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*‘Speak out, you are not alone’: Co-producing  
knowledge with young people on addressing sexual  
violence through collaborative, participatory  
approaches*

Janelle Rabe

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**‘Speak out, you are not alone’:  
Co-producing knowledge with  
young people on addressing sexual  
violence through collaborative,  
participatory approaches**

Janelle Rabe  
Department of Sociology  
Durham University

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

The prevailing understanding of sexual violence and its prevention remains dominated by legalistic frames focused narrowly on severe physical offences, overlooking the complexity and ambiguity of young people's experiences. This study responds to growing calls to centre young people's voices in conceptualising sexual violence and its prevention. It explores how they make sense of sexual violence, sexual behaviours, and other forms of violence and abuse; how they exercise agency within constraints; and how they view and recommend improvements to current responses.

Adopting a participatory, young person-centred, and trauma-informed approach, the research involved iterative and co-produced workshops with 26 young people (aged 13–18) from Northeast England. This methodology enabled them to articulate complex views on sensitive topics in a safe and supportive environment, fostering dialogue and mutual learning.

The findings present a young people-informed conceptualisation of sexual violence that recognises a broad range of behaviours and the diverse language they use to express their experiences. The study highlights how they navigate sexual violence relationally and temporally, exercising agency amid uncertainty about the responses and consequences from others. It also reveals their collective agency in challenging isolation and shame.

It demonstrated young people's needs and recommendations for enhancing whole-school approaches, including transparency, open dialogue with trusted adults regarding ambiguous and concerning experiences, and relational approaches grounded in care, empathy, respect, and meaningful involvement. This study challenges dominant legalistic and adult-centric framings of the problem and its solutions. By promoting young people as co-producers of knowledge and research, it advocates for a reimagining of sexual violence prevention efforts. It positions them as vital partners alongside adults in driving sustainable change.

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**Declaration**

I confirm that no part of the material presented in this thesis has been previously submitted by me or any other person for a degree in this or any other university. In all cases, where it is relevant, material from the work of others has been acknowledged.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

*'When I grow up, I wish to help other girls like me.'*

When I was still working at a charity for disadvantaged children in the Philippines, I remember feeling moved by my conversations with girls who had experienced sexual abuse. It struck me most that many expressed hopes for their future rather than focusing on their past. These interactions profoundly shaped my approach to understanding and addressing sexual violence. I realised the significance of opening spaces where children and young people felt heard and valued in sharing their views. I became committed to a young person-centred approach that acknowledges their experiences while focusing on their strengths and agency. Their stories reflected the harsh reality that sexual violence against children remains an urgent global public health and social issue, affecting millions of young people (Together for Girls, 2024).

This thesis explores how young people in Northeast England understand and respond to sexual violence. It emerges from my personal experience and academic engagement that children and young people are often framed as passive or innocent, with limited recognition of their agency. These dominant framings, rooted in adult-centric and binary perspectives, often overlook the nuanced ways in which young people navigate harm and make sense of their experiences. This study challenges these framings by foregrounding their voices and advocating for their active participation in shaping responses to sexual violence.

Adopting a participatory research approach, this study involves 26 young people aged 13–18 from two groups (youth club and further education institution) in Northeast England. Through a series of 18 iterative workshops, they identified the issues that mattered most to them. These priorities emerged through a collaborative participatory process that positioned the young people as co-creators of knowledge. The topics they raised included understanding sexual violence, boys' experiences, defending oneself, shame, outcomes of violence, and school responses. The thematic focus of this thesis, including the emphasis on education settings, agency, and conceptualising sexual violence, was shaped by their identified priorities. The young people consistently identified schools as a significant context in their experiences of sexual violence, necessitating focused attention throughout the thesis. By centring their language and perspectives, this study contributes to a more relational and responsive approach to prevention, grounded in young people's priorities and lived realities.

This chapter is structured as follows: First, I introduce the context, key terms, and conceptual scope of the study. Second, I establish its significance by outlining the scale and outcomes of

sexual violence. Third, I discuss sexual prevention, focusing on education and young people's participation. Fourth, I reflect on the academic and personal rationale underpinning this study. Finally, I present the aims, research questions and the chapter structure of the thesis.

## **1.1 Contextualising sexual violence against young people in the UK**

Sexual violence against children and young people is shaped by a complex cultural, social, legal, political, and technological context. This section outlines the broader context in which this study is situated.

### **Cultural and social norms**

As a Filipino researcher working in the British context, I bring an intercultural lens to the study of sexual violence. My understanding is shaped by practice and policy knowledge across both settings, and by a recognition that understanding of sexual violence is contextually constructed. Societal norms around gender, childhood, and sexual behaviours influence how harm is responded to and understood. Despite contextual differences, research in both the Philippines and the UK reveals common themes: a culture of silence and taboo surrounding sexual violence, the impact of gender norms, and societal attitudes on children and young people.

Historical attitudes toward sexual violence and child sexual abuse have long been shaped by disbelief, minimisation, and adult-centric interpretations. The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) states that from the 1940s onward, adults and institutions consistently failed to believe or act on children's disclosures of abuse. Even in more recent decades, children and young people have been framed as complicit or responsible for the abuse they experienced (IICSA, 2022). The Inquiry was established by the Home Secretary in 2015 to establish the extent to which institutions in England and Wales fulfilled their duties to protect children from sexual abuse. These reflect historical attitudes that prioritise adultist framings of children and young people. The culture of silence and taboo, influenced by these attitudes, contributes to persistent barriers to disclosure, such as fear of blame, disbelief, or shame (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019; IICSA, 2022).

Prior research has shown how heteronormative gender norms, such as ideas of masculinity, views on gender roles, and gender equality, contribute to everyday misogyny, leading to increased levels of sexual violence among young people (Donovan *et al.*, 2023; Women and Equalities Committee, 2023). I discuss the impact of gender norms in more detail in the succeeding chapters.

## **Policy developments and legislative shifts**

Legal frameworks have played a central role in defining sexual violence by equating it with criminal acts (Lovett et al., 2018). The Sexual Offences Act 2003 introduced protections for children under 13, outlining a list of illegal acts (Sexual Offences Act 2003, 2003). Meanwhile, the statutory introduction of Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in 2020 marks a significant legislative development in supporting schools to address sexual violence.

International policy developments have also shaped national responses. The near-universal ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) established children's rights to protection from harm and to participation in decisions that affect them. The Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 16.2 on ending violence against children, have urged governments to prioritise this issue. However, some scholars claim that national responses, including those in the UK, remain largely reactive, emerging in response to public scandals or media pressure rather than through sustained engagement with young people's perspectives (Shawar, Truong and Shiffman, 2022).

In the UK, policy attention to sexual violence has intensified in recent years, particularly among young people in educational settings. While the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy began in 2007, this thesis focuses on developments from 2016 onwards to align with the intensification of public discourse around sexual violence in schools, which is one of the priority topics of the young people in this study.

Action plans such as the Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) strategy and the Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy represent the UK government's initiatives to address sexual violence. The VAWG strategy, initiated in 2007 by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), developed a framework for addressing VAWG and guides interrelated policies across a range of crimes, including domestic violence, child abuse, rape and sexual offences and sexual harassment. When it was initially developed, it was named the VAW strategy then it was changed to VAWG to reflect the CPS' role in addressing child abuse and teenage relationship abuse (Crown Prosecution Service, 2012). The Tackling Child Sexual Abuse strategy focuses on tackling all forms of child sexual abuse by bringing offenders to justice and supporting victims and survivors (HM Government, 2021).

Despite these developments, some responses remain fragmented. They often address different forms of violence and abuse in separate policy initiatives, with little recognition of the overlaps in young people's lives. For instance, while the CSA Strategy focuses on criminal justice responses targeted at adult offenders, the VAWG framework addresses gender-based violence affecting women and girls yet places less attention on the experiences of boys and LGBT+ young people. There is also a strong emphasis on criminal justice-oriented

interventions focused on crime reduction, and with limited involvement of children and young people in shaping the policy.

### **Public discourses on lived experiences and government responses**

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) and platforms like Everyone's Invited amplified young people and victim-survivors' voices on their lived experiences, revealing widespread experiences of sexual violence and the barriers to disclosure. In March 2021, following public outcry over the kidnapping and murder of Sarah Everard by a police officer, the website 'Everyone's Invited' went viral (Donovan *et al.*, 2023; Horeck *et al.*, 2023; Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). Initiated by Soma Sara in 2020, the site served as a safe space for young people who have experienced harassment and abuse in schools and colleges to speak about their experiences anonymously and submit the name of their school alongside their testimony (Everyone's Invited, 2020). Thousands of young people posted testimonies of sexual harassment and abuse in schools and colleges, such as sexual harassment, unwanted touching, online abuse, and sexual assault (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). They named over 2000 schools on the website, and over 50,000 students have reported their experiences since it started (Haves, 2021; Donovan *et al.*, 2023).

Additionally, the Ofsted's rapid review of sexual harassment in schools and the Women and Equalities Committee inquiries in 2016 and 2023 highlighted the prevalence of sexual violence among young people in education institutions like secondary schools and colleges. The UK Government requested Ofsted to conduct a rapid review of sexual harassment in schools and colleges in March 2021. Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education is the UK's education regulatory body. Ofsted's inspectors visited 32 state and private schools and colleges. Ofsted's rapid review of sexual harassment in schools and the Women and Equalities Committee inquiries in 2016 and 2023 highlighted the prevalence of sexual violence among young people in educational settings. They talked to 900 children and young people about the prevalence of sexual harassment in their lives and among other young people (Ofsted, 2021). The Women and Equalities Committee of the UK House of Commons conducted an inquiry on the prevalence of sexual violence in education settings in 2016 and attitudes towards women and girls in education settings in 2023 (Women and Equalities Committee, 2023).

The testimonies in the Everyone's Invited website, alongside inquiries by Ofsted and the Women and Equalities Committee, underscore the scale of harm perpetrated by young people in education institutions. However, these initiatives tend to focus on prevalence and identified behaviours, rather than engaging with how young people themselves interpret and navigate harm. Adult experts in government inquiries are invited to make sense of the factors that

contribute to these experiences, yet there seem to be fewer opportunities to hear directly from young people. My thesis addresses this gap by presenting their sense-making of sexual violence to complement the available knowledge.

### **Technological and post-pandemic contexts**

The technological landscape further complicates young people's experiences of sexual violence. Their increasing engagement with digital platforms, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has created new spaces for connection, but also new vulnerabilities. Platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter) have become sites where harmful sexual interactions can occur, often blurring the boundaries between healthy and harmful behaviours (Brown and Tregidga, 2023).

McAlinden's (2018) concept of 'culture of confusion' remains salient in this context, as young people navigate complex, hybrid environments that challenge traditional definitions of abuse. The scope of non-contact sexual violence continues to expand, encompassing technology-facilitated acts that policy and practice have not yet caught up (Brown and Tregidga, 2023). This post-pandemic context reinforces the value of this study in presenting a participatory approach that engages young people in articulating their evolving understandings of harm (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023).

The contextual factors discussed above highlight the need for a more expansive and young people-informed conceptualisation of sexual violence. The following section outlines conceptual clarifications on key terms used throughout this study.

## **1.2 Key terms and conceptual clarifications**

While definitions are often expected to provide clarity in meanings, this thesis takes a critical stance. It recognises that many concepts central to sexual violence research are contested and context dependent. It questions whether definitions truly serve the best interests of children and young people (Beckett and Walker, 2019). These brief explanations show how I acknowledge the significance of academic and policy definitions in situating key terms of this study. Still, I critically engage with the definitions and terms along with the young people through the participatory sense-making process in this study.

### **Child and young person**

While the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines a child as anyone under the age of 18, this thesis uses the term young people to refer specifically to adolescents aged 13–18 who participated in the study. The terms youth and adolescent are used sparingly when referring to the identification of participants in the literature. This study's choice reflects both

the age group involved and their expressed preference to be referred to as young people rather than children.

### **Sexual violence and related terms**

This thesis recognises the challenges of not having consensus definitions of sexual violence. It critiques how these definitions often rely on binary and legalistic framings that do not capture the complexity of young people's experiences. Still, some internationally developed definitions, like the International Classification of Violence against Children (UNICEF, 2023) provide some clarity on terms used throughout this thesis.

Any deliberate, unwanted and non-essential act of a sexual nature, either completed or attempted, that is perpetrated against a child, including for exploitative purposes, and that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, pain or psychological suffering (UNICEF, 2023)

This study draws from literature on child sexual abuse, so it is helpful to clarify this term early on. It considers child sexual abuse (CSA) as a form of sexual violence, which includes various manifestations such as child sexual exploitation (CSE).

Child sexual abuse is evidenced by this activity between a child and an adult or another child who by age or development is in a relationship of responsibility, trust or power, the activity being intended to gratify or satisfy the needs of the other person (ECPAT International, 2025)

This study engages with these terms reflexively. It does not adopt a fixed definition of these terms and engages with the evolving meanings and young people's interpretations. Having outlined the key terms and their contested meanings, the following section presents the conceptual scope of the study to show how these definitions are applied and negotiated in young people's lived experiences.

### **1.3 Conceptual scope of the study**

This study focuses on adolescents aged 13–18, reflecting the age group of the young people involved. While children and adolescents share some vulnerabilities, the types and contexts of sexual violence they encounter often differ. Adolescents are more likely to experience extra-familial harm, such as from peers, strangers, and intimate partners, compared to younger children (Ligiero et al., 2019; Owens et al., 2020).

Drawing on Liz Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence, this thesis centres young people's everyday experiences that are often excluded from legal definitions. Kelly's (1988) pioneering work challenged the notion that only 'extreme' or 'deviant' acts of violence count as sexual

violence by drawing attention to a range of behaviours that share common characteristics and impact. Similarly, I argue that available legalistic definitions of sexual violence cannot fully represent young people's experiences. This study adopts a broader conceptualisation of sexual violence to capture the nuances in young people's experiences.

As Beckett and Walker (2019) argue, researchers should explore alternative conceptualisations of terms like sexual violence, child sexual abuse, and child sexual exploitation to more accurately reflect children and young people's complex experiences. This thesis extends this argument by exploring how young people might contribute to enhancing these conceptualisations that benefit them in navigating their experiences of harm.

This study explores sexual violence as a complex construct shaped by age, power and context. It includes acts perpetrated by both adults and young people, occurring in different settings such as dating, public spaces, home, and institutions (Rabe, 2024). A key emphasis of this study is the differentiation between harm caused by adults and harm caused by young people. This distinction is critical since dominant responses to sexual violence involving children have historically focused on adult-perpetrated harm using criminal justice frameworks (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023).

However, current understandings and interventions are still evolving to adequately respond to situations involving young people. Compared to harm perpetrated by adults, the binary of 'victim' and 'offender' is not easily applicable in situations between young people (McAlinden, 2018). A young person may experience harm from another young person yet cause harm or exert power over someone else (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023). Labelling young people as 'perpetrator' or 'offender' can be stigmatising to them (Cairns, Cilliers and Hackett, 2025). This framing moves beyond legalistic models and recognises young people's agency in navigating uncertain experiences of harm.

Including sexual behaviours in the scope is essential to understanding sexual violence, especially in participatory research with young people. Their experiences often blur the boundaries between consensual, coercive, and harmful sexual behaviours, making it difficult to separate discussions of sexual violence from their broader sexual experiences. For instance, in situations involving both young people, it may be challenging for them to determine which behaviours have been normalised in peer groups yet harm others. This study engages with sexual behaviours as vital in their sense-making. This complexity is explored through their language and interpretations. I elaborate on this further in the next chapter.

Presenting this scope at the outset sets the context for exploring young people's perspectives in this study. It aligns with the reality that their experiences are overlapping and not easily categorised. My framing builds on Kelly's (1988) continuum and highlights the recognition of

young people's behaviours and experiences that are impactful and harmful. This study's evolving focus on sexual violence and sexual behaviours reflects the participatory ethos of the study, where young people's priorities shaped the conceptual and thematic direction of the research.

## **1.4 Significance of the study**

This study is timely due to the intensified concern about addressing sexual violence against children, as evident in government commitments, civil society efforts, international human rights and child rights instruments (Together for Girls, 2024; ECPAT International, 2025). There has been increasing attention to protecting young people from sexual violence (UNICEF, 2023; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024; ECPAT International, 2025).

In November 2024, ministerial delegations from 100+ countries, alongside children, survivors and civil society organisations, gathered in Colombia to discuss a shared vision and concrete commitments to ending sexual violence against children (Together for Girls, 2024). The event sought to break the Guinness World Record for most countries represented at a childhood violence summit. More importantly, they wanted to break the global record of inaction on sexual violence (Together for Girls, 2024). The increased attention to sexual violence connects to its widespread prevalence among children and young people. It has been likened to a 'silent pandemic' with 'little awareness of the scope, scale, and consequences of the problem or understanding of potential solutions' (Ligiero *et al.*, 2019, p. 3).

### **Global scale of sexual violence**

In 2024, UNICEF released its estimates on the scale of sexual violence in childhood at the global and regional levels for the first time (Together for Girls, 2024). The estimates, representing 141 countries, were based on national data and broader data sources on contact and non-contact forms of sexual violence (Together for Girls, 2024):

- 1 in 5 girls experiences sexual violence in childhood
- 1 in 7 boys experiences sexual violence in childhood
- 1 in 8 girls and 1 in 11 boys experience contact forms of sexual violence
- Approximately 82 million girls and 69 million boys experienced sexual violence in the past 12 months

The global estimates illustrate the high incidence of various experiences of sexual violence among children and young people. Their experiences of sexual violence vary due to their intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, gender, age, and social class. Kimberle Crenshaw and other scholars contend that different dimensions of their identities and the intersecting systems of oppression and power, such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientations shaped

the violence experienced by women and children (Crenshaw, 1991; Creek and Dunn, 2011; Holmqvist Gattario and Lunde, 2023).

Whilst it is difficult to ascertain the exact scale of the issue, the statistics on sexual violence against children only represent the tip of the iceberg. The scale of sexual violence and abuse of children is likely to be higher than the numbers recorded (IICSA, 2022).

### **Sexual violence among young people in schools**

The findings of the Ofsted report closely mirror those reported by the UK Parliament Women and Equalities Committee inquiry in 2016. The Women and Equalities Committee Inquiry report stated that almost a third (29%) of 16–18-year-old girls say they have experienced unwanted sexual touching at school. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of all 16–18-year-old boys and girls said they heard terms such as "slut" or "slag" used towards girls at schools regularly (Women and Equalities Committee, 2016).

Harmful sexual behaviours (HSB) among young people in UK schools encompass a continuum of behaviours, including sexist name-calling, unwanted touching, coercion into sharing sexual images, rape, and other forms of sexual assault (Firmin, 2020). Firmin finds that students may be more likely to be exposed to behaviours on the inappropriate and problematic end of the HSB continuum of sexual behaviour, such as sexist language and non-consensual sharing of sexual images, than contact sexual assault in schools.

The Ofsted (2021) report reveals the list of most common types of harmful sexual behaviours that happen 'a lot' or 'sometimes' between young people.

- non-contact forms but face-to-face: sexist name-calling (92%), rumours about their sexual activity (81%), unwanted or inappropriate comments of a sexual nature (80%)
- non-contact forms, online or social media: being sent pictures or videos they did not want to see (81%), being pressured to provide sexual images of themselves (80%), and having pictures or videos they sent shared widely without their knowledge or consent (73%)
- contact forms: sexual assault (79%), feeling pressured to do sexual things they did not want to do (68%), unwanted touching (64%)

The report shows how boys were less likely to think these behaviours happened, which differs from the frequency that girls indicated. For instance, on unwanted touching, a much lesser proportion of boys (24%) thought it happened compared to girls (64%). This illustrates a similar proportion of disparity in gendered perceptions on the behaviour 'feeling pressured to do sexual things they did not want to': boys (27%) and girls (68%).

