures that run counter to that narrative is unlikely to effectively influence bystander behaviour (Cowie, 2011; Powell, 2011).

This paper explores the relationship between young people's experiences of HSB in schools and the social rules/norms of those settings. It considers rule setting at three levels – amongst students, staff and government policymakers (who set national standards for practice in schools) – all of which contribute to the behavioural expectations of students at school. In doing so it provides direction for policy and practice for sufficiently addressing the cultures that enable HSB in schools.

Methodology

This paper brings together data from a primary study into the levers for preventing HSB in schools with secondary analysis of English policy documents that guide responses. Bourdieu's constructivist structuralism (1992), and his concepts of social field (rules), capital and habitus, were used to analyse the data and provide a qualitative account of the ways in which staff, students and policymakers engage with the rules associated to HSB.

Dataset

Empirical study

Seven educational institutions – including mainstream secondary schools, further education colleges, alternative provisions for young people excluded from mainstream education, faith and non-denominational provisions – and four local authorities in which those 'schools'¹ were based – participated in the study into the levers for preventing and addressing HSB in educational settings from 2015-2017.

In each school the research team ran focus groups with staff and students (n=29), observed school environments (n=9), and reviewed behaviour incident logs (n=8) and institutional policies and procedures. Complimentary data was collected in the participating local authorities via: focus groups with multi-agency practitioners (n=4); observations of multi-agency meetings (n=16); case file review (n=3), and; a review of policies and procedures (Table 1).

INSERT Table 1 Dataset for empirical study

For the primary study these data were drawn together and first subjected to manual analysis by a three-person research team to identify themes related to enablers and barriers for addressing HSB in schools – accompanied by reflexive workshops with participants in sites to explore identified themes. These themes provided a coding framework to analyse the data using NVivo software and conduct a qualitative thematic analysis to illustrate identified levers for HSB prevention in schools - with the view to informing regulators who inspect schools in England and were under pressure to assess the quality of school responses to HSB (WEC, 2016). A detailed account of this methodology and the results of the primary study have been published elsewhere (Firmin et al., forthcoming; Lloyd, 2018, Allnock, 2019).

¹ Schools is used as short-hand for all establishments that participated in the study.

For the purposes of this paper the data generated via the study's 33 focus groups was reanalysed (detailed below) for the purpose of assessing student and practitioner accounts of, and involvement in, shaping norms associated to HSB.

Secondary Data: UK policy framework

From 2016-18 the UK Government published three policy documents recommending how schools, local authorities and the police should respond to HSB in schools. One of these was new – advice for schools on specifically addressing sexual violence and harassment between students – and two were revisions – England's statutory guidance for safeguarding in schools, and the broader statutory child protection guidance entitled *Working Together*. These three documents illustrate the national policy landscape, and exemplify policy-maker involvement in rule-making, associated to HSB in schools.

Analysis

Both datasets were taken together and analysed through a Bourdieusian lens of Constructivist Structuralism (Bourdieu, 1992). Bourdieu argued that human behaviour was informed by a reflexive interplay between the rules at play within any given context (social field) and an individual's feel for those rules (habitus) which they embodied. According to Bourdieu, individuals engage with, and often reproduce, the rules of social fields to achieve status within them – using four types of capital in the process – economic, social, cultural and symbolic. Scholars have utilised this sociological lens for exploring education systems (Reay, 2017; Vincent, et al., 2012) and for considering young people experiences of abuse (i.e. Firmin, 2017; Pitts, 2013; Powell, 2010). This paper brings together these somewhat distinct areas of Bourdieusian study (education and abuse) to consider the relationships between the institutions, structures and policies of the field of education and the habitus of staff/students engaged in the social fields of school life with regards to HSB.

A qualitative analysis framework was designed to explore rule-engagement amongst students and staff in the empirical dataset and government/policymakers in the secondary policy dataset. The social rules in question were those identified in societies which enable, or even promote sexual violence (Lovett, et al., 2018; Powell, 2010; Ringrose, et al., 2011; Talbot & Quayle, 2010) such as those which blame victims for abuse, promote hyper-masculine or other harmful gender stereotypes or pathologise individuals or small communities as being responsible for abuse - rather than seeing abusive behaviour as a broader social issue. Analysis explored whether the social rules identified in participating schools (created/reinforced by students or staff) or within the wider education field (created/reinforced by policymakers) challenged or reinforced norms associated with sexual violence in general, and HSB in schools specifically.