End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023) reports the results of their survey on young people's experiences of sexual violence and harassment in schools:

- Nearly three-quarters (72%) of young women say sexist behaviour makes them feel uncomfortable
- 60% of girls have heard teachers use sexist language
- 62% of young women say comments about their body or uniform have made them feel uncomfortable, 26% said it was a teacher who made the comments
- 58% think racism is a problem at their school, and 40% of those who have witnessed sexual name-calling (and 46% of Black girls) have heard it reference race
- 60% think homophobia is a problem at their school, and 55% of those who have witnessed sexual name-calling have heard it reference minority sexualities
- Almost 1 in 4 (24%) girls in mixed-sex schools say they have been the subject of unwanted sexual touching at school
- 1 in 4 girls have shared a sexual image of themselves (24%) and of those, a quarter (24%) said they felt pressured into it, and almost a third (31%) initially wanted to but later regretted it.

The survey data shows how intersections of sexuality, ethnicity, and race compound young people's experiences of sexual violence. Their findings are supported by Sundaram *et al.*'s (2022) study of Black and minoritised girls' experiences of harassment. These authors discuss how a teacher told one of the study participants to take public sexual harassment as a compliment. show

Sexual violence occurring between young people in schools is situated within their broader experiences of sexual abuse and harassment in other contexts. There is a growing body of research that has reported on the occurrence of violence and abuse in intimate relationships between current or former dating partners (Weir *et al.*, 2025). Recent reports reflect that many young people, especially girls, are exposed to sexual harassment in public spaces (Children's Commissioner, 2022; Plan International, 2023) and online harassment and image-based sexual abuse (Plan International, 2020; Ringrose and Regehr, 2023).

## **1.5 Outcomes of sexual violence**

The immediate and long-term physical, mental, psychological and social outcomes associated with experiences of sexual violence, particularly child sexual abuse, have been reported extensively (Ligiero *et al.*, 2019; Skoog and Kapetanovic, 2023; Together for Girls, 2024). These include immediate and long-term effects that persist until adulthood, affecting their health, relationships, education, and careers (Together for Girls, 2024). The study reports that sexual violence experienced by young people is a health risk factor. It claims that those who experienced it had an increased probability of adverse health outcomes such as depressive

disorders, anxiety disorders, eating problems and conduct disorders than those who have not experienced it. Experiences of sexual violence, like sexual harassment, can also lead to education-related outcomes such as poorer academic engagement, school avoidance, and dropout (Kruger *et al.*, 2023). Other impacts of sexual violence and harassment include feeling unsafe, worried, and afraid to participate in the broader community due to safety concerns (Children's Commissioner, 2022).

Among the outcomes associated with sexual violence include intensified feelings of shame that contribute to a negative sense of self and mental health concerns. McElvaney *et al.* (2022) propose that experiences of sexual violence and abuse are often experienced as an assault on the self. The study reported how young people following sexual abuse had negative self-evaluations, such as feeling stupid, worthless, and flawed and negative evaluations from others, such as being blamed or not believed. The negative feelings mentioned, along with fear of retaliation, guilt, shame and lack of confidence in the support available, operate as a barrier to disclosure and help-seeking (Ligiero *et al.*, 2019; McElvaney *et al.*, 2022).

Discussions of harm occurring from sexual violence are often framed by a trauma model wherein it is framed as an individual affliction with recovery as a goal (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018). Alternatively, some scholars propose an understanding of trauma that situates the harm within broader structures of inequality and beyond the focus on individual trauma (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024).

Additionally, it is crucial to move beyond narratives that portray victims of sexual violence as 'inevitably damaged' by the negative outcomes, towards recognising their strength and resilience (Woodiwiss, 2014). Developing resilience entails individual characteristics such as self-efficacy, optimism, and adaptability, and environmental protective factors such as social support from family, friends and significant adults (Domhardt *et al.*, 2015; Moletsane and Theron, 2017). This view of resilience eases the burden of responsibility on the individual to 'move forward' or 'bounce back' following their experience of sexual violence. It highlights the critical role of their families, communities, and institutions in supporting their wellbeing (Moletsane and Theron, 2017).

## **1.6 Sexual violence prevention**

### **Public health and socio-ecological approaches to prevention**

There is a growing consensus that sexual violence is preventable and that everyone must play a critical role in safeguarding children and young people from harm (World Health Organization, 2016; Ligiero *et al.*, 2019; Owens *et al.*, 2020). A public health approach broadens the scope of strategies from a predominantly criminal justice approach to addressing sexual violence before the harm has occurred (McCartan, Kemshall and Tabachnick, 2015). It consists of primary strategies (aimed at everyone involved to stop the abuse from happening), secondary responses (focused on at-risk populations), and tertiary responses (when the abuse has occurred and preventing future harm to victims (Moore and McArthur, 2024).

A significant aspect of a public health-based prevention approach entails clear messages for action, such as addressing social contexts and norms that facilitate sexual violence (McCartan, Kemshall and Tabachnick, 2015). Moore and McArthur (2024) note little attention to enabling early detection of behaviours that might be precursors to violence and abuse and to respond when a young person has a concern. Their study claims that developing an understanding of practical prevention efforts involves the identification of potentially problematic behaviours and valuing young people's roles in preventing sexual violence.

The socio-ecological framework considers the broader social contexts which influence young people's experiences of safety and sexual violence (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This framework has been used in violence prevention literature to understand the complex interactions of risk and protective factors (Corcoran, 2000; Ligiero *et al.*, 2019; Jones *et al.*, 2020). These include the individual (microsystem), the immediate social environment of parents, peers, and school (mesosystem), and the broader social environment that impacts the young person. Studies have consistently supported that sexual violence prevention initiatives must attend to each level in the framework (Kenny and Wurtele, 2012; Casey, Lindhorst and Storer, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2020).

### **Education as prevention**

Evidence from prior research demonstrates that school-based relationships and sex education (RSE) programs contribute to sexual violence prevention. RSE is deemed more effective as part of a whole-school approach. This approach reinforces values learned as part of RSE in the broader school context (Economics, 2024).

RSE at the primary and secondary levels contribute to sexual violence prevention by supporting young people ([Sex Education Forum, 2022, p. 4](#)):

- to develop critical thinking skills, including around gender equity, power dynamics in relationships and digital literacies
- to reduce and report harmful behaviour
- to develop positive relationships with themselves and others based on respect and equality

Schneider and Hirsch (2020) advocate a life-course approach to primary prevention of sexual violence with a conceptual pathway on how sex education can prevent sexual violence:

- Gender-transformative components increase gender equitable beliefs and combats rigid gender stereotypes
- Sexual behaviour change components help students apply decision-making models in sexual activity and improve their negotiation skills
- Child sexual abuse prevention components support young people in identifying signs of abuse and communicating with a trusted adult about perceived or real danger
- Social and emotional learning components increase positive social behaviours

Gender-transformative whole-school interventions acknowledge gender as a central component in the occurrence of sexual violence (Schneider and Hirsch, 2020). It is critical to intervene in the gender stereotyping process as early as possible before they have absorbed gender norms that could shape their self-concepts and expectations of others. Education addressing gender stereotypes and harmful norms can mitigate potential harm by preventing young people from displaying harmful behaviour (Schneider and Hirsch, 2020; Economics, 2024).

Education addressing gender stereotyping and using non-heteronormative examples in discussions can support LGBTQ+ and gender nonconforming young people who experience higher rates of sexual harassment and violence than heterosexual and cisgender young people (Schneider and Hirsch, 2020). Sexual violence prevention approaches must challenge gender attitudes and beliefs that condone violence at the individual and community levels (Aghtaie *et al.*, 2018; Jones *et al.*, 2020). Sundaram (2018) recommends engaging young people to recognise gender normative expectations and practices and challenge sexist expectations and practices.

### **Young people's participation in sexual violence prevention**

Despite the heightened interest and attention in children and young people's participation in decisions affecting their lives, barriers persist for them to participate meaningfully. These include the little value given to child participation in decision-making (Mitchell, Lundy, and Hill, 2023) and adult constructions of children and young people as vulnerable, innocent, and objects of protection (Jensen, Studsrød, and Ellingsen, 2020).

Constructions of childhood premised on their vulnerability and incapacity often shape young people's limited participation in their protection (Moore, 2017). For instance, child protection social workers often have fixed views of children and their participation without 'ascribing

children a role in defining their feelings, wishes and sense of self.' (Jensen, Studsrød and Ellingsen, 2020, p. 87). Views persist about the validity of knowledge co-created by children and young people (Kirk, 2007; Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019; Freire *et al.*, 2022), the value of their participation (Moore, 2017), and their limited capacity to identify and raise concerns about sexual violence and abuse (Jensen, Studsrød and Ellingsen, 2020; Moore and McArthur, 2024).

Scholars have identified adultism as a barrier to young people's participation and agency. Adultism means that systems and accompanying structures prioritise adults over children and young people due to age (O'Kane and Imoh, 2023; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024). It entails not taking their perspectives seriously and only considering adult views valid (Bertrand, Brooks and Domínguez, 2023; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024). These can lead to some adults limiting young people's participation and agency by imposing adult agendas even in participatory processes (O'Kane and Imoh, 2023). Young people in various studies in the UK and Australia have lamented that their views and involvement do not seem to be valued by adults (Cody, 2017; Carlisle *et al.*, 2022; Moore and McArthur, 2024).

The exclusion of young people's views is concerning amid the increasing recognition of the value of their perspectives in improving understanding of violence and abuse (Hackett, 2017; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2020; Roth, 2023). Children and young people's views are critical to helping adults understand what violence means to them as part of the prevention efforts (Moore, 2017; Moore and McArthur, 2024).

Several studies posit participation as a means for enhancing children and young people's protection from violence and abuse (Hamilton *et al.*, 2019; Moore and McArthur, 2024; Warrington *et al.*, 2024). This concept entails involving young people in informing strategies to promote their safety, recognising their strengths and vulnerabilities, and forging meaningful collaboration between young people and adults (Moore, 2017). The meaningful participation of children and young people has a significant impact on protecting them from violence and abuse, with adults having a key role in supporting their actions (Feinstein and O'Kane). Research has shown the benefits of providing safe and reflective spaces to young people as being cathartic to them and reducing the stigma, shame, and isolation experienced by victim-survivors, toward supporting their longer-term wellbeing (see Cody and D'Arcy, 2019; Ellis, Hickle and Warrington, 2023; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024).

## **1.7 Rationale for conducting this doctoral study**

My rationale for undertaking my doctoral research project is rooted in my personal advocacy and academic interests. These are motivated by my commitment to amplifying the voices of

young people through their meaningful participation in research. In doing so, I am working towards my vision of young people and adults working together to combat sexual violence sustainably.

### **Amplifying my advocacy through my research**

My primary reason for choosing this topic is my long-standing interest and commitment to promoting children's and young people's rights and voices in sensitive topics such as sexual violence.

Since studying at university, I have always been passionate about working with children and young people and ensuring that their rights are fulfilled. A few years into my professional career, my interest focused on sexual violence. At that time, I joined policy advocacy campaigns in the Philippines to urge amendments to our previous law that set the age of consent at 12 years old. I was shocked that our law set the age of consent that low, leaving countless Filipino children and young people vulnerable to violence and abuse. It fuelled my commitment to contribute to addressing sexual violence as a priority issue in my advocacy and professional career.

Then, my master's thesis focused on understanding policy constructions of children in Philippine laws. I highlighted the incongruence of setting the age of consent at 12 yet allowing access to contraceptives without parental consent at 18 years old. This research drove my interest in exploring constructions of childhood in policy and practice, with concrete outcomes in their lives. Following that, I led a funded research project that engaged Philippine policymakers on their views on a proposed amendment to the sexual consent that will raise the age of consent to 16 years old.

I am pleased that in 2022, the new law was passed to increase the age and expand the protection for more Filipino children and young people. My research project contributed to raising the awareness of some policymakers and providing research evidence used in the Congressional deliberations. This experience enabled me to see the impact of research leading to positive outcomes in young people's lives. This motivates me in conducting my research project to facilitate impact and outcomes beyond academic outputs.

Whilst I wanted to conduct my doctoral research project in the Philippines to represent the perspectives of Filipino children, ongoing strict COVID-19 restrictions at the time of my application meant significant practical and logistical uncertainties in conducting fieldwork in the Philippines. Still, even when I was doing the research with British young people, I always held the Filipino children in my heart and mind. I hope my research will be replicated in the Philippines and other countries that would benefit from representing the lesser-heard voices

of children and young people. My experiences in the Philippines enable me to draw from a broader cross-cultural perspective. At the same time, I strive to remain attuned to the different contexts in the United Kingdom. My doctoral research with British young people reflects the global nature of the issue and the need to understand their distinct experiences and perspectives shaped by the UK's policies, culture, and systems.

### **Finding my place in the literature**

I recently read online conversations about how scholars have been reframing discourses from 'finding the gap' to 'finding one's place' in the literature (Khan, 2024). The latter is a powerful phrase to represent my academic journey. Finding the confidence to represent my voice in my writing has taken me a long time. I am mindful of my positionality as a woman and a mature international student. Thus, it is ever more important to be reassured that I have my place to be heard and valued in academic spaces that can be exclusionary to researchers with similar identities. Finding my place evokes values of community and solidarity that validate us taking our space and being respected for our unique contributions.

This study situates itself in sexual violence research literature by drawing connections to the concepts of agency and participation. As far as I am aware, there are no known studies that primarily concentrated on employing participatory approaches to determine young people's perspectives in understanding the issue of sexual violence as an approach to enhancing sexual violence prevention efforts.

This project starts from the premise that the terms and concepts used to engage young people in discussions on sexual violence are pre-defined parameters based on established definitions and language. Adult-centric systems like criminal justice primarily inform these available constructs and language. Embedding the perspectives and experiences of young people through my research will be helpful in the prevention aspects of sexual violence, instead of the legalistic interventions that are implemented after the abuse has already occurred (Moore and McArthur, 2024).

Researchers and other adults involved in young people's lives, like parents, teachers, and social workers, deploy different terms, assuming a universal understanding and acceptance of their meaning among children and young people. However, young people have limited to no involvement in influencing the identification, prevention, or responses to sexual violence and abuse (Moore and McArthur, 2024). This study is situated in a growing body of literature focusing on young people's perspectives on issues related to sexual violence, like consent and sexual agency, which I elaborate on in the following chapter. My project aims to contribute to this body of literature by exploring how young people understand sexual violence and determine its implications for enhancing sexual violence initiatives.

## **1.8 Aims and Research Questions**

This study has three primary aims:

- (1) to present a young people-informed understanding of sexual violence and its prevention
- (2) to advance knowledge on sexual violence, its prevention, and participatory research on violence and abuse among young people
- (3) to provide insights into enhancing policy, practice and research on sexual violence prevention and participatory practice on violence and abuse among young people

This study seeks to address the following research questions:

1. How do young people understand sexual violence? (RQ1)
2. How do young people exercise their agency in dealing with and preventing sexual violence? (RQ2)
3. How do young people perceive the prevention of and responses to sexual violence? (RQ3)

My study is both aspirational and ambitious, realising my vision of promoting young people's agency by engaging them as partners in research, policy, and practice. It concerns conceptual outcomes (i.e., knowledge co-produced with young people on the identified topics) and methodological outcomes (i.e., insights gained about the participatory research process).

## **1.9 Thesis structure**

This thesis is organised around four core concepts: sexual violence, participation, agency and prevention. Each chapter supports this study's central argument of promoting young people's meaningful participation in research and their agency in dealing with and responding to various forms of sexual violence in their lives.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide this research's conceptual framework and context within relevant literature. By delving into the core concepts and discourses underpinning my research, these chapters justify the development of the research questions my project will address.

Chapter 2 delves into conceptualising sexual violence. It explores the implications of constructions of childhood on views of 'ideal' victimhood. This chapter provides an overview of definitions and constructs related to sexual violence as well as their limitations. It examines the ambiguity and uncertainty of young people's experiences of and understanding of sexual behaviours, the factors that might influence their perceptions and proposed adult responses.

Chapter 3 focuses on agency. It discusses perspectives on the concept. It explores young people's agency in dealing with sexual violence, such as naming their experience as violence,

disclosing, and demonstrating prosocial behaviours. The chapter examines components of whole-school approaches that contribute to effective sexual violence prevention efforts.

Chapters 4 and 5 present the concept of participation through the study's methodological approach and reflections. Chapter 4 discusses its methodological approach. It explains the rationale for choosing a participatory approach, the research design, sampling, methods, and data analysis. It elaborates on the ethical considerations. This chapter ends with the limitations and potential of a participatory research approach.

Following the methodology chapter, this project's methodological findings and reflections will be discussed in Chapter 5. These will be framed using the three building blocks of my participatory approach: Leading (shared decision-making), Listening (sustained relationship-building), and Learning (co-producing knowledge collaboratively).

Chapters 6-8 comprise this study's conceptual findings and discussions that connect to agency, sexual violence, and prevention. Chapter 6 focuses on how different participatory sense-making approaches enable young people to express their understanding of sexual violence. It offers the concept of 'language of discomfort' to complement legalistic language in engaging young people.

Chapter 7 focuses on young people's agency in responding to and dealing with sexual violence. It demonstrates instances of young people's agency in responding to different forms of sexual violence. This chapter presents their agency as relational and temporal.

Chapter 8 explores prevention by discussing young people's insights on schools' responses to sexual violence and their recommendations for improvement. Their perspectives reveal their expectations of fairness, transparency, and care. It will also present young people's recommendations on improving schools' responses to sexual violence, highlighting a consistent timeline of care and support.

Chapter 9 concludes this study by presenting a summary of the main findings. In doing so, it will explain how it answers the research questions. It outlines this project's conceptual, methodological, and practical contributions. Areas for future research, policy, and practice will follow. The thesis ends with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of this study and final reflections on the research journey.

# Chapter 2 Conceptualising sexual violence against children

## Introduction

This chapter demonstrates how legalistic frames dominate perceptions of young people and sexual violence. It highlights the value of exploring alternative lenses that account for the fluidity and evolving nature of their experiences of sexual behaviours and sexual violence. It begins with a brief overview of the literature review process, followed by outlining the pluralistic theoretical framework. The chapter then discusses constructions of children, showing how narrow views focusing on their innocence and asexuality influence perceptions of 'ideal' victimhood of sexual violence. A discussion of constraints of legal approaches and challenges in definitions follows. The following sections highlight the need for different constructs to encompass everyday behaviours, to understand young people's sexual behaviour better, and to acknowledge their views of sexual violence, reflecting uncertainty and ambiguity. The chapter concludes with recommendations from research and practice on adult responses.

## 2.1 Emergent literature review process

This literature review adopts an inductive and pluralistic approach, shaped by the participatory ethos of my study and my commitment to centring young people's voices. The initial literature search was conducted using academic databases such as JSTOR and Google Scholar. Key search terms included sexual violence prevention, sexual violence, agency, and young people's participation in sexual violence research. This search provided a foundational understanding of dominant discourses and conceptual frameworks in the field.

As the study progressed, the literature review was iteratively refined to reflect the concerns and priorities raised by the young people. For example, their reflections on discomfort, shame, and school responses prompted engagement with literature on intimate intrusions (e.g. Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018), punitive and welfare responses (e.g. Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023), and constructions of ideal victimhood (e.g. Roberts, Donovan and Durey, 2019).

This emergent process aligns with Cloutier's (2024) concept of conceptual nimbleness. It is the ability to adjust the research by abstracting from empirical data in flexible ways while situating the study in relevant literature. It also reflects the principles of pluralistic inquiry, which enable the integration of diverse theoretical perspectives to capture more accurately the complexity of young people's lived experiences (Frost & Bailey-Rodriguez, 2020).

The literature was not used to fit in young people's insights, but as a tool for sense-making. The decision-making process for selecting studies was guided by their relevance to the themes that emerged from the data and their potential to situate young people's perspectives within broader academic and policy debates. The literature review was refined at multiple stages of the research to ensure alignment and responsiveness with the evolving themes and insights generated through the workshops.

The following section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this study. It builds on the pluralistic and emergent approach described above, drawing from interdisciplinary fields and adapting existing theories to reflect young people's insights.

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework**

### **Rationale for a Pluralistic Framework**

This thesis adopts a pluralistic and emergent theoretical framework, shaped by the complexity and fluidity of young people's lives. Rather than applying a singular lens, I draw from interdisciplinary fields such as childhood studies, sociology of childhood, feminist theory, and intersectionality to interrogate dominant discourses on childhood and sexual violence. Coherence in this pluralistic theoretical framework is maintained by following a consistent epistemological stance that privileges young people's perspectives and questions adult-centric assumptions in knowledge production.

### **Childhood studies**

Drawing on the related fields of sociology of childhood and childhood studies, my study recognises young people as social actors with agency. These interdisciplinary fields have emerged as a critique of dominant child development theories that prescribe a fixed linear trajectory of children's development (Tisdall and Punch, 2012; Morrison, 2023; Coyne and Carter, 2024). I extend this critique by showing how young people's perspectives challenge not only rigid developmental framings of childhood but also legalistic and binary framings of sexual violence.

In the UK, childhood studies increasingly prioritise young people's voices and participatory methodologies (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). My research aligns with these core principles but also critiques their limitations. As a Filipino researcher, I bring a decolonial lens that questions the dominance of Global North perspectives in understanding childhoods. In the Philippines, for example, young people's agency is often negotiated within cultural norms of adult authority and obedience (Calamba and Rabe, forthcoming). This lens informs my attentiveness to power

dynamics in research interactions and my reflexive engagement with intercultural and intergenerational differences.

Drawing on Jørgensen and Wyness (2021), I understand power in research as relational and context-specific, shaped by the adult and young people's identities, such as gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality. My positionality and lived experience of Global South childhoods inform how I engage with young people in this study. This includes embedding Filipino values of relationality, respect, and emotional sensitivity in the participatory process. This perspective also shapes how I introduce young people to alternative perspectives of sexual violence by highlighting its emotional and relational dimensions beyond legalistic framings.

### **Critical childhood studies, childism, and adultism**

I contend that foregrounding young people's agency requires addressing structural and epistemic systems that marginalised their contributions. My study draws on critical childhood studies and childism to interrogate how adultism undermines the recognition of young people's perspectives as equally valid when discussing sexual violence.

Childism, as proposed by John Wall (2019), emerges as a new field of critical childhood studies. It critiqued adult knowledge systems and promotes young people's perspectives in reconstructing norms and understanding social issues. I adopt childism not only as a theoretical standpoint but as a participatory ethos in reimagining the researcher-participant relationship and emphasising relational and affective engagement. This approach reflects my commitment to co-producing knowledge and advocating for young people's role in transforming social norms and systems.

Adultism, as framed in this thesis, refers to the systematic privileging of adult perspectives as superior and the exclusion of young people from knowledge production (Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024; Moore and McArthur, 2024; Wall, 2025). I do not use the term to dismiss all adult-produced knowledge. Rather, I critique the structures that render young people's insights illegible or inferior, especially in discourses on sexual violence shaped by legal actors. These frameworks often fail to reflect the complexity of young people's experiences and can also be limiting for adults when responding to them. This shared constraint suggests that adultist knowledge systems affect both groups by imposing rigid frameworks.

Building on Wall's (2025) critique, I argue that adultist knowledge systems associate validity and legitimacy of knowledge with age and experience, particularly in areas like sex education and sexual violence. These systems frame young people as unknowledgeable and in need of adult guidance. My study challenges this by positioning young people as collaborators in

producing knowledge about sexual violence. It foregrounds their language and concepts in making sense of sexual violence.

## **Recognising the value of feminist and intersectional theories**

My study applies feminist concepts such as Kelly's (1988) continuum of sexual violence, Vera-Gray's (2018) notion of intimate intrusions, and Roberts, Donovan and Durey (2019) critique of ideal victimhood in exploring young people's views on sexual violence. These frameworks expand the discussions beyond legalistic definitions and help understand how sexual violence is experienced in everyday and ambiguous ways. I seek to use theories that are responsive to young people's lived realities, building on the work of feminist scholars who have similarly worked with young people. As I discuss further in section 2.4, this approach is crucial to my argument that young people use their language and concepts differently when making sense of their experiences.

In her study on discourses on child sexual abuse and gendered sexual violence in the United States, Whittier (2015) argues that sexual violence against children should be understood as both similar and different from adult experiences of sexual violence. My study adopts this perspective to critically engage with some feminist theories that, while valuable, were primarily developed with adults in mind. I respond to these critiques raised by scholars like Whittier by applying feminist theories in ways that foreground young people's language and sense-making. My study is influenced by the work of scholars like Helen Beckett, Christine Barter, Melanie McCarry, Vanita Sundaram and those in Durham University's Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse, Geetanjali Gangoli, Catherine Donovan, and Hannah King, whose research with young people and interpersonal violence highlights the impact of gender norms that influence young people's understandings of and experiences of violence and abuse.

While intersectionality was not used as a direct analytical lens in this study, its conceptual value remains central to understanding the diversity of young people's experiences of sexual violence. Intersectionality, as proposed by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), highlights how overlapping identities, such as age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability, shape and compound experiences of marginalisation and sexual violence. Crenshaw suggests that these identities are not additive but instead interconnect, creating distinct systems of oppression and unique experiences of vulnerability. I acknowledge that intersectionality theory is crucial in my study by challenging universalised notions of childhood and sexual violence. It supports my claim that young people's experiences of sexual violence must be understood in connection to their intersecting identities. This framing informs my sensitivity to differences in power and inclusion when engaging young people in the participatory process.

This pluralistic and emergent theoretical framework provides the foundation for the analysis in succeeding chapters, reflecting a commitment to co-producing knowledge with young people and challenging adult-centric frameworks that do not align with the complexity of their

experiences. These perspectives convey a shared commitment to challenging knowledge systems that marginalise young people's diverse experiences and perspectives.

The critique of dominant knowledge systems in sexual violence discourse must be situated within broader cultural and historical constructions of childhood. The following section explores how these constructions influence how sexual violence involving young people is perceived and how their experiences are responded to and understood.

## **2.3 Constructions of children and 'ideal' victimhood**

### **Constructions of childhood and sexual violence**

My study contends that dominant discourses of innocence and vulnerability continue to shape how sexual violence involving children and young people is understood and responded to. These narratives often obscure young people's agency and result in adult responses that are not fully responsive to their needs. In his seminal work on the philosophical implications for understanding sexual consent concerning children, Archard (1994) critiques the Western construction of childhood as passive, asexual, and dependent, an image that shapes legal and policy frameworks. Hlavka (2019) argues that the eroticisation of childhood innocence increases young people's vulnerability to sexual violence, while also silencing their voices in research and practice. Hlavka (2019) maintains that perceptions of innocence and vulnerability are racialised and gendered. White girls are often framed as innocent, while Black girls are hypersexualised. My study builds on this literature to explore how normative expectations of childhood and 'ideal' victimhood can diminish the legitimacy of young people's experiences when they do not conform to these ideals.

Legal and institutional frameworks often impose labels like 'victim' without engaging young people in how they understand or relate to these terms. In their qualitative study with 17 children from South Wales, including those with lived experiences of different forms of harm, Haines and Charles (2019) find that children resist the label of victimhood and instead prefer to be called children who experience harm. Their study suggests how children and young people negotiate and resist the legalistic language that adults use to describe their experiences by offering other terms that capture the nuances in their identities and experiences. This view aligns with a key contention in this thesis about validating young people's language in communicating about their experiences.

Meanwhile, Ellis (2019) conducted an ethnographic study with girls who were placed in a secure accommodation in England for their protection due to professional concerns about child sexual abuse. The study focused on data from interviews with young people, with additional data from staff members. While fifteen girls contributed their views, the study highlighted three

girls who shared complexities and similarities in their discussions about their experiences. While telling their stories in varied ways, these three girls rejected labels of vulnerability and instead adopted notions of culpability and aligned their identities with a girl who is in control of her sexuality (Ellis, 2019). These narratives suggest how societal discourses on blame and sexual agency could be internalised by young people, which may lead girls to frame the abuse and harm they experienced because of their actions, despite coercion and structural constraints. These insights are particularly relevant to my study's focus on how young people engage with and resist dominant framings of harm and victimhood.

These findings underscore a claim of my study on the limitations of binary labels, victim/agent, innocent/knowing, that dominate adult-centric understandings of sexual violence. My study draws on these insights to examine how young people make sense of harm and identities differently. It also interrogates how this sense-making varies in different cultural contexts, reinforcing the need to centre young people's perspectives in research, policy, and practice.

Agnew and McAlinden (2023) claim that laws do not adequately account for the complexity of peer-based sexual behaviour. Responses that label 'healthy' sexual behaviour as 'deviant' and/or categorising young people as 'offenders' do not consider the context of the evolving socio-cultural landscape that influences their attitudes and behaviours. Constructions of childhood that focus on their asexuality and innocence may contribute to misinformed narratives of youth sexuality that frame all their sexual behaviours as objects of regulation, which can lead to over-criminalisation (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023). These insights reinforce my study's claims about the limitations of laws and legal frameworks in reflecting the complexities of young people's experiences and identities that tend to position them in binary positions. My study builds on Agnew and McAlinden's (2023) study by exploring how the young people negotiate with alternative identities and concepts that better align with their language and lived realities.

### **Constructions of the 'ideal' victim of sexual violence**

Constructions of childhood have concrete effects on young people's experiences and the responses they receive. Constructions of children as innocent can lead to punishing those children and young people who cannot conform to these portrayals (Hlavka, 2019). This situation is evident in discussions of the 'ideal' victim of sexual violence.

Victimhood and the concept of the 'ideal' victim are socially constructed (Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel, 2022). As Christie (1986) proposes, the 'ideal' victim deserves their victim status (cited in Roberts, Donovan and Durey, 2019; Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel, 2022). The 'ideal' victim is often framed as weak and passive without agency or culpability, while the 'ideal' offender is deviant (Beckett, 2019; Roberts, Donovan and Durey, 2019; Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel,

2022). My study supports the findings of these studies that show how binary constructions limit how young people are recognised as victims and constrain their opportunity for their experience to be recognised as valid.

Research shows that myths surrounding child sexual abuse (CSA) significantly affect disclosure outcomes, legal proceedings, and psychological wellbeing (Cromer and Goldsmith, 2010, 2019; Hlavka and Mulla, 2021; Denne, St George and Stolzenberg, 2023). CSA myths, meaning stereotypes beliefs about victims and perpetrators could lead adults to question young people's credibility (Cromer and Goldsmith, 2010). This literature has implications for my study by demonstrating how adult and institutional beliefs act as barriers in young people's decision-making and anticipation of outcomes when they disclose or seek help.

Defence lawyers and jurors frequently ask young people whether they physically resisted, implying that a lack of resistance can indicate consent. For instance, in their study with Estonian young people, Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel (2022) find that older adolescents were expected to resist abuse due to their legal age of consent, reinforcing the notion that age equals capacity. These expectations reflect adult-centric legal standards that overlook the subtle, relational ways young people may resist (Kitzinger, 2015). Linking age to resistance reinforces developmental discourses that equate biological maturity with agency, ignoring the situated and relational nature of young people's responses. My study applies a childhood studies lens to challenge these biological deterministic assumptions and foreground young people's agency in navigating constraints and opportunities.

Another dominant myth centres on visible signs of harm. The 'harm' narrative in CSA assumes that victims will display trauma such as emotional distress, physical injury, or psychological breakdown (O'Dell, 2003; Woodiwiss, 2014). In legal contexts, these narratives influence credibility assessments of victims' testimonies. Prosecutors encourage emotional displays to align with cultural constructions of trauma (St. George, Denne and Stolzenberg, 2022). Hlavka and Mulla (2021) find that child victims who showed visible distress were deemed more credible, while adult survivors who did not show these signs were seen as less believable.

These studies reinforce my claim that adultist expectations are harmful, particularly for young people whose expressions of impact may not conform to dominant trauma narratives. My study explores how young people articulate the outcomes of their experiences in diverse ways through language and bodily responses like flinching, or feelings of discomfort and shame. In doing so, it highlights the constraints of biomedical models of trauma when young people who do not present in expected ways may be excluded from support.

This critique aligns with Vera-Gray and Fileborn's (2018) analysis of the biomedical trauma model, which frames trauma through observable symptoms and diagnostic categories. This

framing distinguishes which experiences 'count' as sexual violence but risks silencing other expressions of impact. While I acknowledge the value of the biomedical trauma model in validating harm and accessing support, my study examines its limitations. In contrast, a trauma-informed approach recognises that trauma may be experienced in diverse ways (Beckett and Warrington, 2024). It differs from the biomedical model by recognising that young people may communicate harm in diverse ways, even if they do not name it as trauma. This approach is relational and contextual, grounded in young people's sense-making. It enables a broader understanding of sexual violence that is not contingent on diagnostic evaluations but informed by their meaning-making. This distinction is crucial to my study's epistemological stance, which prioritises young people's language and interpretations instead of dominant legal and medical frameworks.

Another common myth relates to the timing of disclosure and its perceived credibility. Dominant narratives suggest that delayed disclosure undermines believability (Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel, 2022; Crown Prosecution Service, 2023). Victims may be accused of fabrication, coaching, or revenge motives (Cromer and Goldsmith, 2010; St. George, Denne and Stolzenberg, 2022)

One other myth relates to the timing of disclosure and its perceived credibility. Dominant narratives suggest that delayed disclosure undermines believability (Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel, 2022; Crown Prosecution Service, 2023). Victims may be accused of fabrication, coaching, or revenge motives (Cromer and Goldsmith, 2010; St. George, Denne and Stolzenberg, 2022). These beliefs reflect adultist assumptions about how victims should behave and contribute to the dismissal of young people's experiences when they do not meet these expectations.

I maintain that these expectations ignore the complex realities of disclosure for children and young people. An extensive body of literature has shown that disclosure is shaped by fear, shame, confusion, and relational dynamics (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina and Lateef, 2019; Allnock and Atkinson, 2019). The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA, 2022) highlights a longstanding pattern of disbelief and dismissal in adult and institutional responses to child sexual abuse, dating back to the 1940s. This historical and cultural legacy contributes to young people's anticipatory fear that they will not be taken seriously. My study builds on this insight by showing how these worries influence their decisions after experiencing sexual violence. Recognising this complexity requires centring young people's perspectives to transform institutional norms.

A limitation of the literature reviewed is its predominant focus on child sexual abuse (CSA) involving adult offenders, particularly in intrafamilial contexts. Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel

(2022) observe that in cases involving two young people, especially when both are older adolescents, they are less likely to be considered credible or to receive appropriate help. This reflects how young people are marginalised if they do not fit the 'ideal' victim narrative. There is limited research on young people's experiences of peer-perpetrated sexual violence, particularly outside the criminal justice system. Some report incidents to schools but choose not to pursue legal action, further complicating visibility and recognition.

Many studies on CSA myths are based in the United States, representing adult professional perspectives (e.g. Small, 2019; Hlavka and Mulla, 2021; St. George, Denne and Stolzenberg, 2022) or Estonia (Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel, 2022), which differ from the UK context. While UK-specific research is limited, the Crown Prosecution Service (2023) acknowledges the need to challenge CSA myths, indicating growing recognition of their harmful impact. Survivor testimonies from the Truth Project (IICSA, 2022) reflect themes from international literature, reinforcing my argument that adult perceptions of childhood and sexual violence shape institutional responses, often to young people's detriment.

Notably, children and young people's views are absent in this body of work. Their perspectives on being subjected to myths and navigating justice systems are rarely discussed. Hlavka and Mulla (2021) claim that in legal proceedings, the testimonies of adult experts like police, legal and medical professionals, are privileged over the child victim witness. This exemplifies adultism in practice, where young people's views are devalued (Bertrand, Brooks and Domínguez, 2023; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024). My study addresses this gap by centring young people's voices and experiences.

The synthesis of literature illustrates how dominant constructions of children and 'ideal' victimhood create barriers in recognising their experiences as valid. It demonstrates the dominance of crime-oriented legal frameworks, shaped by adult-driven justice systems and societal discomfort with child sexual abuse, which often diminishes young people's voices.

My study challenges the legitimacy of hierarchies of victimhood. These hierarchies determine who 'deserves' support and even actively exclude those who do not conform to narrow adult-defined standards. For instance, Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel (2022) point out how someone instructed a victim of stranger rape to report to authorities, while a victim of violent sexual assault by her peer was primarily guided to seek psychological counselling. This example reflects a hierarchy of harm that considers adult-perpetrated violence as serious and diminishes the impact of harm between young people. My study reiterates that sexual violence among young people must be understood outside of these dominant knowledge systems and instead through frameworks that centre young people's perspectives and meaning-making. As Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel (2022) powerfully stated, 'No child should feel

unworthy of help'. My study echoes this call by advocating for responsive and young people-centred approaches to understanding and addressing sexual violence.

## **2.4 Constraints of legal approaches, definitions, and dominant discourses**

Building on the theoretical framework, my study engages with feminist critiques of legal definitions of sexual violence that fail to account for the diversity of lived experiences. Seminal work by Stanko (1985) and Kelly (1988) underscore that legal frameworks define sexual violence through narrow criminal categories, which obscure behaviours that have a routine and relational nature. Stanko (1985) critiques that men's violence is framed as exceptional and deviant, rather than part of a spectrum of behaviours including everyday intrusions. This framing trivialises women's experiences by failing to validate the impact of verbal, emotional, and relational boundary violations. This critique reinforces my study's argument that young people's experiences and views are similarly dismissed when they do not fit legal categories.

Similarly, McGlynn (2024) points out the challenges of trying to fit women's experiences into existing legal categories and acts, often with the label insufficient to capture their experience. Legal definitions of violence and abuse rely on binaries, either something is or is not the action. These fail to capture ambiguous experiences that can be defined differently between individuals or the same person in different contexts (Vera-Gray, 2016).

My study extends these arguments by challenging the limitations of criminal law definitions in fully explaining the diversity of young people's experiences. My study claims that young people's voices and experiences are even less represented or considered in policy development. It aligns with Warrington's (2021) finding that they are usually excluded from decision-making on matters involving their lives. They are the objects of the discussions, but even their testimonies must match cultural expectations to be considered valid (Small, 2019). My critique underscores the need for research that centres on young people's perspectives and complements adult-centric frameworks such as the criminal justice system.

Setty, Hunt and Ringrose (2025) argue that 'legal frameworks are blunt instruments when applied to the complexities of young people's socio-sexual lives and experiences, while the framing of all sexual activity under 16 as unlawful homogenises young people and removes agency, acting as a barrier to identifying and reporting abuse' (p. 2). Police officers interviewed in the study acknowledged the limitations of the law in considering young people's agency and development, especially regarding underage sexual activity, especially when the encounter is deemed consensual. They described balancing their duty to enforce the law while avoiding undue criminalisation of young people for normative adolescent behaviour. My study supports

this critique that young people's peer-based sexual cultures and individual agency may not align with legal definitions and adult understanding, such as on the topic of consent (Whittington, 2019b; Setty, 2025b; Setty, Hunt and Ringrose, 2025).

In their study on sexual violence in LGBTQ+ relationships, Donovan, Butterby and Barnes (2023) claim that prevalence studies on sexual violence are often focused on acts that are regarded as criminal: rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. The criminal justice lens influences 'what counts' as sexual violence. The authors argue for a 'shift away from the incident-based, physical violence-focused approach to understanding sexual violence, in order to include how victimisation can result from a relationship 'demeanour' of perpetrators who control the nature, dynamics, timing, and meaning of sex in intimate relationships' (p. 154). Their study argues that 'what counts' as sexual violence can include verbal comments and coercive behaviours that can cumulatively sexually victimise an intimate partner. My study echoes this point by advocating for an expanded understanding of sexual violence that includes emotional and relational aspects as explained by young people themselves.

Vera-Gray (2016) asserts that women's experiences of behaviours pre-defined through the 'harassment' framework may miss practices that might not be experienced in all contexts by all women as harassing. Some mundane everyday behaviours like 'cheer up' would be difficult to define as sexual harassment, yet they are part of women's experiences. The sexual harassment framework may also exclude experiences that do not fit the concept as normatively understood or explained in legal language when they are not 'sexual' in nature yet cause harm. It may limit experiences which are not subjectively experienced as harassing, yet are uninvited interruptions (Vera-Gray, 2016). These findings have implications for my study, as young people similarly lack the language and frameworks to articulate their experiences. It underscores the need for research that explores young people's sense-making processes.