A narrative analysis was conducted on focus group transcripts and the three national policy documents– first manually and second through NVivo. Manual analysis was used to identify the ways in which social norms associated with HSB in schools were created (or challenged) by students/staff/policymakers. In the dataset it was evident the HSB was normalised, and rules associated with it were created/reinforced/challenged via:

1. the language people used;
2. attitudes to disclosure;
3. levels of exposure to HSB, and;
4. the response to the sharing of sexually-explicit images amongst students.

The empirical dataset was first analysed in NVivo under these four categories to identify how this sample of students and staff challenged or reinforced abusive norms via these mechanisms. National policy documents (secondary dataset) were then analysed to consider to the extent to which they acknowledged and addressed the roles played by both staff and students in: addressing harmful language, enabling disclosure, reducing the impact of exposure and tackling abuse through image-sharing. This second stage of analysis was important in order to view the data from participating schools in context – and identify whether any negative rule-engagement by staff or students was in-keeping or at-odds with the wider (policy) field of education.

As detailed in Table 2 the behaviours students displayed or discussed, and their attitudes to both these behaviours and to staff responses, exemplified student-involvement in rule-making. For school staff – the actions they discussed taking in response to HSB, as well as the school structures and policies that they drew upon, evidenced their engagement in rule-making. Finally the language that described HSB in national policy-documents and the interventions/structures recommended for addressing HSB in schools, illustrated the extent to which staff and student engagement in rule-making was aligned, or contrary to, national frameworks.

INSERT Table 2 Organisational framework for rule-engagement data

This categorisation allowed the embodiment of social rules (via decisions, actions, documentation), as well as their description, to be captured. Collectively this dataset offered an account from students, staff and policymakers about the nature of HSB in school and the required response – and analysis of those stories identified narratives which challenged or reinforced the social norms HSB.

Ethics and limitations

The primary study received ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire as well as the four participating local authorities. Several matters were considered as part of this process, including the sensitive subject matter, the management of confidentiality and safeguarding concerns, and ensuring participants gave informed consent. Ethics remains under consideration in the publication of the study's findings, ensuring anonymity, not reproducing detailed information about any cases that were reviewed, and ensuring dissemination of the learning to advance safeguarding practices. The letters 'M' and 'F' are allocated to each quote from a young person used in the paper to whether they identified as male or female.

The findings of this paper are limited in that they are drawn from an opportune sample of schools (n=7). Therefore while they represent a range of educational settings the data collected from these schools and the views of participants cannot be considered as

representative of all staff/students at the participating schools or of the views of staff/students from other schools. The policy documents in this dataset are from England and do not necessarily reflect the position of Governments in other countries. These limitations are addressed by discussing the findings with reference to wider research on HSB and safeguarding in schools, provides an environmental lens through which to review/develop approaches to HSB prevention. This paper offers an approach to critically examining who can influence the nature of HSB in schools - and this approach, and the lessons from it, are transferable to many international settings concerned with HSB in schools.

Findings

Findings are presented in two sections. The first details how students and staff reinforced/challenged/enabled social-rules of HSB in schools. The second considers the relationship between this process of social-rule creation and the levers for HSB prevention within national policy – asking how this aspect of rule-making contributes to = school cultures that challenge, reinforce or enable HSB.

Rules of (Harmful) Sexual Behaviours at School

The rules associated to sexual behaviours in school were displayed, reinforced and practiced through:

- a) Language staff and students used and heard
- b) Staff and student attitudes to disclosure
- c) Levels of exposure to HSB in schools
- d) Staff and student approaches to addressing non-consensual sharing of sexually explicit photographs

Across all four areas it was evident that social rules within schools both enabled HSB and failed to challenge the norms that underpinned it. Embodiment of harmful social rules by students/staff created mainstream and sub-cultures within schools in which aspects of HSB were at best expected and at worst accepted. Attempts to challenge harmful norms appeared to have a legacy when they were made by both staff and students and were embedded into the ethos of a school community.

Each of the four rule-making categories outlined above are explored below. They collectively demonstrate how relational pathways (re)produce social rules which can enable or challenge HSB between students, and shape the cultural norms of schools.