My study draws on Hlavka's (2019) concept of 'epistemic violence'. It describes the practices of silencing young people's experiences of sexual violence. It occurs when children and young people are culturally denied the language and space to make their voices heard. The impossibility of child sexual violence 'allows space for everyone *but* the child to speak and to be heard' (p.1962). Sexual violence among young people must thus be understood outside of dominant systems that structure responses to their experiences. Their voices must be front and centre to speak about their experiences and narrate them in their own words (Hlavka, 2019). This concept is relevant to my study since it situates the impact of adultism on sexual violence, which has not been explored in previous childism and childhood studies research. My study differs from Hlavka's (2019) conceptual paper by embedding empirical data to demonstrate the language the young people use to describe sexual violence.

Related to this term is the concept of testimonial injustice, coined by Miranda Fricker (2007), when children and young people's testimonies are articulated in the language of adults and deemed less reliable. Fricker claims that the systematic under-representation of some individuals makes it difficult for them to have the language or conceptual framework to articulate or make sense of their experiences. The dominance of constructions of childhood innocence and protection denies young people their capacity and knowledge of sex, power, and language. By applying the concepts of epistemic violence and testimonial injustice, my study situates the marginalisation of young people's voices in broader adult-centric knowledge systems.

## **2.5 Challenges in defining sexual violence**

Despite the adoption of the umbrella term 'sexual violence against children' internationally, one of the critical challenges in sexual violence prevention is the lack of consensus on the terms, definitions, and frameworks to describe sexual violence against children (Ligiero *et al.*, 2019; Rabe, 2024; ECPAT International, 2025). There is no overall internationally agreed-upon definition of sexual violence against children, which is not mentioned in the Convention on the Rights of the Child or the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (ECPAT International, 2025). The term 'sexual violence' has been used mainly 'when referring to adults, often concerning gender-based violence and the public health discourse, and is often associated with rape' (ibid, p. 24).

In recent years, the discourse in the child protection field 'has moved towards violence-based language (e.g. violence against children instead of child abuse)' (ibid, p. 25). The challenges of defining sexual violence against children reflect a broader issue on different levels of understanding across and within countries on what constitutes violence against children (VAC) (UNICEF, 2023). The criminalisation of acts has often been used to define some forms of VAC. However, it carries the risk of not reflecting the entire spectrum of VAC, which is not criminalised (UNICEF, 2023). For instance, the continuum of sexual violence highlights the impact of behaviours which are not criminal acts (Kelly, 1988).

Cultural norms and policy frameworks shape the understanding of and responses to different forms of violence and abuse that children and young people experience. For instance, in the United Kingdom, child sexual abuse has been primarily understood as abuse occurring within families (Cody and D'Arcy, 2019). Scholars question whether narrowing understandings of child sexual abuse to intrafamilial abuse leaves situations in extrafamilial contexts in 'definitional limbo' (Lovett, Coy and Kelly, 2018).

A comparison of definitions used by England and UK government documents and charities involved in child protection, violence and abuse reveals differing terms: ‘sexual violence’ (DfE, 2024; Rape Crisis England & Wales, n.d.), ‘sexual violence and harassment’ (Ofsted, 2021; Women and Equalities Committee, 2023; DfE, 2024; NSPCC, n.d), ‘sexual abuse’ (HM Government, 2023) and ‘harmful sexual behaviours’ (Ofsted, 2021; Women and Equalities Committee, 2023; DfE, 2024). The table below shows how terms used in discussing sexual violence fit and intersect within legal frameworks and practice contexts.

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Overlap/connection with other constructs</b>	<b>Policy recognition (UK)</b>
Sexual violence	An umbrella term covering other constructs	Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024 (Child-on-child sexual violence and sexual harassment)
Sexual abuse	Overlaps with peer sexual abuse and harmful sexual behaviour but is often associated with adult perpetrators and intrafamilial sexual abuse	Sexual Offences Act 2003 – child sexual offences Working Together to Safeguard Children 2024 (sexual abuse)
Harmful sexual behaviours	Overlaps with child sexual abuse involving young people, dating violence, and harassment between young people	Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024
Sexual harassment	Includes similar behaviours with dating violence and HSB	Working Together to Safeguard Children Keeping Children Safe in Education 2024 (sexual abuse including harassment and exploitation)
Violence and abuse in relationships	This may include acts similar to HSB or harassment, often associated with domestic abuse	Domestic Abuse Act 2021 (16 years old and above) Working Together to Safeguard Children (under domestic abuse) Keeping Children Safe in Education (teenage relationship abuse)

*Table 1: Comparison of terms in UK policy*

A review of UK policy documents reveals a fragmented landscape of terminology. Government and third-sector organisations variously use terms such as sexual violence, sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) (DfE, 2024; Ofsted, 2021;

HM Government, 2023; Rape Crisis England & Wales, n.d.; NSPCC, n.d.). These terms often overlap but are applied inconsistently across legal and safeguarding frameworks.

Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) defines sexual violence in line with the Sexual Offences Act 2003, including rape, assault by penetration, and sexual assault. It also outlines the legal definition of consent as involving freedom and capacity to choose, which can be withdrawn at any time (DfE, 2024). However, KCSIE also uses the term child-on-child abuse and harmful sexual behaviour to encompass a wide range of behaviours, including sexual harassment, upskirting, and sexting. Some of these behaviours may not meet the legal threshold for sexual violence.

Working Together to Safeguard Children (HM Government, 2023) uses the term sexual abuse rather than sexual violence, further contributing to conceptual confusion. While some frameworks treat CSA as a subset of sexual violence (Ligiero et al., 2019), others treat the terms as distinct, leading to inconsistencies in how cases are categorised and responded to.

Domestic abuse definitions also vary depending on age. The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 applies only to individuals aged 16 and over, meaning that abuse in younger adolescents' relationships may not be legally recognised as domestic abuse (DfE, 2024). Both KCSIE and Working Together acknowledge that young people of different ages can experience abuse in dating and intimate relationships, but the legal framework has age-specific limitations.

My study claims that a lack of definitional clarity contributes to fragmented and sometimes contradictory institutional responses. This lack of consensus reinforces assumptions about which behaviours are serious enough to warrant intervention. The use of overlapping but inconsistently applied terms often does not align with young people's experiences, particularly when they do not fit neatly into legal categories.

## **2.6 Expanding constructs to encompass everyday behaviour**

The previous sections established how policy documents and legal discourses have focused on sexual offences and crime-oriented language as the primary frame for understanding sexual violence. However, less attention has been paid to everyday behaviours and experiences such as staring and comments, which are frequently dismissed as harmless (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018).

In their work exploring alternative frames for understanding violence against women and girls, Vera-Gray and Fileborn (2018) claim that routine forms of harassment and intrusions women and girls experience from men in their everyday lives are under-evidenced and under-theorised. Relatedly, Vera-Gray (2016) proposes connecting criminal forms of violence to

routine experiences that allow for experiences that may not feel harassing yet still have an impact on them. Walling-Wefelmeyer (2019) aptly notes that 'how' women defined their experience shapes 'what' actions they take' (p. 2). Whilst these studies primarily focus on the experiences of adult women, they offer valuable insights for contextualising young people's experiences of naming, reporting and help-seeking.

Identifying and naming routine, everyday incidents of violence and abuse is complex since these encounters are so normalised that they are rarely called harassment or considered serious enough for reporting (Vera-Gray, 2016). My study acknowledges that there is limited available literature that provides a term that can capture how young people name their experiences. This reinforces the need for research that engages young people in developing concepts and language that reflect their lived realities.

Gartner and Sterzing (2016) highlight how current understandings of youth sexual violence exclude discussions of chronic, low-severity forms of violence like gender microaggressions. These are defined as 'intentional and unintentional insults, invalidations, and assaults based on gender and are most frequently perpetrated against women and girls' (p. 492).

Connecting to the work of other feminist scholars on men's intrusions on women's lives, Gartner and Sterzing's (2016) research is valuable in expanding the understanding of sexual violence among young people beyond the legally actionable offences such as sexual assault and sexual harassment. Seminal and recent scholarship delved into women's experiences of men's intrusions (Stanko, 1985; Vera-Gray, 2016; Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2019; McGlynn, 2024). However, existing literature has largely overlooked young people's experiences and views, suggesting the need for further research in this area. Nevertheless, I reiterate that their conceptual exploration of intrusions is a valuable departure point in centring young people's experiences and definitions, often not reflected in criminal laws. Gartner and Sterzing (2016) also suggests that substantial work with adolescents is necessary for refining core constructs such as sexual assault, sexual harassment, and gender microaggressions. My study responds to this suggestion by using a participatory approach to explore how adolescents engage with and define constructs related to sexual violence.

Vera-Gray (2016) defines intrusions as a 'deliberate act of putting oneself into a place or situation where one is uninvited, with disruptive effect' (p. 13). This definition negates the need to show an intent to harm since the focus is on the deliberateness of the practice. At the same time, the term 'uninvited' instead of 'unwanted' affirms the agency of the person affected to choose who enters their physical and emotional space. It highlights the actions of the person causing the harm rather than their intentions or the other person's response. This definition

opens the spaces for impact that may be constrained in harassment framing. It explores 'what form an incident took and how it was experienced and defined' (Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2019, p.2). My study extends this body of work by exploring young people's sense-making in classifying behaviours using terms that would better reflect their experiences aside from intrusions.

Building on earlier work on intrusions, McGlynn (2024) proposes a new criminal offence of intimate intrusions. It encompasses the nature of existing harms and new, 'yet-to-be-imagined' forms of abuse that evolving technology may facilitate. This approach relieves women and girls of the constant and repeated burden of naming their harms and experiences addressed in piecemeal criminal law reform. This type of reform means that each new manifestation of abuse results in a specific offence. Using the umbrella term seeks to describe the 'seemingly infinite variety of ways that abuse is perpetrated without the need to provide a distinct label for every different form of harm' (ibid, p. 6).

Whilst I recognise the value of this proposal, young people's voices and experiences are marginalised due to the emphasis on adult women's experiences. My study critiques this adult-centric focus and highlights the need for advocacy that embeds young people's voices in legal and policy reform. It underscores how adult knowledge systems and legal responses to sexual violence are often applied to young people, without accounting for the diversity and specificity of their experiences.

The studies reviewed above support my thesis' argument on the limitations of existing frames. The concept of intrusions represents a significant shift in validating a broad range of experiences beyond physical legal offences. These findings have implications for my study in exploring how young people name and describe their experiences beyond available legal terms

## **2.7 Understanding young people's sexual behaviours**

### **Recognising young people's varied sexual behaviours**

Hackett (2014) proposes that children and young people's sexual behaviours exist in a continuum which ranges from normal and developmentally appropriate on one end and highly abnormal and violent on the other. It helps determine differences in motivations and meanings of their behaviours at various stages of development (Hackett, Branigan and Holmes, 2019).

Harmful sexual behaviour (HSB) entails sexual behaviours that are developmentally inappropriate, harmful towards the self and others, or abusive towards another child, young

person or adult (Hackett, Branigan and Holmes, 2019). Young people may encounter or display behaviour that can be classified in the continuum as inappropriate (i.e. context for behaviour may be inappropriate and socially acceptable within peer group) or problematic (i.e. consent issues may be unclear, may lack reciprocity or equal power, no overt elements of victimisation). Distinguishing between appropriate non-abusive behaviour and inappropriate abusive behaviour requires practitioners to understand what is healthy and informed consent, and what is abusive or coercive (Scottish Government, 2020).

The continuum of sexual behaviours clarifies the variances in childhood sexuality and normal sexual development among young people (Hackett, 2014). Policymakers and practitioners must be cautious not to deny legitimate childhood sexuality (Hackett, 2020). Risk-taking and sexual experimentation are typical parts of adolescence, so not all peer-based sexual behaviours are problematic, exploitative or harmful (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023).

My study supports Hackett's (2020) argument that young people have a right to healthy sexual development and sexual expression, along with their right to be protected from harm. It builds on his research by exploring young people's rights to participation and protection as part of sexual violence prevention initiatives.

### **Factors that influence young people's views and experiences of sexual behaviours**

McAlinden (2018) argues that cultural and social landscapes influence how young people negotiate their social identity, how they behave within interpersonal relationships and how they understand sex, sexuality, and sexual relationships. The impact of technology and the digital world contributed to blurring the distinction between 'normal' and 'harmful' sexual behaviours (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023). These authors claim that rapidly evolving digital culture and the social media age have produced new norms on what is deemed appropriate or normal sexual behaviour among adolescents. It also affects their ability to make informed decisions about appropriate behaviours and relationships and identify the risk of harm to themselves and others (McAlinden, 2018).

Agnew and McAlinden (2023) state the various influences and pressures young people face online and offline. These include new modes of digital communication, dating practice changes, and technology access. Different socio-cultural influences, including pornographic content, can perpetuate gendered myths and stereotypes that may include how young people understand gender roles, sexual norms, 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' relationships and their views on their body's potential worth. For instance, pornographic content can affect young people's ability to confidently differentiate between normal and healthy behaviours and those which are problematic and potentially harmful (McAlinden, 2018). Professor Nicky Stanley's research

finds an association between regular access to online pornography and coercive and violent sexual behaviour (Women and Equalities Committee, 2023).

Building on this research, my study claims that it is crucial to acknowledge young people's competencies and autonomy in navigating the influence of cultural and societal sexualised media content. In a study with Finnish young people on a moderated question and answer forum about their concerns on sexuality, Spišák (2016) reports how the young people involved in her study adopted a highly analytic and intellectual attitude when distinguishing representation and reality and demonstrated skills to seek help when they feel their porn consumption had gotten out of hand. She argues for recognising young people's agency in negotiating the evolving and changing boundaries of sexuality and gender. My study differs from Spišák's (2016) work in my focus on sexual violence, yet it extends her work by centring young people's perspectives in recognising the changes and impact of gender norms in their exercise of agency.

Setty, Ringrose and Hunt (2024) propose that young people's sexual cultures are 'post-digital', meaning the digital and non-digital elements are intricately connected. Their behaviours, experiences and cultures are digitally mediated. The connection between their digital and non-digital lives shapes new relations of intimacy and emotion.

Scholars note the impact of schools' gender regimes in facilitating conducive contexts for violence and abuse (Donovan *et al.*, 2023; Ringrose and Regehr, 2023). In a study with school staff and students from educational institutions in the UK on harmful sexual behaviours, Firmin (2020) report that staff's responses to students' behaviours may shape their behavioural expectations and interactions related to gender and inappropriate behaviour, including minimisation or dismissal. Teachers' intervention when seeing sexual harassment between young people shaped their perceptions of the unacceptability and tolerance of the action (Holmqvist Gattario and Lunde, 2023; Skoog, Lunde and Gattario, 2023). Teachers and school staff constructing boys' actions as benign sends a harmful message to girls that they have misinterpreted the situation (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). These include situations when boys' harmful behaviours are not challenged but, worse, justified as natural. These different contexts and factors may influence young people's views and understanding of sexual behaviours, gender norms, and sexual violence

## **2.8 Young people's views reflecting the uncertainty and complexities concerning sexual behaviours and sexual violence**

This section explores how young people articulate uncertainty and complexity in their understandings of sexual behaviours and sexual violence. It highlights the relational and

contextual nature of their experiences. While there is a growing body of research that foregrounds young people's perspectives on topics related to sexual violence, like consent and online harm, my study contributes a distinct focus on how they articulate their experiences in their own language and conceptual framing.

My study recognises how evolving digital and offline contexts and influences can contribute to a 'culture of confusion' among young people (McAlinden, 2018), particularly intensified following the pandemic as seen in increased online exposure and new forms of engagement. Research shows that young people often perceive sexual violence and consent with more nuance than the discourses reflected in education and policy. For example, in a mixed methods study with peer researchers (aged 12-18) in Netherlands, Cense, Grauw and Vermeulen (2020) find that adolescents expressed insecurity about their bodies and sought spaces to discuss these uncertainties without shame. Similarly, Setty (2024) reports that young people wanted reassurance that feeling confused or vulnerable was acceptable, and that sex and relationships were emotionally complex. These findings support my claim that young people's sense-making could be more expansive than the legalistic focus of dominant framings of sexual violence.

Beckett et al. (2019), in research with young people (aged 10–20) in England, find that the participants wanted more nuanced education about online sexual harm, such as moving beyond adult-centric messages focused on risk and stranger danger. These avoidance-based messages risk victim-blaming and fail to reflect the relational and peer-based contexts in which harm often occurs. My study builds on this work by highlighting how institutional stigma and silence, particularly in educational settings, constrain young people's ability to explore their concerns and questions about sex and violence. It reinforces the need for safe, dialogic spaces that validate diverse experiences and challenge rigid norms of what is considered 'normal'.

A growing body of research also explores young people's views on sexual consent, revealing tensions between lived experiences and binary educational messaging. Setty (2022), in research with adolescent boys in Southeast England, finds that participants distinguished between intentional violations and situations marked by confusion or emotional pressure. Boys described interpersonal dynamics such as saying 'no' being socially awkward, requiring emotional labour to manage others' feelings. This is relevant to my study, where the young people identified boys' experiences of sexual violence as a priority issue. Setty's work offers insight into gendered experiences often overlooked in dominant discourses focused on violence against women and girls.

Coy et al.'s (2013) mixed methods study with young people (aged 13–20) in England report that they often understood non-consensual sex because of miscommunication, especially

when relying on non-verbal cues. Similarly, the qualitative study of Righi et al (2021) with high school students (aged 14-18) in the United States shows the gendered differences in communicating about consent or refusal to sex. Girls often used non-verbal refusals, while boys expected verbal cues. Whittington (2019b), in participatory research with 103 young people (aged 13–25), co-produced a continuum of sexual agency that captured how young people described experiences falling between rape and consensual sex. This continuum reflects the fluidity and diversity of young people’s understandings, challenging legalistic and binary definitions.

These studies show how young people negotiate with the complexities of consent, often constrained by adultist knowledge systems that fail to reflect the grey areas in their lived realities. My study extends this body of work by exploring how young people construct experiences that do not fit legal definitions of sexual violence, yet are experienced as harmful.

Gender norms and peer dynamics shape these experiences. Young people navigate the social consequences of consent and refusal within romantic and peer relationships. Gendered scripts, such as expectations of passivity for girls and initiation for boys, create pressures that influence behaviour and perceptions. In her book on debates in childhood and citizenship, drawn from case studies in the USA, the UK, and Australia, Nakata (2015) describes the impact of gender scripts, such as women being often viewed as passive and men as assertive, on children and young people’s experiences of sexual violence. Meanwhile, in their article analysing linkages between harm and consent for adolescents under the age of consent, Carpenter et al. (2014) highlight the denial of girls’ sexual subjectivity. In a qualitative study with young people (aged 8-17) and staff in residential care homes in England to examine how discourses of blame and violence are interrelated, Barter (2006) notes the complexity where young women are seen as responsible for male actions yet lack control over the outcome, even when including sexual violence. These dynamics are crucial in my study to understand how young people might experience and interpret sexual violence differently from adults.

Sundaram (2018) proposes a continuum of acceptability to capture how young people view violence, not as a binary of right or wrong, but as contextually justified or tolerated. This framework is valuable in my study to situate the young people’s insights as ambiguous, relationally complex, and shaped by gender norms. Beckett (2019) similarly finds that young people often felt confused about culpability and blame, sometimes failing to recognise abuse or seeing themselves as responsible. These findings align with broader research showing that shame and anticipated blame from adults can deter help-seeking (IICSA, 2022).

Agnew and McAlinden (2023) argue that adult framings of young people's sexual behaviours as inherently risky exacerbate these feelings of uncertainty. Hallett's (2020) research with young people (aged 14-17) in care institutions in Wales suggests that policy definitions and adult narratives surrounding coercion did not align with the lived realities of young people, who often navigated exploitative relationships that met some of their needs. My study builds on this work by validating the ambiguity and uncertainty in young people's experiences. It reinforces my argument that young people's lived experiences may not be fully captured within existing adultist frameworks.

This section synthesises a growing body of research that foregrounds young people's perspectives on sexual violence and related issues like consent. It critiques framings that do not account for the ambiguities and grey areas in young people's lives. My study contributes to this field by centring young people's voices, offering a more nuanced understanding of sexual violence.