Language

The language that students and staff reported hearing, as well as the language that they used in focus groups, demonstrated how the rules of sexual engagement were communicated at school and provided a discourse which normalised HSB.

Both staff and students described how sexist language was both a cause and consequence of desensitised attitudes to HSB. Staff recounted overhearing male students

use phrases like 'beat and delete' and 'fuck and chuck' to describe romantic/sexual encounters. Students also reported this type of language

M: Especially now, I know someone that's had sex like every bloody week. He's so proud of it.

M: He's got a body count of like 10.

M: It's that word, body count makes me that of like dead people, like necrophiles. (SiteBS2FGM)

In these illustrations, participants articulated how the de-humanisation of young women, who were presented as both disposable and something to be possessed, was itself a form of harm. Wider studies into racism/colonisation have demonstrated how describing someone as less-than or without some sense of humanity makes their abuse permissible (Gilroy, 2014; Rohani, 2017): sexist language within schools was consequentially similar.

Staff noted how female students embodied this discourse - describing themselves as 'bitches' and 'slags' - akin to Bourdieu's symbolic violence. Many of the complex reasons for this are likely beyond this dataset. However, one explanation from students was the sheer prevalence of sexist language; as one stated - "The name calling is constant".

Exposure, to be considered in more detail later, was relevant to the issue of language and its use by staff and students. For some students, persistent exposure to sexist language created an inevitability about these words and the attitudes they represented.

While some staff criticised, and recognised the pervasiveness of, sexist language amongst students, some also used language that indicated they too had embodied linguistic norms associated with HSB. Staff talked about how: young women would 'provoke' sexual attention from male peers; young women's behaviours and dress-code would invite sexual attention; sexist name-calling was so prevalent that it was impossible to address, and; drawing upon gender stereotypes in their own conversations was acceptable. For example, when discussing romantic encounters between their students a staff member in a male-dominated school asked their colleagues:

Do you think that our girls are more promiscuous because they've got such a big pool of boys to choose from? (SiteBS2FG1)

In describing a relationship between the gender imbalance of their school and the ways young people formed relationships this staff member used gendered and stereotyped judgements to describe young women's behaviour.

These sexist narratives contributed to school climates in which students felt they would be blamed for abuse that they experienced:

F: ... 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 (SiteASchool2FG1)

F: It's still the girl's fault.

F: Yeah.

F: It's always the girl's fault.

F: You rarely find someone that will actually care to solve it, 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" (SiteASchool1FG1)

In this way the language used within schools both reinforced the rules associated with HSB.

Several statements made by staff and students also challenged, at least abusive and violent, expressions of HSB such as:

F: They'd go and speak to a teacher straightaway (if they saw someone being groped) ... Yeah, I think if someone is visibly in a bit of bother, I think people do something, I think they'd go over to that person. Here, definitely. (SiteDCFG2)

M: I mean I hope to God they'd get involved. Like I feel like maybe I'm a bit hopeful of this school, but I feel like something like that happened. At least I know a fair few students would. I mean I can't speak for the entirety of the college, but I don't see how that could be seen as acceptable in anyone's eyes. I know if it was me or my friend group they're just on it. I'm almost certain teachers as well (SiteACFG1)

These responses presumed a distinction between rape and other forms of problematic behaviour such as sexual harassment - contrary to the position of the research team and the continuum of sexual behaviour we used to define HSB across which these behaviours are connected. Therefore, to challenge rape but excuse sexual harassment ultimately creates a context in which all forms of HSB are enabled.

Disclosure and help seeking

Across school environments students engaged with social rules which discouraged disclosure of abuse to adults and promoted help-seeking via peers if at all.

No, but you don't normally tell teachers, you normally tell me first. Then I have to persuade you to go and tell the teacher. Or I tell you not to tell the teacher (SiteBS2FG1)

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, I just leave it and if I get punched I just leave it. (SiteAS1FG1)

Three interconnected rationales were identified for this position. Firstly, the risk of social isolation: if you told an adult about an HSB incident you would be excluded from peers or viewed as untrustworthy. Secondly, fear of retribution - which extended to any young person attempting to seek help - even on the behalf of others:

M: Like us saying something like that...he would be like, "Why did you snitch on me?"