### **Discomfort as a signal of uncertainty**

My study explores discomfort as a signal of uncertainty, which entails the recognition of embodied or emotional discomfort concerning sexual violence or sexual behaviours. This concept builds on prior studies about young people's emotional awareness that something felt wrong, but they could not explicitly articulate it (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). Ahmed (2017) states that discomfort is rooted in bodily and sensory experiences of unease, difficulty, and a sense that something is wrong (p. 22).

In an editorial on sexual harassment, Klein (2019) highlights the significance of distinguishing between behaviours that cause discomfort and sexual harassment. This author critiques the lack of gradation of behaviours from feeling uncomfortable and sexual assault under the term sexual harassment, such as saying 'I'm uncomfortable' can be equated by some as 'You are harassing me'. It suggests that discomfort is a subjective experience that may be prompted even with no ill intent from the other person involved. Whilst Klein (2019) focuses on adult experiences, my study extends his argument by examining how young people use discomfort to articulate broader, often ambiguous, experiences.

In their qualitative research on young people in Australia (aged 12-20) and their views of safety, Moore and McArthur (2024) demonstrate that young people's safety concerns were often experienced as emotional and bodily responses to a person who made them feel concerned. Still, they were aware that their feelings were not often accurate indications of their safety. The participants stated that they needed adults' assistance in discerning the

seriousness of 'lesser concerns' such as someone making inappropriate comments or making them feel uncomfortable. However, many felt that adults were not inclined to take their concerns seriously if they communicated about their feelings rather than observable and provable behaviour. These findings support my claim that adultist expectations often conflict with young people's language and emotional cues, leading to misrecognition or dismissal.

Studies with survivors of child sexual abuse reveal that they had similar sentiments that something was 'not right' with their experience. Recollections of survivors indicate experiences of uncomfortable feelings that indicated to them that something was off, but they could not fully identify their experiences as abuse (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). Several studies report that young people's uncertainty about articulating their experiences was often magnified by not having the correct language or terms to name their experiences. Some examples include:

I don't know. Just something in my mind clicked and I was just like this doesn't seem normal and you never hear anybody talking about it, like, "Oh, I was with my dad," and it just didn't seem—*just didn't seem right* (St. George *et al*, 2020, p. 1043, emphasis mine)

Victims and survivors abused as very young children often described having *a sense that what was happening to them was "bad", but they did not know it was sexual abuse* (IICSA, 2022, p. 53, emphasis mine )

She described feeling *both 'uncomfortable'*... It was not until she read through the Everyone's Invited testimonies and saw a similar experience identified as 'harassment' that *she realised it 'wasn't right'* (Horeck *et a.l*, 2023, p. 9, emphasis mine)

Cause being five, you don't, you don't know these things, do you? You don't know what's happening to you, and erm, it finally clicked... When *it eventually clicked that something wasn't right*, I'd say, 'Oh, grandpa snores all the time. He keeps me awake at night'. Just to try and push him out more than anything. (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019, p. 20, emphasis mine)

These examples illustrate how discomfort often precedes recognition and naming of harm. While some scholars attribute this uncertainty to age, Cossar, Belderson and Brandon (2019) argue that macro-level factors, such as education, also play a role. My study builds on this point by claiming that young people's uncertainty is not merely a matter of vocabulary. Still, it reflects the impact of systems that constrain their ability to assess whether a situation is serious enough to disclose and whether they will be believed.

### **Normalisation and minimisation of harmful behaviours**

My study acknowledges that heteronormative discourses and expectations shape young people's views of sexual behaviours and activity. These include gendered heterosexual scripts that position men as initiators of sex and women as gatekeepers who must communicate their

affirmative consent or explicit refusal (Hlavka, 2014; Hirsch *et al.*, 2019; Setty, 2025b). Young people may accept violent behaviour as part of the gender order. In their review of studies on disclosure, Allnock and Kiff (2023) include insights on the normalisation of abuse in interpersonal dating relationships as barriers to disclosure and help-seeking. These findings support my study's claim that young people frequently struggle to identify abuse, particularly in relational contexts where gender and peer norms obscure harm.

Donovan, Butterby and Barnes (2023) claim that cis-heteronormative dynamics of power are not adequate in explaining how individuals with different intersectional identities are rendered more vulnerable to sexual violence. Whilst their study focuses on the experiences of LGBT+ adults, it offers a valuable lens for questioning the applicability of dominant gender narratives to young people's experiences of sexual violence.

In a qualitative study with Black and minoritised girls and young women (ages 17-21) in the UK on their experiences and meaning-making on sexual harassment, Sundaram *et al.* (2022) show how Black and minoritised girls and young women's experiences of sexual harassment intersected with several axes of inequality, including gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, and faith. Their experiences centred on their bodies differently from White adolescents, treating them as 'over-sexualised, desexualised, undesirable or unattractive, and exotic' (p. 38). Whilst my study did not involve Black and minoritised young people, it supports the need for an inclusive and intersectional approach which recognises how identity and context shape experiences of harm and exclusion.

Objectifying and harassing girls is one method of gender role reinforcement among boys to perpetuate gender inequality and justify beliefs of their social power (Bolduc, Martin-Storey and Paquette, 2023; Kruger *et al.*, 2023). Girls' sexual behaviour is regulated by using derogatory terms such as 'sluts' or 'whore' (Conroy, 2013). Boys may act to prove their masculinity amid pressures and gendered expectations associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). These include being assertive and aggressive in participating in these harassment practices (Skoog and Kapetanovic, 2023).

Students may perceive a 'hierarchy of harm', considering physical sexual violence as worthy of reporting, but other more common forms of 'low-level' everyday behaviours like sexist name-calling are supposed to be tolerated and endured (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019). A review of research shows that the more prevalent a form of HSB is, the less likely young people are to report it, since they have become desensitised to its pervasiveness (Kor, Simpson and Fabrianesi, 2023). This body of work underscores how gender norms contribute to the normalisation and minimisation of violence and abuse in young people's lives. These findings

are relevant to my study because the visibility of extreme forms of sexual violence can render everyday sexism and harassment invisible.

Young people refer to intent and impact in recognising the seriousness of violent and abusive behaviour (Edwards et al., 2022). Perceptions of the impact of actions may be reduced if they feel that the people involved were not 'hurt' by the behaviour. Hurt or harm may be validated with physical injury (Edwards et al., 2022; Hamby, 2019). Relatedly, in their study with 59 young people (aged 13-21) in England on barriers to disclosure, Allnock and Atkinson (2019) discuss how some of their participants felt that reporting would make them look foolish for making a big deal about someone hurting their feelings. The impact of the harmful behaviour may be minimised by dismissing the affected person's reaction as an overreaction and not knowing how to take a joke (Keddie, 2009; Barker-Clarke, 2023).

I maintain that these discourses reinforce gender stereotypes of humour and jokes as central aspects of masculine sociality and girls' emotions as trivial and irrational. My study explores young people's perspectives on the impact of the normalisation of these gender scripts in narrowing the room for validating the experiences of girls while diminishing the accountability of boys.

Results from the OFSTED (2021) study show that boys were much less likely to think that harmful sexual behaviour in schools affected them or their peers. Girls reported that sexual harassment (e.g. name-calling, sexual comments, and objectification) was a 'big deal'. At the same time, boys did not identify that it was happening in their schools or consider it an issue. Boys considered these as jokes or compliments (OFSTED, 2021).

Tender Education and Arts, a charity, report that the young men they spoke to could not see why 'low-level' behaviour like catcalling was unacceptable. They were unaware of how their behaviour affected girls or did not see anything wrong with their actions (Women and Equalities Committee, 2023). In their qualitative research with young people in Australia (aged 14-17) on school-based harassment, Shute, Owens and Slee (2008) states that boys in their study recognised that behaviours such as shouting sexual comments to girls could cause harm to them. They even anticipated the impact with statements such as 'you know they will take it to heart'. However, they continued to engage in these behaviours and did not express concern about the situation.

Humour as a masculine resource (Honkatukia *et al.*, 2023) aligns with normalised masculinity (Klein, 2006). They excuse their actions as just humour, obscuring deeper discussions on the impact of their actions and their accountability (Odenbring and Johansson, 2021; Romero-Sánchez, Megías and Carretero-Dios, 2021; Barker-Clarke, 2023; Honkatukia *et al.*, 2023). By engaging with mixed groups in my study, I build on this body of literature by examining

gendered differences in understanding impact, especially on everyday actions that may be framed as jokes or humour.

## **2.9 Recommendations on adults' responses to young people's sexual behaviours, perspectives and experiences related to sexual violence**

In this section, adults refer to those involved in young people's lives, such as parents, guardians, teachers, youth workers, community members, and professionals working with young people. It maintains that all adults in young people's lives have crucial roles in responding with sensitivity, respect, and empathy to their sexual behaviours and experiences related to sexual violence. Scholars acknowledge the worries and confusion, limited confidence to respond appropriately, and pre-existing beliefs of young people and their sexual behaviours that could affect adults' response (Setty and Hunt, 2023, 2025; CSA Centre, 2025). The recommendations below outline approaches and factors that they might consider in their reflections and responses.

McAlinden (2018) points out that one of the difficulties of the 'culture of confusion' is that adults have different ideas about what is considered normal or not normal sexual behaviours among young people, which differ from young people's views and experiences. My study supports this finding and argues that adults must continually reflect on what may be the 'new normal' for young people at any given time., especially with evolving technology, the impact of post-pandemic youth cultures, and new forms of harm.

Setty and Hunt (2023) state that there is a need to better understand young people's perspectives and lived experiences of the continuum of healthy and harmful sexual behaviours. This examination includes identifying which behaviours may be normalised or not identified as abusive. Additionally, a cultural lens in addressing sexual violence among young people enables exploration of 'when and why behaviour is not recognised and/ or responded to as harassment or abuse, both by young people and adults' (Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024, p. 439). This lens redefines incidents of sexual violence as micro-level manifestations of culture, such that young people's behaviours are affected by the social meanings and norms that shape expectations for their behaviours. The evidence in this body of work suggests that adults must engage young people in open dialogue about sexual behaviours, seeking to understand how they navigate the new norms.

The [CSA Centre \(2025\)](#) recommends continuous reflection and developing self-awareness on one's history, values, and beliefs related to children and young people, sex, sexual behaviours

and sexual abuse that may affect the response of adults working with children and young people. Beckett (2019) proposes that adults must challenge their unhelpful assumptions of young people's passivity and victimhood. She stresses that they need to convey to young people that they are not to blame for the harm they experienced and that it does not place them outside the scope of support. These studies collectively support my argument that challenging adultist norms requires continuous reflection and dialogue between adults and young people.

Drawing on their collective 20 years of academic and practice experience in RSE and facilitating challenging discussions, Emily Setty and Jonny Hunt (2025) launched a new project called Re-imagining RSE, a hub for evidence-informed advice, best practices, and the latest research in RSE. They propose the concept of 'safe uncertainty' as a dynamic, facilitative approach for navigating the nuances of RSE and learning to be comfortable in, or with, the 'grey' areas (Setty and Hunt, 2025a). They recommend that applying this concept entails 'creating space for open conversations, equipping teachers with the confidence and skills to hold uncertainty and to enable meaningful and sometimes challenging – conversations'. For instance, using this concept in digital intimacies involves working alongside young people and equipping them with skills to navigate digital spaces while enjoying their benefits (Setty, 2025a).

My study applies this concept by creating safe spaces for young people to explore the issues they face and for adults to reflect on their concerns. I support Setty and Hunt's (2025a) argument that adults do not need to have all the answers. Instead, they should resist the urge to provide definitive responses and focus on facilitating young people's reflection, articulation, and collaborative meaning-making. This approach strengthens my argument for centring young people's agency and promoting co-construction of knowledge with adults.

In a recently published guide on communicating with children and young people who have or may have been sexually abused, the CSA Centre (2025) states how people who work with children and young people may worry about how to communicate with them about sexual abuse. The guide underscores the importance of listening, empathy and honesty. My study adopts a similar stance that adults have a crucial role in supporting them to communicate in whichever way works for them.

Varied adult approaches are essential in helping young people navigate the 'culture of confusion'. My study applies shared principles from these approaches: openness to dialogue, recognition of complexity and ambiguity, and a commitment to supporting young people's critical thinking, reflection, and informed decision-making.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reinforces one of this study's central claims about the need for a young people-informed understanding of sexual violence. It demonstrates the relevance of the research question: How do young people understand sexual violence? The literature review illustrates that their perspectives have been largely overlooked and are missing in developing definitions in policies and practice.

The literature on constructions of childhood, 'ideal' victimhood, and legal definitions reflects a narrow view of sexual violence. Focusing on legal and illegal acts and what counts or does not count as sexual violence does not align with young people's lived experiences of complexity and fluidity. Ever-changing contexts like the interconnectedness of online and offline spaces contribute to their uncertainty in delineating acceptable or unacceptable behaviours, especially among peers. The chapter highlights the significance of adults' responses and guidance in supporting young people's agency in navigating these complexities.

# Chapter 3 Young people's agency and sexual violence prevention

## Introduction

The previous chapter established the paucity of research that incorporates young people's perspectives in conceptualising sexual violence. This chapter focuses on young people's agency. It starts by discussing theoretical perspectives on agency. It is followed by delving into how they exercise their agency in dealing with sexual violence through various actions. The following section will focus on the distinct role of schools as an institutional context that can expand young people's agency through whole-school approaches.

## 3.1 Theoretical perspectives of young people's agency

This section explores views of agency by discussing the debates on structure-agency, alternative frames, and how the exercise of agency might be more complicated when involving sexual violence and sexual behaviours.

Structural views of children and young people's agency portray their actions and lives as constrained by these social forces beyond their control (Alderson and Yoshida, 2016; Beckett, 2019). These views have been critiqued for being overly deterministic and framing individuals with no capacity to influence their lives (Beckett, 2019). These narrow accounts discount the fact that there may be exercises of agency at a micro-level, which may still result in a negative outcome or not change the status quo (Threadgold, Farrugia and Coffey, 2021). There may be instances when young people do not actively resist or seek to change the structure or its constraints, yet they exercise their agency by navigating spaces wherein they can still make choices (Alderson and Yoshida, 2016). This framing is relevant to my study, which explores how young people navigate constraints related to sexual violence, even when their actions do not align with adult expectations of resistance.

The individualistic view of agency has dominated the field of childhood studies (Esser et al., 2016). Several scholars who underscore the autonomy and capacity of children as independent social actors have adopted this theoretical standpoint. Agency is treated as a primordial and natural quality that all human beings possess and are waiting to be discovered inside children and young people (Esser, 2016; Raithelhuber, 2016).

These individualistic perspectives have been critiqued for focusing too much on the self-determination and will of individual actors and failing to identify externally determined limits to their exercise of agency (Beckett, 2019). My study aligns with these critiques of the individualist

perspective of agency. It highlights that agency must be understood in relation to intersecting factors such as age, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and ethnicity. Hemmings and Kabesh (2013) argue that the over-association of agency with choice reflects a Western perception of individuals and society and does not reflect the relational identities of young people from the Global South. This insight is significant to my study, which is grounded in my positionality as a researcher from the Global South. I draw from my knowledge of and experience with Filipino children and young people to inform my stance on a relational view of agency that connects with young people's relationships with their families, communities, and friends.

Nico and Caetano (2021) position young people outside the boxes of the two competing theories of individualisation and structuralisation. They are at the intersection of structuring social processes that shape their lives. Still, their subjectivity makes them competent reflexive social actors who can make their own meaning of their choices (Nico and Caetano, 2021). Relatedly, Threadgold, Farrugia and Coffey (2021) argue that agency and structure are not binary but part of a person who continually engages with both in the world. These authors claim that their agency is seen as mediated through everyday performances in young people. They may resist or contribute to the reproduction of society. These perspectives are salient to my study in examining how young people might navigate sexual violence in ways that are not overt yet still demonstrate their agency.

In her book chapter exploring the need to reframe young people's experiences of child sexual exploitation, mostly drawn from the UK context, Beckett (2019) draws from Giddens' structuration theory to position young people as reflexive, knowledgeable agents who can exert some degree of choice amid limited options and external constraints. This scholar argues that some individuals experience these constraints differently depending on their biographies and the context of opportunity and constraint where their lives are negotiated. Beckett's argument aligns with my study which explores how young people's reflections about sexual violence are informed by their lived experiences and view of constraints.

My study supports the arguments of these scholars who frame young people's agency beyond the structure-agency debates (Beckett, 2019; Nico and Caetano, 2021; Threadgold, Farrugia and Coffey, 2021). Similarly, my thesis emphasises young people's capacity to negotiate their choices and reflect on their possible actions amid evolving circumstances that could be highly constrained and externally influenced. My study builds on these scholars' work by applying these ideas to the topic of sexual violence where young people's agency may be understood differently.

Some scholars put forward the term 'ambiguous agency' to highlight how children and young people's agency is only acknowledged when they align with adults' expectations (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012; Edmonds, 2019). Young people's exercise of ambiguous agency is often viewed as problematic since it deviates from achieving the right kind of agency and from having the right kind of childhood (Edmonds, 2019). Cody, Bovarnick and Soares (2024) suggest recognising young people's varying exercise of agency within their specific social structures, contexts, and relationships, even when they differ from what adults believe is 'right' or 'best' for them. The concept of ambiguous agency is relevant to my study in reinforcing my claim about the differences between adults' expectations and young people's lived realities. It reiterates the need to validate young people's distinct ways of exercising their agency and not forcing them to conform to adults' expectations or beliefs.

Recognising young people's agency is specifically significant in relation to their sexuality and sexual behaviours, where they have the right to age-appropriate information to make informed decisions (McAlinden, 2018). It involves discussions on their rights and responsibilities as sexual citizens.

In his seminal work on sexual citizenship, Weeks (1998) explains this concept as claims of belonging and their participation in the rights and responsibilities of being a citizen, including both the intimate and sexual aspects. A key feature of this concept is its focus on expanding the boundaries of traditional citizenship by recognising the sexual rights of groups of people that have been typically excluded in discourses of sexuality and citizenship, like children and young people (Illes, 2012; Richardson, 2017; Aggleton *et al.*, 2019). For instance, in her conceptual paper on rethinking sexual citizenship, Richardson (2017) argues for extending spaces to include the experiences of LGBT+ people and individuals from the Global South. Meanwhile, Illes (2012) calls for recognising children and young people as sexual citizens and how this recognition can shape sex education in promoting their participation and reflections in the education process. These conceptual papers on sexual citizenship demonstrate the need to expand traditional views of children and young people as passive, asexual, and not yet adults nor citizens. My study supports these views that recognise them as sexual citizens with rights and responsibilities in deciding about their sexual behaviours.

Sexual citizenship can include navigating instances of problematic behaviours and prosocial behaviours (Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024). These authors suggest that supporting young people's sexual citizenship entails preventing violence and abuse and promoting positive sexual rights. Sexual citizenship, when applied to the education context, is a relevant concept in my study as an alternative frame to re-imagining policy responses, moving beyond punitive

sanctions to promoting young people's rights and agency in preventing harm and contributing to positive outcomes.

In their qualitative research with 91 young people (aged 13-18) in five European countries on their views on interpersonal violence and abuse, Aghtaie *et al.* (2018) view young people as agentic social actors who can resist or comply with gender norms and expectations related to violence and abuse. Young people's views can shift from acceptance towards rejection of abusive and violent behaviour. These authors consider the capacity of individuals to make choices towards their desired outcomes amid the social, cultural, economic, and political contexts they face. These findings are salient to my study, which also explores how young people negotiate with gender norms in their sense-making about sexual violence. My study differs from Aghtaie's *et al.* (2018) by using participatory workshops instead of interviews, which enabled young people to direct the discussions on aspects related to gender norms that were most relevant to them.

In her critique of 'victim feminism' logic, Vera-Gray (2017) asserts that recognising violence and abuse as a context does not undermine women's and girls' agency to act within it. This logic 'denies the fact that they are making decisions: that locating or situating their actions is incompatible with their ability to act... it contains a failure to recognise girls as complex agents' (p. 133). In my study, I apply Vera-Gray's argument to young people more broadly by highlighting their agency in responding to gender norms and navigating interpersonal and structural constraints.