M: If you were to snitch on someone, they might find out it's you, and you could ...

M: Some guy got stabbed right outside of our college (SiteACFG1)

Finally, there was a sense that incidents of abuse through image-sharing (explored later in this paper), sexual harassment and sexist name-calling were unresolvable – and, given the associated risks, disclosure was futile.

Staff appeared largely resigned to an anti-disclosure culture amongst students being near-impossible to overcome.

There's no appetite for that, no whistleblowing appetite at all. Zero (SiteACSFG)

They also acknowledged that the some fears associated with disclosure were founded and they could not always protect young people. By adhering to the rules of non-disclosure both staff and students contributed to cultures that enabled HSB – creating a sense that those who were motivated to display HSB could do so with impunity.

Some students challenged to this dominant social norm, discussed successful disclosures and promoted help-seeking

I would tell them to tell the teacher about it because my head of year actually sorted it out for me and it didn't happen again, they tried it but it didn't work. (SiteBS1FG)

Students also almost universally stated that they would intervene and if required tell a teacher if they a) witnessed racism at school or b) were aware of a contact sexual-offence.

Occasions in which students appeared willing to challenge the norms of non-disclosure, had two threads to them. For students who either experienced successful disclosure of sexual harassment or reported they would disclose witnessing incidents of contact sexual-abuse and racism, they believed firstly that this behaviour was wrong and secondly that someone could respond effectively. The rules of non-disclosure therefore did not appear determined by a universal adherence to an idea of 'snitches' – rather they were informed by beliefs about the acceptability of behaviour and the effectiveness of responses. Wider research suggests rates of disclosure are also low for contact sexual-abuse and therefore the hypothetical willingness of students to disclose may not actually occur in real-time. However, young people's conceptual engagement in the rules of disclosure at least differed on these grounds.

Exposure

Some of the separation that students made in their responses to HSB at the abusive end of Hackett's continuum, compared to those that were inappropriate or problematic, may be partly attributable to exposure rates. Student exposure to HSB appeared to influence whether they a) recognised the behaviour as wrong and b) believed there was value in seeking help professionals.

It's normal, like the first time it happened to us, we told someone. Then we just got used to it. (SiteBSchool2YW)

As this quote illustrates – students reported a direct, and reflexive, relationship between disclosure and exposure. Students reported sexual harassment, particularly sexist

language, as common-place. Some sought help at the first instance after which they 'got used to it' – implying that: a) disclosure was ineffective at preventing future incidents; b) the experience of disclosure did not incentivise young people to report again, and; c) the rates of exposure 'normalised' HSB – i.e. it was expected.

Exposure also appeared to inform attitudes towards both disclosure and the acceptability/inevitability of HSB. Both staff and students noted a change in the behaviour students accepted/challenged in their first year compared to later years:

At primary school they're told don't touch...or if you get touched you need to tell somebody. But then you're transferring to secondary school and they come in and they're looking around, and if they see things like that happening around if it happens to you okay I mean it happened, I'm not happy with it, but I'm not necessarily going to divulge that this happened (SiteAS2StaffFG)

In this regard it is not necessarily that students don't recognise behaviour as problematic – but more that HSB becomes a problematic component of their school experience. Staff too indicated that their response to HSB was informed by exposure – particularly of sexist/abusive language:

And, I think the danger working here is something I found personally, is you become desensitised quite quickly, to the language and you don't always tune in. Because you hear it all the time... (SiteBS2StaffFG2)

When I first started working here, I kept my own sexual language incident book because I couldn't keep up... and I mean even that I've stopped doing because it's just, you just, yeah... (SiteAS1FStaffFG)

Limited challenges from staff due to high incident rates interplayed with student attitudes of expectation– creating/reinforcing the rules of HSB.

Approach to image-sharing

All of the three forms of rule-engagement outlined thus far interplayed with one particular form of HSB: abuse through sexual image sharing of peers. Whether initially acquired because of coercion (which itself was abusive) or the onwards sharing of images (initially sent consensually) following relationships that had broken down or due to other disputes, this type of HSB was routinely described by students as part of school life due to:

- a) high rates of exposure;
- b) the perceived limitations of disclosure and the fear of parents finding out, and;
- c) the language used to describe such incidents blaming the person who had been abused.