Collectively, these studies help situate my thesis in framing young people as relational and reflexive agents whose decisions are shaped by relational and structural contexts. By drawing on concepts such as ambiguous agency, sexual citizenship, and critiques of victim logic, I highlight young people's capacity to negotiate gender norms and articulate their experiences in ways that might differ from adult expectations.

### **3.2 Young people's agency in dealing with sexual violence**

This section delves into the concepts of naming, disclosing, reporting, and help-seeking to capture the different actions that young people pursue when dealing with sexual violence.

#### **Identifying and naming sexual violence and harmful sexual behaviours**

Identifying behaviours and situations as violence and abuse involves the process of naming and labelling. Naming involves, 'making visible what was invisible, defining as unacceptable what was acceptable and insisting that what was naturalised is problematic, where names are not available, and even the existence of forms of sexual violence cannot be acknowledged' (Kelly, 1988, p. 139). Naming behaviours as violent or harmful contributes to recognising their

seriousness and unacceptability (Edwards et al., 2022). Labelling involves categorising the experience as an assault (Khan *et al.*, 2018). Naming, labelling, and identifying relate to whether the young person realises that their experience was related to sexual violence (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019).

These studies, mostly based in the UK and US settings, demonstrate that young people's sense-making and labelling of their experience is shaped by how they determine the seriousness and acceptability of the action. These insights are relevant to my study in demonstrating the complexities in young people's lived experiences and sense-making, given the changing boundaries of healthy and harmful sexual behaviours.

In their review of qualitative empirical literature on young people's constructions of gender norms (aged 10-25), Edwards et al (2022) find that the boundaries and nuances around sexual violence may lead to the misnaming or non-naming of some behaviours or actions as violence or harmful. This is relevant to my study which explores how contextual and structural factors like gender norms may influence how they identify their experience as harmful or problematic

As discussed in Chapter 2 on discomfort as a signal of uncertainty, young people spoke about an emotional awareness that something felt wrong. In a qualitative study with 30 young people (aged 13-17) from the UK on their perspectives in telling about abuse to services, several participants shared that it was difficult to articulate their experience due to limited vocabulary or awareness (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). These authors state that there was often a sense of uncertainty in determining if their experience was 'enough of a problem' to tell someone else about it. These findings are salient to my study, which also explores how young people communicate about their experiences. It builds on their research by focusing on discomfort and uncertainty as core constructs in the discussions and the analysis.

Studies have shown that individuals with experiences that meet the definition of sexual violence may not label it due to different reasons. They may deny their experience or want to forget it happened ( Khan *et al.*, 2018; Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). In a mixed-methods study with undergraduate students in the United States on the social risks of labelling and reporting sexual assault, Khan *et al.* (2018) report that young people's hesitance to label, tell, or report their experience as assault is influenced by the potential impact on their identity, the other person involved, and relationship implications for both. Respondents avoided labels of victimhood since it automatically positioned the other person as a perpetrator. It has implications for their relationship and the broader perception of the label on the other person. While Khan et al's (2018) study involved young adults, its findings have implications for my study in examining young people's perceptions of the label of victim and perpetrator on the people involved. These insights demonstrate the limitations of the victim-perpetrator binary.

My study critiques the limited representation of young people's perspectives in identifying behaviours and situations associated with sexual violence. Studies on sexual violence and harassment conducted in the US setting are often quantitative and concerned with establishing the prevalence and identifying risk factors, characteristics, and correlates of sexual victimisation among young people. (Ngo *et al.*, 2018; Livingston *et al.*, 2023). Prevalence studies based on quantitative surveys ask 'whether and how many times non-consensual sexual touching or sexual behaviour has occurred' (Donovan, Butterby and Barnes, 2023, p. 154). While prevalence studies are useful for policy and programme development, statistics may not capture the nuances in young people's lived realities. My study aims to complement these quantitative studies by presenting young people's perspectives emanating from a participatory approach that validates their language and terms instead of pre-determined concepts.

Traditional self-report measures usually do not allow young people to discuss their experiences in their language (Khanolainen, Semenova and Magnuson, 2021). These instances may then hinder researchers from encapsulating the complete and authentic narratives of the respondents. My study claims that pre-defined nature of these lists does not align with the fluidity, complexity, and diversity of young people's experiences of these ambiguous behaviours. It reiterates the need for research that identifies behaviours grounded in young people's perspectives as valuable in developing sexual violence prevention interventions.

A few studies have explored young people's language in describing the behaviours and situations in their own terms. In their research on domestic violence among college students, Linder *et al.* (2024) find that they did not identify their experiences as domestic violence since the language they used to describe their experiences differed from the terms in policy and educational materials. Using overly legalistic language contributed to young people's confusion in identifying their experiences, which may not align with the descriptions of this type of language. Similarly, in Sweeting *et al.*'s (2022) mixed-methods study with Scottish adolescents (aged 13-17) on sexual harassment in schools, their participants used different terms to label behaviours when researchers did not explicitly provide the term sexual harassment. Among their participants, boys and girls had different perspectives on which behaviours count as sexual harassment. Girls were more likely to define more ambiguous situations as sexual harassment or unacceptable (Sweeting *et al.*, 2022). These findings are relevant to my study that involves mixed-gender groups and exploring gendered differences in their sense-making.

The methodological approaches followed by both studies allowed the young people to identify the behaviours using their language and did not constrain them with the pre-defined concepts of sexual harassment and domestic violence (Sweeting *et al.*, 2022; Linder *et al.*, 2024). My study builds on these approaches by enabling young people to name and identify sexual violence and sexual behaviours in their language instead of directing them to fit their experiences into pre-determined constructs.

### **Disclosure, reporting and help-seeking**

Telling involves communicating the experience to someone (Khan *et al.*, 2018). Scholars have discussed the definitional issues of the term disclosure (Alaggia, 2004). Some used the term telling and distinguished it from reporting, which involves communicating to someone with a position and responsibility to investigate or act (Alaggia, 2004; Khan *et al.*, 2018). These distinctions are helpful in my study in validating young people's decisions to speak about their experience to other people and the actions they want to be taken after.

Prior studies reveal that young people face constraints and opportunities in decision-making, wherein they have varying senses of control and choice. For instance, other people report instead of the person involved or pressure them into taking actions they do not want for themselves (Khan *et al.*, 2018; Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). These authors frame children and young people as strategic individuals who consciously weigh the likely costs and benefits of disclosing. Young people considered the social risks of telling, disclosing and reporting that affect their identities and other people involved (Khan *et al.*, 2018; Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). Disclosure is an ongoing process involving positive and negative loops, such that children and young people will make different decisions depending on the responses they receive over time (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). My study builds on these insights by examining how young people consider relational factors such as the potential impact on their relationships with other people, when deciding to tell or not tell someone else about their experience.

Indirect and non-verbal indicators could be complex for adults to identify related to violence and abuse. For instance, a qualitative study with adult survivors of child sexual abuse on disclosure in Canada included participants' reflections that they used non-verbal behaviour and actions to indicate something was amiss when they were children (Alaggia, 2004). Similarly, the Independent Inquiry on Institutional CSA report shows how survivors recalled that as children, they used behaviours such as acting out for adults to notice that something was not right (IICSA, 2022). Meanwhile, another study with adolescents suggest that these

behaviours were manifestations of the impact of their experience (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019).

These insights, drawn from retrospective accounts of adult survivors and reflections of adolescents, demonstrate the different ways that children and young people communicate in ways that might be missed or misinterpreted by adults. This reinforces the need for research that centres young people's communicative strategies.

In their practical guide for professionals to build their confidence in speaking with children about child sexual abuse, CSA Centre (2025) discusses how signs of sexual abuse and violence may be overlooked or misinterpreted by professionals due to young people's intersecting identities. For instance, behaving in a sexually inappropriate manner should be seen as a concern for any child. However, Black children and young people may be perceived as more adult-like than their White peers and can downplay potential signs of abuse. Disabled and neurodivergent children and young people may display challenging behaviour, but professionals should consider if they are communicating distress. Perceptions of greater sexual risk-taking among LGBTQ+ young people may lead professionals to 'normalise' their abuse. Young people's actions or behaviours may be their attempt to 'tell'. However, stereotypical representations, impressions of certain young people or judgments about ethnicity, disability, sex/gender, and sexuality may lead some professionals to misinterpret their behaviours and hinder an adequate response (CSA Centre, 2025).

Some authors claim that adults with relationships of trust and ongoing communication with young people would be more sensitive to these changes and indirect signals (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). Young people felt that adults must take a proactive and preventive stance: 'watching out, noticing and asking children and young people whether they had worries rather than waiting for them to raise them' (Moore & McArthur, 2024, p. 5). My study supports these findings and advocates for enhanced adult responsiveness, entailing capacity-building and reflective dialogues. These approaches would enable adults to be more attuned to when children and young people feel unsafe or uncomfortable, and to respond appropriately.

Several scholars adopt the socio-ecological framework to explore the interrelatedness of the individual, relational, and institutional factors in young people's experiences related to disclosing, reporting, or help-seeking (Khan *et al.*, 2018; Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). Khan *et al.* (2018) emphasise that young people's agency in engaging in these processes has relational and institutional dimensions. My study applies the socio-ecological framework to understand how young people's decisions are shaped by their relationships and institutional settings.

The relational aspect considers how relationships shape the available actions. These include the young person's relationship with the person who harmed them, the response they received or expect from their friends and family, and their perception of the impact of telling others about their experience on their social relationships (Alaggia, 2004; Khan *et al.*, 2018). These studies, based in Canada and the US, involving young people and young adults, highlight how relational dynamics influence disclosure in different geographical settings. The likelihood of telling someone about experiences of violence and abuse depends on how the person behaves towards them generally. This includes whether they have a trusting and reliable relationship with that person and whether they feel they will be believed (CSA Centre, 2025). The CSA Centre (2025) stresses that adults and professionals are crucial in supporting the young person to tell. Telling is a process that allows children and young people to communicate in different ways. Adults must support them in communicating in the way that works best for them. These findings are salient to my study on highlighting the significance and impact of trusting relationships in facilitating young people's communication process about their experiences.

The institutional aspect involves the young person's beliefs and knowledge about reporting and the experiences of those who disclosed and reported. Cultural factors at the structural level influence young people's ability and willingness to seek help or disclose (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019). The design of the child protection system and legal requirements also shape professionals' responses to disclosure and reporting. These include how they manage the young person's need for control, choice, and confidentiality (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). These findings underscore the tension between institutional requirements and young people's relational needs. My study builds on these studies by examining how young people perceive their schools' responses to sexual violence and their practical recommendations.

An extensive body of research on barriers to disclosing, reporting and help-seeking finds similar themes on expectations of disbelief and fears of shame and blaming (Schönbucher *et al.*, 2012; Allnock and Miller, 2013; Ofsted, 2021; Allnock and Kiff, 2023; CSA Centre, 2025). These barriers may be magnified by overlapping, concurrent forms of oppression such as the young person's ethnicity, language, culture and religion, disability, and/or sexual orientation (CSA Centre, 2025). This author states that feelings of guilt, shame, a sense of responsibility, worry, and confusion are deepened when they consider how telling might affect their view of their identity or their relationships and communities.

Conversely, factors such as expectations of trust, validation, and support shaped their decision to tell someone else (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019). They consider their experience

of telling someone about sexual violence as positive if they were believed, action was taken to protect them, and they received emotional support (CSA Centre, 2025).

Collectively, these studies stress the emotional aspect of disclosure that impacts young people differently depending on their social position and identities. These are relevant to my research in examining the affective dimensions of their sense-making about sexual violence and their agency.

This section demonstrates the interconnections between relational, institutional and affective dimensions in young people's decisions to tell others about their experiences. My study builds on extant research by foregrounding young people's language and validating their diverse communication cues and processes.

### **Prosocial behaviours and collective action**

In an arts-based participatory project *Imagining Resistance* with 14 young people in England who had experience of sexual violence, Warrington, Langhoff and Warnock (2024) explore the concept of resistance as both explicit acts of defiance and everyday acts. In their study, resistance is understood by young people affected by sexual violence as 'do not tolerate or acquiesce with sources of adversity or harm, and thus aim to neither accommodate nor sustain that harm' (p. 2).

Resistance is a relevant concept in my study, which explores how young people do not passively accept norms and exercise their agency in challenging them. This framing supports my study's claim that young people's resistance can be relational or emotional and not always overt.

Prosocial behaviour represents young people's exercise of agency in resisting and challenging harmful norms and behaviours (Banyard *et al.*, 2022). Bystander intervention is a form of prosocial behaviour. Young people, as potential third parties witnessing another young person at risk of sexual violence or harmful sexual behaviours, can interrupt, distract, diffuse, or seek help for them (Banyard, Waterman and Edwards, 2021). These scholars state that they can also be proactive by modelling social norms about respect and healthy relationships, even with no immediate risk of violence (Banyard, Waterman and Edwards, 2021).

These studies, primarily with young people from the United States, represent one type of prosocial behaviour. My study focuses on prosocial behaviour broadly instead of bystander intervention to validate young people's different actions, including emotional support and care, which may not be represented in traditional bystander frameworks.

The concept of 'space for action' was first used in the field of domestic abuse to describe the ways that coercively controlling behaviour of a perpetrator can limit the victim-survivor's autonomy (Kelly, 2003). The young people in Donovan *et al.*'s (2023) study demonstrated how they resisted limits to their space for action even when the gendered regime of their schools constrained them.

In the context of domestic abuse, Donovan and Barnes (2020) propose the concept of the potential of 'space for reaction' to disrupt the dynamics of coercive control while providing spaces for help-seeking. It acknowledges that their exercise of agency is not always 'successful' as influenced by intersecting identities and structural violence. The space for reaction can reflect resistance and agency by not giving in to gendered rules, forcing conformity and promoting empowerment (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). These concepts are useful in my study to highlight how young people navigate gendered constraints and potential relational consequences when exercising their agency.

Young people use digital technology as a space for resistance in challenging control and coercion of their partners, such as blocking them, changing their passwords or avoiding surveillance (Aghtaie *et al.*, 2018; Barker-Clarke, 2023). These examples show how these expressions of agency are constrained by the gendered habitus that naturalises impending male sexual violence. It also demonstrates their agency in making an escalation calculation to evaluate the safest course of action (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020).

In a participatory study with adolescent girls (aged 13-15) in New Zealand on navigating cyberbullying and receiving nudes, the participants recall how they navigated their safety options by choosing to block instead of reporting (Barker-Clarke, 2023). For these girls, reporting could increase the risk of confrontation if the male peer-sender lost access to his account and suspected who had made the complaint. Meanwhile, in qualitative research with 21 seventh graders (mean age: 13 years old) in the United States who identified as Black or African American, some girls recall being assertive when objecting to sexual harassment. Still, they noted the potential risks and fears if the perpetrator retaliates or escalates the situation (Kruger *et al.*, 2023). These studies highlight the relational factors that young people consider when resisting the problematic behaviours of their peers. They demonstrate how young people's resistance and agency is influenced by relational reflections and intersecting identities. My study builds on this body of literature by presenting the distinct views of British young people whose experiences may be influenced by different cultural and geographical contexts compared to New Zealand and the United States.

These examples show how these expressions of agency are constrained by the gendered habitus that naturalises impending male sexual violence. It also demonstrates their agency in

making an escalation calculation to evaluate the safest course of action (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). These insights are relevant to my study in unpacking how gender norms intersect with relational norms in young people's peer groups that shape how they resist or challenge problematic behaviours

While some studies suggest that girls and young women may adopt a masculine frame as a form of resistance, this framing risks reinforcing binary gender norms and oversimplifying their complex negotiations of gendered power. On one hand, it promotes their collective resistance against sexual harassment by exhibiting a tough attitude (Odenbring and Johansson, 2021; Walker, 2022; Honkatukia *et al.*, 2023). However, equating these behaviours with masculinity may reinforce binary gender norms and overlooks the reflexive decisions that girls and young women make within constrained heteronormative environments like schools (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). Some might resort to physically or verbally aggressive behaviour to promote their safety, thinking that this would be the best option for them. My study questions Walker's (2022) claim that these actions equate to a performance of masculinity instead of recognising these as strategic responses in institutional education environments constrained by heteronormative gender norms.

These 'so-called' tough attitudes demonstrate shifts in the meaning of 'self-defence'. Instead of just defending against individual actions, it broadens to defence against the weight of gendered norms that position women and girls as weak, unreliable, and unsafe (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). This insight is significant in my study where some young people identified protecting themselves as a priority issue. It calls for a redefinition of resistance as an individual act of defence to considering collective resistance and solidarity against harmful norms. This view contrasts with studies that highlight masculine-coded behaviours that may inadvertently lead to complicity in gendered harm by highlighting a strengths-based approach of girls and young women drawing empowerment from one another.

My study asserts that young people's helping actions and agency should not be constrained to bystander interventions. Friends could help in identifying problematic or harmful experiences and can help the person involved understand that their situation may be abusive or violent (Allnock, 2015). They can support by confronting the offending individual on their behalf (Barker-Clarke, 2023; Honkatukia *et al.*, 2023), facilitating their disclosure (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019), or collective solidarity in challenging the behaviour as unacceptable (Shute, Owens and Slee, 2008; Aghtaie *et al.*, 2018). My study extends this body of work by exploring how young people exercise their agency in solidarity with others and the values that shape their actions.

Friends can be a significant source of post-disclosure support to young people following an experience of violence and abuse by offering emotional support, relaxation, solidarity, and facilitating access to professional support (Allnock, 2015; Warrington *et al.*, 2023). Sustaining connections with friends with similar experiences can help them feel understood and counter feelings of shame, self-blame, and isolation (Warrington *et al.*, 2023).

A growing body of research with young people, particularly those with lived experiences of sexual violence, demonstrates their strong interest, passion, and commitment to sexual violence prevention (see [Hamilton \*et al.\*, 2019](#); [Warrington, 2021](#); [Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024](#); [Warrington \*et al.\*, 2024](#)). They valued their vital role in informing prevention policy and programmes and promoting solidarity with other young people (Cody, 2017; Hamilton *et al.*, 2019; Warrington *et al.*, 2024). Some young people participated in local, national and international platforms to influence actions on sexual violence, such as World Congresses and UN Special Sessions, and participatory action planning (Feinstein and O'Kane, 2009; Rabe, 2024). These actions represent collective participation, wherein young people in a group work together to influence change ([Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024](#)).

Young people are framed as proactive agents who can transform conditions where sexual violence occurs (Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024). However, despite the increasing opportunities to participate, many young people lamented that they were involved in a tokenistic manner ([Feinstein and O'Kane, 2009](#)). They wanted adults' recognition and respect as partners in addressing sexual violence (Feinstein and O'Kane, 2009; Cody, 2017). My study builds on the insights of this growing body of work by highlighting the significance of facilitating young people's meaningful involvement in sexual violence prevention and collective action.

This section highlights how young people in different geographical settings and with intersecting identities exercise agency through prosocial behaviours in constrained and heteronormative environments. My study challenges binary framings of masculine-coded and feminine-coded actions and instead recognises young people's reflexive responses grounded in relational practices of care and solidarity.

### **3.3 Policy guidance on sexual violence in UK schools**

#### **Relationship and sex education (RSE) policy**

In 2019, Relationships Education was made compulsory in all primary schools and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) compulsory in all secondary schools in England through the Relationships Education, Relationships and Sex Education and Health Education (England) Regulations 2019 ([DfE, 2019](#)). RSE aims to support young people to 'develop resilience, to know how and when to ask for help, and to know where to access support' ([p.](#)

8). The updated guidance includes sections on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues in compliance with the Equality Act. It states that 'Schools should be alive to issues such as everyday sexism, misogyny, homophobia and gender stereotypes and take positive action to build a culture where these are not tolerated, and any occurrences are identified and tackled (p. 14). While this inclusion can be considered as progress, the guidance seems to be shaped by dominant heteronormative norms about relationships and sexual behaviours.

It includes the suggested topics to be covered at the primary and secondary levels. Schools are free to determine how they will deliver the content in the guidance. RSE guidance at the secondary level outlines the content that supports students in distinguishing between healthy, unhealthy, and harmful relationships, aspects of the law related to sex and content, and harmful behaviours online. These include knowledge on harmful behaviours: 'that some types of behaviour within relationships are criminal, including violent behaviour and coercive control'; 'what constitutes sexual harassment and sexual violence and why these are always unacceptable'; the concepts of, and laws relating to, sexual consent, sexual exploitation, abuse, grooming, coercion, harassment, rape, domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence and FGM, and how these can affect current and future relationships (DfE, 2019, p. 28-29). My study questions the limitation of this framing, which emphasises legal definitions and behaviour management, overlooking the relational and emotional aspects of young people's experiences.

The guidance also includes skills-based topics such as 'how people can actively communicate and recognise consent from others, including sexual consent, and how and when consent can be withdrawn (in all contexts, including online)' and 'that there is a range of strategies for identifying and managing sexual pressure, including understanding peer pressure, resisting pressure and not pressurising others' (p. 29). These recommended topics show how the guidance seeks to equip young people with the knowledge and competencies related to sexual violence. In the Women and Equalities Committee sessions, Professor Nicky Stanley stated that the statutory guidance 'did not address sufficiently the fact that some children and young people might be using controlling and abusive behaviour themselves' (Women and Equalities Committee, 2023, p. 20)

Setty and Dobson (2023) claim that upholding the law is 'the most immediate and obvious underlying principle of the guidance' (p. 83), evidenced in a page dedicated to how teachers can apply a legal focus in teaching the content. These scholars contend that the framing of topics is legalistic, focusing on learning outcomes of learning the law related to sexual consent, rape and violence. However, they note that 'there is no discussion of the realities of and obstacles to implementing these techniques or acting in line with legal understandings in lived

contexts' (p. 85). The analysis in their study underscores how the guidance contains explicit and implicit heteronormativity, takes a risk-averse and harm-reduction approach to young people's social development, and legalistic and decontextualised notions of reciprocal rights to sexual health and well-being. The emphasis on legality reminds young people that they can be protected and punished by the law. The focus on the legal aspects of RSE obscures the broader experiences and sexual behaviours of young people that do not align with sexual offences as identified in the law (Setty and Dobson, 2023). This framing is inadequate in supporting young people whose experiences may not fit into legal categories or who do not identify within binary gender norms. My study supports Setty and Dobson's (2023) argument in the emphasis on the legal aspects in current RSE policy. It builds on their work by examining how this framing may influence young people's sense-making of sexual violence.

### **Keeping Children Safe in Education (KCSIE) guidance**

KCSIE promoted a whole-school approach to safeguarding:

Systems should be in place, and they should be well promoted, easily understood and easily accessible for children to report confidently any form of abuse or neglect, knowing their concerns will be treated seriously, and knowing they can safely express their views and give feedback (p.29)

This statement reflects the need for validating young people's views, but it remains to be seen how this applied in practice which my study contributes by presenting young people's perspectives. The 2024 policy document provides schools with guidance on dealing with safeguarding concerns involving adults working in schools. These concerns are divided into two levels: those that may meet the harm threshold and those that do not, named low-level concerns (DfE, 2024).

At the second level, KCSIE guidance clarified that a 'low-level' concern could be any concern causing a sense of unease about an adult and includes behaviour on a wide spectrum, such as inadvertent behaviour that may look inappropriate but might not, ultimately be intended to enable abuse (DfE, 2024 p. 108). Recognising low-level concerns seeks to create a culture of openness and transparency while protecting those who might become subject to potential false low-level concerns or misunderstandings. Schools are encouraged to develop their policy on low-level concerns. School staff want to be confident in distinguishing these from inappropriate, problematic, or concerning behaviours. Their policy should also handle and respond to concerns sensitively and proportionately when raised (DfE, 2024). This guidance is aimed at school staff, but it does not include guidance on involving young people in co-developing policies to report low-level concerns.

KCSIE includes guidance on responding to child-on-child sexual violence and harassment (DfE, 2024). It states that when considering harmful sexual behaviours (HSB), young people's ages and stages of development are critical factors. Sexual behaviour between young people can be considered harmful if one of them is much older. Still, the guidance stated that 'a younger child can abuse an older child, particularly if they have power over them, for example, if the older child is disabled or smaller in stature' (DfE, 2024, p. 115). This section reflects a change in terminology since 2022 that changed the term from peer-on-peer abuse to child-on-child abuse. The former term suggests that abuse is between children of a similar age or power, which is not always the case (Safeguarding Network, 2022). This shift in terms is significant in acknowledging power imbalances that might not be reflected in age differences.

In this review of the terms used in the KCSIE in part five, child-on-child sexual violence and harassment, the most frequently used terms in the guidance are sexual violence and sexual harassment when referring to the actions taken concerning the 'victim' and the 'alleged perpetrator/s'. The term 'harmful sexual behaviour' was used only in the definition of terms and the section 'safeguarding and supporting the alleged perpetrator(s) and children and young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour' (DfE, 2024, p. 138).

The emphasis in framing the young person who committed the harm or displayed harmful sexual behaviour as an 'alleged perpetrator' implies a legalistic view. It can imply that upholding the law is one of the immediate underlying principles of the guidance (Setty and Dobson, 2023). KCSIE still used the terms 'victim and perpetrator' to refer to the young people involved, despite proposals from child-focused organisations like the Lucy Faithfull Foundation and Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse to use instead the terminology of 'children who may have been harmed' and 'children who may have harmed' (Safeguarding Network, 2022). These terms acknowledge the fluidity of young people's identities and experiences and reduce the stigma associated with terms such as perpetrators when referring to young people. My study supports these proposals and highlights how language shapes how young people understand sexual violence.

KCSIE guidance outlined important considerations in responding to reports of child-on-child sexual violence and harassment, such as how to support and protect the young person who may have been harmed and the young person who may have caused harm (DfE, 2024). The young person who may have been harmed must feel in control of the process, be assured that their report is taken seriously, and receive medical and emotional care. The school must maintain a delicate balance of safeguarding the student who may have been harmed and the

wider student body while continuing to educate the young person who may have caused harm (DfE, 2024). Additionally, the latter may have unmet needs that the school should support. Hackett *et al.*'s (2013) study reported that two-thirds of the children and young people referred for HSB have experienced some form of abuse or trauma. This finding stresses the need for trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate responses that do not just focus on sanctions.

My study asserts that including guidance on low-level concerns is helpful in delineating schools' safeguarding responses based on the risk of harm by adults. Current guidance is focused on developing the adult staff's capacity to identify appropriate and inappropriate behaviour and respond to concerns when raised. However, there appears to be no indication of policies addressing 'low-level' concerns involving young people when they might inadvertently cause unease or engage in inappropriate behaviour. This gap places the responsibility on students to determine whether their peers' behaviour meets the threshold for reporting and can discourage disclosure and help-seeking. It highlights the need for clearer guidance that is attuned to the relational and emotional complexities in young people's lives. My study explores the impact of current safeguarding policy on young people's experiences of and perceptions of sexual violence in education settings.

This policy review demonstrates how the RSE and KCSIE guidance are shaped by legalistic and binary framings, which do not align with young people's ambiguous experiences. My study builds on existing critiques by examining how policy framing may shape young people's sense-making of sexual violence and their decision-making to disclose or report in school settings.

### **3.4 A whole-school approach to addressing sexual violence**

#### **Implications of school cultures and responses to young people's disclosure, help-seeking, and reporting**

School cultures, policies, and peer cultures shape young people's attitudes towards disclosing and reporting, especially on everyday behaviours related to sexual violence (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). Recurring themes and narratives from the young people in Ofsted (2021) review include the reluctance to challenge or report their experiences and their seeming resignation to sexual violence and harassment as 'a normal experience'. Poor institutional responses deepen the adverse impacts on them due to cultures of dismissal and denial. School staff and leaders may underestimate the scale of the problems and not consider them as 'significant problems'. These include school staff not taking students' reports seriously and dismissing sexual harassment as 'banter' (Ofsted, 2021). These insights are salient in my

study to demonstrate the impact of adult attitudes and systems on young people's perception of trust and reliability of school systems. I interpret the impact of these institutional cultures as silencing young people and reinforcing adult views that determine which behaviours are considered valid.

In a qualitative study with staff and students in secondary schools in England on preventing harmful sexual behaviours, Firmin (2020) states that even when young people report their experiences, the insufficient or lack of action on their reports leads to future non-reporting due to their feelings of inevitability or futility. Similarly, in a study with 59 young people (aged 13-21) and 58 educational staff from local authorities in England, the youth participants recall that they felt that the education staff in their schools did not handle their reports sensitively, putting them at social risk of being labelled as snitches (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019). Young people in Allnock and Atkinson's (2019) study and the OFSTED (2021) report felt that once they disclose or report, adults, like the school staff, will decide on their behalf, and they have little say on the next steps in the process.

These findings highlight similar themes of young people's disappointment with school actions. In my view, this disappointment highlights the limitations of current policy in helping school staff understand students' emotional and relational considerations after disclosure or reporting. My study builds on this England-based body of work by showing how young people in Northeast England perceive their schools' responses and their practical recommendations to address their perceived issues. It extends the work of these previous scholars by highlighting young people's roles in identifying problems and co-developing potential solutions. These findings demonstrate the tension between young people's relational concerns and schools' institutional protocols. These are relevant to my study to situate young people's perspectives within systematic constraints and opportunities for change.

Schools have safeguarding responsibilities to notify other concerned stakeholders, like parents, police, or social care, depending on the severity of the situation. Some young people expressed that they feared other students being made aware via gossip, school assemblies, or being pulled out of lessons in front of others (OFSTED, 2021). They view some safeguarding procedures as inflexible and serve as barriers to disclosing or reporting experiences of sexual violence (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019).

### **Principles and components of whole-school approaches (WSA) to addressing sexual violence**

Along with recognising that schools can be part of the problem of perpetuating harmful gendered norms, it is equally crucial to consider the significance of engaging school staff and leaders as part of the solution to addressing sexual violence (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). School

staff should set a precedent and example in challenging harmful gender norms and behaviour, and promoting positive gender transformative norms (Walker, 2022). They are responsible for changing social conditions that facilitate harmful sexual behaviour. These include responding to incidents that are perceived to be meaningful by young people and promoting environments that support rather than shame them (Lloyd, 2020). Changing school cultures that may influence harmful gendered norms include promoting healthy and positive relationships, gender equality, addressing drivers of harmful sexual behaviours and a whole-school approach (Bragg *et al.*, 2022; Donovan *et al.*, 2023; Lloyd and Walker, 2023; Renold *et al.*, 2023).

Evidence from prior research highlights the value of whole-school approaches (WSA) in addressing sexual violence and harassment in schools (Meiksin *et al.*, 2020; Bragg *et al.*, 2022; Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024). Ofsted (2021) recommends that schools follow a whole-school approach in responding to sexual violence. Setty and Hunt (2023) claim that WSA is about relationship-based practice rather than behaviour management. It entails modelling positive behaviours within the school, such as adult interactions with young people and among themselves. It involves bringing young people and adults together to address sexual violence in school. It means working together to identify problems, develop solutions, and reflect on biases and beliefs related to sexual violence (Setty and Hunt, 2023). My study supports these findings that highlight the value of relationship-based practice and intergenerational collaboration in promoting safety within schools.

Several scholars identified essential components of effective whole-school approaches. Maxwell and Aggleton (2014) point out three areas for intervention: action at the institutional and policy levels, work involving school staff, and support programmes for young people. The combined efforts from these three areas help develop a school culture that promotes equality and challenges violence. Ofsted (2021) recommends including measures to reinforce cultures that do not tolerate sexual violence. These recommendations resonate with my study, which applies the socio-ecological approach in understanding the linkages between individual, relational and institutional factors in preventing sexual violence.

Setty and Hunt (2023) propose that the core principles underpinning effective practice in implementing WSA include: inclusivity; trauma-informed, rights-based, intersectional; flexibility; centring social justice; giving young people agency and voice; using innovative, creative, and small group models of delivery; self-assessing and evolving regularly (p. 26). End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023) recommends that whole-school approaches should address intersecting forms of inequality and marginalisation related to racism,

homophobia, and classism, as young people with minoritised identities experience sexual violence differently. My study builds on these studies by foregrounding young people's perspectives on the values and principles that they envision for their schools' responses to sexual violence.

Some schools are under strain to deliver a whole-school approach, which can undermine its implementation (Meiksin *et al.*, 2020). Bragg *et al.* (2022) highlight the contextual factors that may influence how schools implement WSA. In England, schools face increasing pressure due to school inspections focused on grades and core curriculum, high-stakes testing, and school league tables (Meiksin *et al.*, 2020; Bragg *et al.*, 2022; Lloyd and Walker, 2023). For instance, one of the schools participating in Bragg *et al.*'s. (2022) study received a 'required improvement' verdict from Ofsted, the school's inspectorate. This inspection status resulted in changes to the senior leadership team and consequent delays and sidelining of their whole-school RSE programme. These examples illustrate how institutional priorities may conflict with relationship and welfare-based approaches, with the additional pressure of inspections and school rankings. My study builds on these findings by presenting young people's perspectives of their schools' priorities and the impact on their understanding of sexual violence.

Studies report that on schools have successfully implemented whole-school approaches. Bragg *et al.* (2022) state that some schools integrated the elements into existing systems and processes, such as including student-led campaigns as part of drama lessons. The students and school staff noticed how the elements worked together with consistent messaging in their RSE classes, student assemblies, and school health promotion council. Meanwhile, Maxwell and Aggleton (2014) discuss a whole school approach focusing on respect by modelling respectful behaviours between staff and students, a school policy on respect specifically mentioning gender, and supporting student-led initiatives such as peer mentoring and campaigns. These two examples show the potential of a whole-school approach that reinforces lessons within the classroom, even in other parts of the school system (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2014; Bragg *et al.*, 2022).

### **Developing school staff's capacity in RSE and responding to sexual violence in schools**

Training and support for school staff are crucial components of whole-school approaches (End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2023a). Studies report variations in the preparedness and comfort of some teachers when delivering lessons amid perceived inadequate training and support (Meiksin *et al.*, 2020; Bragg *et al.*, 2022; End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2023a). Staff may take on RSE roles due to personal values and interests, but may still lack specialist training or senior leadership for their work (Bragg *et al.*, 2022). Some teachers

acknowledged that they were uncomfortable discussing challenging topics or lacked the skills and experience to use participatory learning methods (Meiksin *et al.*, 2020). Organisations like the Sex Education Forum and SafeLives recommend improved resources to support teacher training, including practical teaching strategies (End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2023a). These findings highlight the impact of systematic constraints that affect education staff's confidence in teaching RSE.

These examples show how external and structural factors could constrain school staff who may be eager to support whole-school initiatives. These include how schools face challenges in delivering additional components to young people's education experience, but these are not identified or do not relate to official indicators of school success based on inspection frameworks (Bragg *et al.*, 2022). These authors note how this situation has spillover effects on some school leaders and teachers, seeing RSE, pastoral work and student engagement as marginal to academic roles and outcomes. I consider this marginalised view of some schools on pastoral work and student engagement as incongruent with the relational needs of students. My study offers a contrasting perspective by showing the young people's perspectives on their education experience beyond academic outcomes.

Effective RSE for sexual violence prevention entails promoting safe spaces to learn with teachers who are sensitive and confident (Cense, Grauw and Vermeulen, 2020). Some young people expressed varied views on what safe spaces meant for them, especially in terms of sharing personal stories and experiences (Cense, Grauw and Vermeulen, 2020; Economics, 2024). These studies suggest that teachers must be aware of the social dynamics outside the classroom and the risks of asking young people to discuss their experiences, such as bullying or teasing from their peers. They recommend providing different participation options, such as asking questions anonymously or working in small groups, to enhance safety. A whole-school approach involving RSE must include skill development for educators since they have a crucial role in creating safe spaces, ensuring everyone is treated fairly, managing discussions safely while demonstrating active listening, critical self-reflection, openness, and sensitivity (Setty, 2022). My study supports these findings by exploring the relational and emotional aspects that young people value in their engagement with education staff especially related to sexual violence.

Ofsted (2021) reports that school leaders and staff need to make difficult decisions about sexual violence, but the current guidance may not equip them. For instance, some school leaders are unsure how to proceed when a criminal investigation does not lead to prosecution or conviction. Additionally, the guidance does not clearly differentiate between different types of behaviour or reflect young people's language (Ofsted, 2021). I use these views to situate

the young people's perspectives within broader institutional systems wherein staff also contend with uncertainties and limited knowledge. It reflects recurring institutional limitations focused on legalistic thresholds that provide limited guidance and support to students and staff in dealing with experiences that do not meet legal definitions.

Lloyd and Bradbury (2023) maintain that 'understanding factors such as consent, developmental appropriateness, power, and coercion can be extremely complex without support and training, and within a context where abusive forms of HSB have been normalised' (p. 2). Additionally, these authors argue that relying on systems that are designed to respond to adult-perpetrated harm can be complex when applied to young people. Applying the binary of victim/perpetrator might obscure the idea of who has harmed and needs support. My study examines how this binary framing does not align with young people's lived realities. It underscores the need for research that critically examines the application of frameworks based on adults to young people's distinct experiences.

Women and Equalities Committee (2023) inquiry sessions show that not all schools had the time, resources or expertise to equip their staff with sufficient training in dealing with incidents when they occurred. Setty and Hunt (2023) recommend that school staff need to be supported by school policy and practices on safeguarding, behaviour, uniform, and RSE that reflect core principles of inclusivity, student voice, and collaboration between school staff and students.

Teachers and school staff may be anxious about responding to complex situations, including image sharing since they know that students may be excluded or even criminalised (Lloyd, 2020; Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). However, students may perceive teachers' delayed response while managing their worries as inaction (Lloyd, 2020). While policy guidance on sexual violence among young people is still developing, school staff face challenges in identifying behaviours that constitute harm requiring external referral and those that can be managed internally (Lloyd and Walker, 2023). School staff acknowledged that HSB was often challenging to respond which can entail managing separation between the young person who caused harm and was harmed, preventing retaliation and intimidation of the victim, and balancing other policy and legal requirements (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). These findings reflect recurring themes of the tension and differences between young people's expectations and school staff's experiences of navigating school policies and constraints. These are salient to my study in situating young people's perceptions within the complexities of policy implementation in school systems, where they might have limited knowledge of their teachers' constraints. My study builds on this body of work by exploring young people's reflections on their experiences with adults in schools.

This section shows that while some studies focus on structural and policy-level constraints in implementing responses, few explore how young people perceive these dynamics. My study addresses this gap by presenting young people's views on the implementation of policy responses in their schools and how these affect their sense-making of sexual violence.

Studies note that teachers were often not among the first options for disclosure. Allnock and Atkinson (2019) report that young people feel that teachers focus on vulnerable students but might overlook the needs of those not identified as vulnerable. Meanwhile, teaching staff felt that due to their workload and responsibilities, they knew they could not devote the time to develop relationships that would allow them to notice concerns (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019). Some teachers felt that having dedicated staff with pastoral responsibilities would be better suited to provide a safe space to disclose or support them. Similarly, Cossar, Belderson and Brandon (2019) propose increased school pastoral care work investments to support professionals in building trusting relationships with young people. These authors assert that young people's desire to tell adults about their experiences was prompted by relationships with trust built over time. In many cases, the adult was kind and caring when asking the child when they noticed something was amiss.

### **School policies and practices in responding to sexual violence**

Schools implement different options in responding to sexual violence, especially between young people. These include restorative conversations between students facilitated by the safeguarding lead, counselling and support, referrals to children's social care and/or the police, temporary and permanent exclusions and school public assemblies (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). My study explores young people's awareness and perceptions of these options.

In their mixed-method study with students, staff, and parents in England, Lloyd and Bradbury (2023) show that schools may adopt sanctions-based approaches to deal with specific incidents of sexual violence, especially contact sexual offences. This type of policy reflects a criminal justice-oriented strategy that addresses individual behaviours. However, it may overlook the broader context where it occurs. Lloyd and Walker (2023) observe that schools may be more prepared and concerned with addressing an incident or one-off occurrence of sexual violence than the more frequent and pervasive incidents of inappropriate and problematic behaviour among students.