Staff to an extent reflected this student position – with their own: thresholds of acceptability shifting due to the high rates occurrence rates; belief that their ability to safeguard students

from the issue was limited, and; their approach to prevention focusing on the behaviour of the person who originally sent the image rather than the issue of onward sharing. With regards to this latter point student and staff engagement with the issue of non-consensual image sharing exemplified rule-engagement associated to HSB in a particular way.

Students consistently identified the person abused through the sharing of sexual images was responsible, at least in part, for the abuse that they experienced. They explained that all students were aware it was illegal to take sexually-explicit pictures of yourself under-18, and were told by staff that once a picture is sent you lose control of it. As a result it was suggested young people who had been abused should manage the situation without the support of teachers who had already warned on the dangers, and some believed these young people could be sanctioned if they did seek help:

In some ways they get backlashed as well because why would you send that naked photo to that person? So they also get in trouble. (SiteDCFG2)

I think you shouldn't tell a teacher, you should deal with it yourself because you sent it (SiteAS2FG1)

The student position was reinforced by the attitudes of staff and the content of school curricula. Education or advice on e-safety, relationships and sexual health all contained the consistent message that students should not take or share sexually-explicit images of themselves. To prevent this form of HSB staff focused on the individual who may initially share an image of themselves. There was little discussion, comparatively, about onward sharing – i.e. the non-consensual sharing of someone else's image. In this way school curriculum mirrored the position of students, who referenced it when explaining their position on image-sharing:

We've been through all the lessons in Citizenship, PSHE about sexual harassment and all these things. Don't share images (SiteBSI2YMFG1)

A reflexive relationship between curriculum content and student attitudes to image-sharing contributed to school cultures which enabled HSB. By seeing those who were abused as responsible for what happened to them and/or the source to preventing HSB by adapting their behaviour (rather than the behaviour of those who abused them) victim-blaming positions were sustained. While sanctions were used on students who shared images of their peers, including exclusion/expulsion from school, a victim-blaming position prevailed. If a student was excluded from school for sharing an image of their ex-partner for example, it was possible that the person they abused would be shunned by peers for 'snitching', whereas the person who abused them would have continued peer support and access to a culture that held the person in the image responsible for what occurred.

Section 2) HSB prevention, national policies and rule-making

As the previous section illustrated, staff and students within participating schools often engaged with, and on occasion challenged, social rules underpinning HSB in schools – in the main creating school climates conducive with some forms of HSB. However, the field of education of which these schools were a part is itself a context - the rules for

which are informed statutory policy guidelines and advice for schools. As such it is important to consider the extent to which the rule-engagement of staff and students was aligned in the primary dataset was aligned, or contrary, to social rules of education more broadly.

As noted in the methodology section, key policy documents were subject to analysis against the four categories of rule-making identified in the empirical data. Three policy documents published or revised in 2017-2018 collectively guide school responses to HSB: *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (WTSC) - statutory multi-agency guidance for child protection and wider safeguarding practices; *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (KSCIE) – statutory safeguarding guidance for schools; and specific advice for schools on addressing sexual harassment and violence between students (ASHVS). Content analysis of these documents surfaced findings on the extent to which the UK policy framework equip schools to recognise and address the role played by staff and students in creating schools cultures which prevent HSB; with specific reference to their roles in addressing the challenges of disclosure, exposure, image-sharing and harmful language.

ASHVS makes specific reference to all four areas of rule-making identified in the primary study. Specifically it notes issues such as harmful language and promoting disclosure by encouraging ‘whole-school approaches’ to sexual violence prevention, including through school curriculums and sexual bullying policies. The final two paragraphs in the incident management chapter of ASHVS also suggests work with wider cohorts of students following incidents and a consideration of systemic or institutional vulnerabilities that may require attention following an incident of HSB (DfE, 2017:41). Furthermore, it advises that sexist name-calling and harassment may be managed internally within a school context (rather than referring individuals out to external services) facilitated through school behaviour management processes without (DfE, 2017: 27-29).

The need to intervene with school environments, and to see this broader engagement with social rules and contextual cultures as part of the response to abuse is also a new feature of statutory child protection guidance. 2018 revisions of WTSC for the first time recommended intervening with extra-familial environments, such as schools, where abuse may have occurred, as well as with the individuals involved.

To this end national policy frameworks acknowledge schools cultures, and social rule-making within schools, as potentially associated to incidents of HSB. However, this recognition is primarily related to the role that wider student cultures plays in enabling HSB and need for school policies/practices to address these challenges, and far less about the role that staff potentially play in social norm creation/challenge. As the primary dataset demonstrated, the actions and attitudes of staff members can reinforce, rather than challenge, harmful norms held by students. This shortcoming in the national policy framework may be based on a notion that harmful norms are only those which promote sexual abuse or sexist narratives – as opposed to attitudes that more subtly contribute to victim-blaming narratives or an anti-disclosure rhetoric. Recognising the need to explicitly challenge ideas that disclosure isn’t safe, or that the onward sharing of someone’s image without their consent is problematic, would ensure that national policy

frameworks address social norm creation amongst staff, as well as students. At this stage these elements of harmful rule-creation (or lack of challenge) were not acknowledged in the national policy framework.

Furthermore, much of the two statutory documents (less so ASHVS) remain focused on the management of harm, risk and abuse through the referral of, and intervention with, individual children and families (not the schools contexts in which they encounter harm). Child protection processes in England, as in several other Western countries, are structured around social workers and the agency for whom they work (child safety services, child welfare services etc.), receiving referrals about individual children at risk of, or experiencing, abuse, conducting assessments and overseeing plans for those individuals. In-keeping with this general approach, the policy framework for HSB is largely predicated on referrals of individuals to social care, early help services, or the police depending on the severity of an incident.

A dominant focus on individual intervention divorced, coupled with little recognition of staff-engagement in rule-making (as opposed to students), suggests that the national policy framework is (inadvertently) aligned with some of the actions of staff in the primary dataset which underpin, rather than challenge, HSB in schools. It is important therefore, to view the data on staff engagement in rule-making within the empirical dataset as somewhat aligned to (and at least not sufficiently challenged) by the national policy framework.

Discussion

HSB between students is a form of abuse, and as such is child protection concern. Unlike 'traditional' child protection issues the prevalence of HSB within schools is associated to the social norms that operate within education and not necessarily familial environments. Both staff and students create/challenge norms associated to HSB in school and therefore contribute to climates that are conducive with, or hostile to, the phenomenon– in this sense the staff are the primary carers (in place of parents) and the students are those in their care (the children) who interact with one another and inform the culture of their school (instead of home) environment.

Western child protection policy frameworks, for the most part, do not address the process of social norm creation as a core component of sexual abuse prevention and response, as they are designed to intervene with children involved in, or affected by, HSB (and other forms of abuse) and their families – as opposed to the school contexts in which such behaviour occurred (Firmin, 2017; Parton, 2014). For schools to be better supported to prevent HSB between students, recent references to student cultures and school policy as potentially associated to HSB incidents requires further development. These references provide the foundations for building a more contextual policy framework for safeguarding young people affected by HSB at school, but they are yet to consider the role of staff actions in social norm creation.

Taking this further step is likely to ideologically and practically challenging. As the recent television series *13 Reasons Why* demonstrated, the extent to which schools can be held accountable for informing student cultures (and for those cultures to have informed

individual actions) is fraught with legal and ethical hurdles. If we begin to recognise staff actions as contributing to social norms, and we state that these norms inform student behaviour, then do we 'open the floodgates' for legal cases to be brought against schools whose students 'act-out'? Where do we draw the line between attitudes or cultures in operation and individual decision-making? And how do we rectify the presence of multiple sub-cultures that may operate in school at any one time – some of which may challenge HSB – with a dominant culture that may enable it?

Such questions emerge out of a debate that is grounded in a question of legal responsibility rather than social accountability. Evidence presented in this paper demonstrates how students and staff displayed attitudes and behaviours which would 'enable' HSB – this does not mean that they caused any HSB incidents or that therefore they could be held legally responsible for such incidents occurring. However, if we are committed to preventing HSB, and reducing repeat incidents, is there social grounds for recognising the need to create environments which are hostile to HSB and actively promote healthy and consensual relationships? If so, then child protection and school policy frameworks, such as those presented in this paper, require adaptations so that interventions with both individuals and social norms are viewed as central in efforts to both prevent and respond to HSB in schools and safeguard children from abuse.

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