The zero-tolerance approach to sexual violence and harassment is an example of a sanctions-based intervention. Schools have adopted this approach to send a message that sexual violence is not accepted or tolerated. However, it has unintended consequences that all forms

of behaviours related to sexual violence and harassment may be dealt with in the same way as sanctions such as exclusion. There appears to be little nuance and understanding of the behaviour's context (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). There also seems to be little consideration of the potential needs of the young person instigating the harm, such as support to change or understanding their behaviour. Hackett (2020) maintains that 'in many cases, young people with harmful sexual behaviours are at the same time both perpetrators and victims of harm' (p. 12). This scholar stresses keeping the child at the centre of the response and avoiding 'othering' them, failing to see them as deserving of responses afforded to protect children. My study supports Hackett's (2020) argument in ensuring that young people's views are centred in responses instead of mostly focusing on policy and protocol implementation, often influenced by adults' priorities.

End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023) suggests that school policies must be sensitive to intersections between gender, class, sexuality, and ethnicity that affect how specific groups may be disproportionately affected by punitive sanctions and views of 'deserving victim' or 'perpetrator'. These authors further recommend that whole-school approach policies must not just focus on illegal acts but consider sexual violence as a part of a broader continuum of behaviours. I reiterate one of my central claims that focusing on illegal acts could have a silencing effect on young people's reporting.

Having a punitive policy does not necessarily lead to increased confidence in students that their schools are taking sexual violence seriously. For instance, in Allnock and Atkinson's (2019) study, some young people and school staff felt that there was a perceived lack of follow-through by schools following a punitive response that drives a culture of silence and complacency. In other cases, students' perceptions that no intervention took place through punishment affect their view of their schools' efforts to protect them and make the school environment safer (Lloyd, 2020). The zero-tolerance policy deters some students from disclosing and reporting since they feel that the sanctions may be too severe and fear the consequences of breaking the 'no snitching' rule (Lloyd, Walker, & Bradbury, 2020).

These findings reflect recurring themes in studies on how punitive policies and institutional constraints negatively impact young people's confidence and ability to speak about their experiences due to potential relational consequences, an issue my study explores further.

Setty, Hunt and Ringrose (2025) claim that young people are often unaware of the process involved after reporting. Some police officers in this study acknowledged the risk of overpromising and underdelivering when handling cases after reporting. They acknowledged that for many young people, professional timescales may feel lengthy, and they may feel that

nothing is happening. The lack of clarity from the police and schools leads to mistrust among young people. Some police and teachers felt that the best they could do was to be transparent and realistic about the process while supporting them in what will inevitably be a prolonged and challenging investigation process. The respondents were concerned about the impact on young people, such as mental health issues and isolation, that may affect the young person who reported and was reported (Setty, Hunt and Ringrose, 2025). These findings highlight the disparity between institutional protocols and young people's needs for transparency and consistent communication. My study explores how young people perceive these disparities and their recommendations for addressing them.

Studies report the impact of uniform policies as a form of regulation reflecting heteronormative school cultures and gender rules (Firmin, 2020; Donovan *et al.*, 2023; Horeck *et al.*, 2023). Firmin (2020) finds that that staff used sexist language, such as how young women's behaviours and dresses may provoke sexual attention from their male classmates. In a qualitative study with English young people in secondary schools (aged 13-17) on their awareness of violence against women and girls, some girls expressed their anger and frustration at the culture of sexualisation that policed their bodies through the school uniform policy (Horeck *et al.*, 2023).

Studies on policing girls' uniforms reported that the sexualised nature of implementing this policy contributed to these negative feelings. School staff conduct them in public, such as being asked to line up to measure their skirt lengths, being asked to kneel, or frequent public checks during the school day, which induce embarrassment and constant worry about whether their appearance is deemed appropriate (Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland, 2020; Bragg and Ringrose, 2023).

These findings demonstrate the interconnectedness of heteronormative gender norms with school policies that inadvertently police young women's bodies, causing emotional distress and unease. My study builds on this body of work by foregrounding these emotional experiences as valid forms of impact and harm that need recognition in school policy.

Bragg and Ringrose (2023) recommend moving uniform policies to the schools' well-being agenda instead of punitive behavioural policies and how the policy can support young people's sense of comfort, belongingness, and agency in the school community. For instance, implementing less binary uniform options and more flexible policies can accommodate the needs of non-binary and trans students and consider young people's desire to express their individuality based on their non-normative sexuality, ethnicity or minoritised identities. These

recommendations are particularly relevant in UK secondary schools where uniform policies often reflect rigid gender norms.

The insights in this section indicate that punitive policies related to sexual violence and policing of gender and sexuality are ineffective if they are individualised in nature and do not address the broader contexts that facilitate harm (Lloyd, 2020). Lloyd and Bradbury (2023) state that instead of focusing on zero tolerance policies, schools must address environments that tolerate sexual violence and systemic barriers to disclosure. These authors propose re-imagining what justice means to young people in school responses related to sexual violence. My study supports this recommendation by centring young people's view of justice and fairness within school systems, which may differ from adults' interpretations.

Applying a trauma-informed approach can address the limitations of punitive approaches. It includes supporting young people to feel safe through choice and control, values that are foundational to human well-being (Hickle, 2020). Following a trauma-informed approach, schools must ensure that they meet the needs of those affected by sexual violence, acknowledge the negative impacts on them, and not unduly punish those who display harmful behaviours (Setty and Hunt, 2023).

The trauma-informed practice focuses on supporting the strengths of the victim-survivor to develop their self-resilience and mental strength, regain a sense of control and autonomy in their lives and acknowledge the impact of traumatic contexts (Hickle, 2020). It involves supporting children dealing with adaptive or healthy shame that shifts the feelings from isolation and powerlessness to connection, power, and freedom (Brown, 2006). Resilience among survivors of child sexual abuse seems to be positively related to one's current social roles and negatively associated with further trauma (Cromer and Goldsmith, 2010). My study aligns with the adoption of trauma-informed principles, recognising different manifestations of trauma and impact that may differ from the bio-medical view of trauma, when engaging young people instead of focusing on punitive sanctions and behaviour management.

Zero-tolerance approaches depend on adult-centric definitions of sexual violence but may not fully address its deeper causes (Setty, Ringrose, and Hunt, 2024). These scholars assert that recognising young people's agency entails providing them with tools and spaces to explore why some actions are unacceptable instead of just referring to behaviour policy. They propose using sexual citizenship as a frame for whole-school approaches, which shifts the primary focus away from punishing young people who display harmful behaviours. It creates constructive spaces to use incidents as 'teachable' moments about culture and involves young people in changing harmful culture through critical thinking and reflection. This framing

resonates with my study's focus on young people's capacity for reflection and their crucial role in co-developing solutions to improve school cultures.

Setty, Ringrose and Hunt (2024) assert that schools can be learning environments where young people may get things wrong, but they can learn and reflect in dialogue with adults. Using a sexual citizenship approach in school can move beyond binary categories of legal/illegal conduct towards developing a shared understanding of ethical sexual behaviour and supporting young people to make informed decisions without relying solely on punitive measures (Setty, Hunt and Ringrose, 2025). These authors suggest sexual citizenship as an approach to addressing sexual violence in school as a process of supporting young people to actively shape sexual citizenship based on their lived realities rather than based on adults' expectations. They contrast it with the behavioural nudge approach that encourages young people to make decisions and choices based on the expected 'right' behaviour pre-determined by adults. They suggest that using a sexual citizenship approach in school can move beyond binary categories of legal/illegal conduct towards developing a shared understanding of ethical sexual behaviour and supporting young people to make informed decisions without relying solely on punitive measures. These findings are closely aligned with my study's assertion of questioning and expanding legalistic framing and recognising young people's diverse and complex agency and lived realities.

## **Promoting student voice and participation**

Preventive and restorative approaches to sexual violence must centre young people's voices and involve them in promoting school cultures that challenge harmful norms and promote respectful and equitable relations between one another (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). Fostering student participation and voice on sensitive topics may be more challenging in school contexts that re-emphasise teacher authority and student discipline (Bragg *et al.*, 2022). My study builds on these findings by promoting young people's participation and voice in co-developing solutions to addressing sexual violence in their schools.

Relatedly, Setty and Hunt (2023) describe an example of a student who was cold called by their teacher to participate in an assembly activity. They may have felt compelled to follow an 'authority figure', making it difficult for them to say 'no' out of fear. This example illustrates how classroom and school settings can implement WSA by examining the interactions between students and adults, considering the power dynamics in school contexts that privilege adult authority. Maxwell and Aggleton (2014) maintain that implementing a WSA entails careful thought about the flows of power within the institutional space of the school. Setty and Hunt (2023) state that positive teaching in the classroom about consent, equality, and participation must be complemented by the behaviours of adults across the school by making young people feel respected, valued, and heard. These findings resonate with my study in calling for constant reflections on adult-young people dynamics that are situated in generational power imbalances.

Ofsted (2021) discuss good practices in centring young people's voices in whole school approaches. A school held listening events to help young people share their worries and speak to adults in a safe environment. Another school used worry questionnaires to ask young people about the issues in their age group and the language they used when discussing sexual violence. The young people's responses informed staff training and developed a culture where young people, school leaders and staff had a shared understanding of sexual violence. Some schools use different methods to encourage students to talk about issues and report their experiences, such as private messages on platforms, assemblies, tutor time, posters, and leaflets (Ofsted, 2021). Other studies report student consultation in designing RSE curriculum as another promising approach in ensuring that RSE reflects their needs, particularly in being inclusive of different identities and the issues that matter to them (Setty and Dobson, 2023; Economics, 2024). My study supports and applies these participatory approaches embedded in these studies that enable young people to articulate their views about their experiences and recommendations.

## **Supporting young people's agency in RSE**

Studies with young people have shown how they benefited from RSE approaches that encouraged them to think critically and form their own judgement (Cense, Grauw and Vermeulen, 2020). This approach includes providing young people with the tools and knowledge to better identify harmful and abusive sexual behaviours for themselves (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023). Young people suggested a 'call in' culture to explore ways of being and treating one another. It advocates for positioning them as equals who can all have something to contribute and learn. They felt that focusing on calling out or reporting bad behaviour is a limited approach that may reinforce division. The 'call in' culture focuses on how RSE can engage young people to critically think about risk and reward in peer culture (Setty, 2024). These findings align with my study's focus on a strengths-based approach to engaging young people instead of positioning them as passive recipients of adult knowledge.

A learner-centred approach puts young people's needs, realities, and suggestions at the centre of sex education. It encourages collaborative learning strategies that support their varied ways of developing knowledge and skills (Cense, Grauw and Vermeulen, 2020). Rights-based RSE entails how young people learn about their sexual subjectivities and their position as learners, influencing how they engage with the pedagogical process (Setty and Dobson, 2023). It involves positioning them as autonomous agents in the learning process. It differs from considering them as passive learners expected to absorb facts and information to make 'good choices' in line with existing adult-centric societal norms and expectations. This distinction is salient to my study which explores how young people might resist adult expectations or offer alternative perspectives based on their lived realities.

Noting the focus on the legalistic framing of rights in current RSE guidance, Setty and Dobson (2023) claimed that there is limited recognition of young people's lives and sociosexual subjectivities. Instead, RSE guidance seems to follow a traditional 'adult expert model' that does not engage with the contexts that shape young people's developing sexual subjectivities and experiences. For instance, studies reported young people's views on education related to the law and sexual consent, which do not align with the complexities of their experiences (Whittington, 2021; Setty, 2022, 2025b). My study supports this critique by highlighting limitations in the emphasis on the legal aspects of sex education in secondary schools in England.

Young people need non-judgemental, inclusive, and non-shaming spaces to reflect on harmful or problematic behaviours (Setty and Hunt, 2023). These spaces can help them develop socio-emotional skills for healthy relationships, such as empathy, compassion, and respect (Economics, 2024). Teaching about social and emotional aspects contributes to sexual violence prevention by enhancing young people's ability to acknowledge their own and others'

emotions, express their feelings, and demonstrate empathy (Schneider and Hirsch, 2020). These findings align with my study's emphasis on the emotional and relational aspects as crucial dimensions in young people's understanding of sexual violence.

Setty and Hunt (2023) propose that education on HSB can follow a scaffolded approach, developing young people's knowledge, skills, and social norms. The first stage entails encouraging them to think critically about what constitutes HSB and identify how some forms may be normalised. The second stage involves supporting them in developing skills to critically reflect and identify how they might encounter HSB as a victim, bystander, or a person causing harm. The third stage entails providing opportunities to explore why someone may know right from wrong yet still display HSB or may not act upon it when harmed or witnessing it. This stage means addressing the dynamics of young people's peer contexts and relationships that shape the potential risks or rewards enabling HSB. This approach allows young people to ask questions, reflect, and frame the discussion in their terms towards co-creating learning (Setty and Hunt, 2023). Setty (2024) state how a staged approach to RSE works in engaging young people in discussions on challenging topics. It entails supporting them as their feelings of safety and willingness to share ideas gradually increase. My study supports and applies a similar scaffolded approach that supports young people's knowledge and sense-making as they shift over time.

RSE should provide spaces for young people's feelings of vulnerability and confusion (Setty, 2024). Setty and Dobson (2023) maintain that adults should provide young people with opportunities to determine what good sexual encounters, behaviours, and relationships are. Then they can explore and decide what they will not accept as harmful behaviours. Discussions should also enable them to reflect on how the internet and social media shape norms and beliefs about sex, relationships, love, power, control, sexuality, and sexual behaviours (Setty and Dobson, 2023).

Setty (2024) discusses how the participants identified how shame-based pedagogy on issues such as image sharing and sexually transmitted diseases can be harmful and prevent them from developing healthy and positive outlooks. They wanted RSE to challenge shame. They felt it was significant to explore how judgment restricts their possibilities to explore and navigate their identities by reinforcing normative expectations framed in risk and stigma. This approach prioritises accepting differences between others and oneself (Setty, 2024). Drawing from one of the priority issues identified by the young people in my study, I support the call to move beyond shame-based approaches to RSE and instead promote safe and supportive spaces for reflective learning.

Education on online sexual behaviours, such as digital intimacies and pornography, tends to frame their behaviours as problematic and harmful (Spišák, 2016). Setty and Hunt (2023) argue for providing spaces that are open for dialogue, allowing young people to feel comfortable sharing their concerns and experiences. These findings align with one of my study's central claims that supporting them through non-judgmental and non-shaming approaches involves a collaborative approach between adults and young people in identifying problems and solutions.

### **Justice interests in school responses to sexual violence**

The emerging body of literature on justice interests includes campus justice for sexual violence in university settings (McGlynn and Furgalska, 2019; Cowan and Munro, 2021). McGlynn and Furgalska (2019) state that students' complex justice interests relate to the reasons they offered for disclosing or reporting experiences of sexual violence. The available literature on campus justice thus far focused on young adults' views in universities. This emphasis on higher education settings in the UK highlights a gap in understanding the views of adolescents in secondary schools in the UK. My study addresses this gap by providing the perspectives of British young people from Northeast England which foregrounds their present-day views as distinct from young adults in higher education settings.

The term 'justice interests' was proposed by Daly (2017) to represent victims' reasonable expectations of justice mechanisms. Broadly, extant literature (see Daly, 2017; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; Hester *et al.*, 2023; Bolívar, Sánchez-Gómez and De Haan, 2024) dating from the seminal work of Herman (2005) explored victims' perceptions of justice. These studies showed that traditional expectations of justice as punishment for its own sake did not align with the primary priority of the victim-survivors (Herman, 2005; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019). The concept of justice interests is relevant to my study in moving beyond legal and procedural outcomes to relational and affective outcomes that might be relevant for young people.

McGlynn and Westmarland (2019) offer the concept of kaleidoscopic justice to demonstrate that justice is about 'recognition, dignity, voice, consequences, prevention, and connectedness' (p. 197). These authors described victim-survivors' perceptions of justice as complex and nuanced and an ever-evolving lived experience. Relatedly, Hester *et al.* (2023) describe victim-oriented justice as 'perpetrators where perpetrators are held accountable, with fair outcomes for victims-survivors leading to protection from future harm of themselves and others... where survivors are heard and believed at all levels where the perpetrator, families and communities, as well as formal justice systems, recognise and acknowledge the abuse so that there is accountability for the harm done.' (p. 16). Whilst the literature on justice interests

is based on adults' experiences, these frameworks provide a valuable lens in situating young people's expectations of outcomes in their schools, which my study explores.

The summary below synthesises the common themes in the present literature on justice interests:

- **Participation:** meaningfully participating in the justice process and having their experience be heard (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; Hester *et al.*, 2023); participation as being informed of the options including the justice mechanisms available (Daly, 2017)
- **Recognition:** being believed or recognised as harmed and not blamed by justice professionals, friends, community, or the perpetrator (Herman, 2005; Daly, 2017; Hester *et al.*, 2023)
- **Effective justice:** fairness in the process and outcome (Hester *et al.*, 2023); justice as sensitive, respectful treatment of the person involved (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019)
- **Reparation:** involving something offered to the victim-survivor including therapy (Hester *et al.*, 2023); connectedness as justice involving societal support in the aftermath of trauma (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; Hester *et al.*, 2023)
- **Social justice:** justice as prevention to protect the victim-survivor and others from future harm and promoting safety (Herman, 2005; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; Cowan and Munro, 2021; Hester *et al.*, 2023); justice as the shifting public views of seeing some behaviours as unacceptable (Hester *et al.*, 2023)
- **Accountability:** vindication as affirming the acts were wrong, morally and legally and that the perpetrator's actions against the victim were wrong (Daly, 2017); the offender taking responsibility (Daly, 2017; Hester *et al.*, 2023)
- **Punishment and rehabilitation:** includes criminal sanctions and the social community response of others (Hester *et al.*, 2023); meaningful consequences including and beyond the criminal justice system (McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019); consequences possible within an education institution such as suspension, no-contact orders, suspension and expulsion to enhance the ability to control one's space and continue with their education (Cowan and Munro, 2021)

The literature on justice interest complements the extant literature on young people's perceptions of their schools' responses to sexual violence. My study draws from this body of work to contribute the young people's views in discussions on re-imagining justice beyond punitive consequences.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discusses how several areas related to young people's agency and sexual violence remain unexplored. It highlights the need for a nuanced understanding of the interconnectedness of individual, relational, and institutional factors that shape their agency. There is already substantial literature on young people's naming, disclosure, help-seeking, and reporting, especially in schools. However, this review of the extant literature shows that young people's perspectives in exercising their agency, particularly on the emotional and relational aspects, related to these actions have not been examined comprehensively. To build on prior literature and to address the identified gaps, this study aims to explore the concept of agency based on young people's perspectives. It focuses on the affective, relational, and systematic aspects. These insights reinforce the relevance of these research questions:

- How do young people exercise their agency in dealing with and preventing sexual violence? (RQ2)
- How do young people perceive the prevention of and responses to sexual violence? (RQ3)

Addressing these research questions could deepen current understandings of young people's agency related to sexual violence, centre their crucial role in sexual violence prevention and provide actionable insights for schools.

# Chapter 4 Methodology

## Introduction

This chapter presents a reflective narrative of the research process. It begins by discussing the rationale for following a participatory research approach. Then, it will provide an overview of the research design, the participatory methods used, and the data analysis process. The following section discusses the ethical considerations. The chapter concludes with the limitations and strengths of adopting a participatory research approach with young people.

## 4.1 Participatory research on violence and abuse among young people

Participatory action research (PAR) is not a research method, but rather, it is an orientation to the world (Banks and Brydon-Miller, 2018). Participation as an approach means that the project does not just use participatory techniques. There is a social, ethical, and moral commitment to democratise the research process by valuing young people's diverse experiences, knowledge, and capacity to contribute (Grant, 2017; Lenette *et al.*, 2019; Goessling, 2020). PAR embodies an action-oriented approach involving participants with lived experiences in critically reflecting on an issue and collaborating on potential responses through the research process (McIntyre, 2000; Felner, 2020).

My study is not a full participatory action research project since the young people were not involved as co-researchers or research advisers in all stages of the research process, such as design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination (Cahill, 2007; Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007). The principles of PAR and participatory research with children and young people informed my research.

### Participatory research with children and young people

Participatory research with children and young people (CYP) entails 'taking a person-centred approach to representing children and young people's voices faithfully by building understanding from an interactive, reflexive, and engaged position' (Coyne and Carter, 2024, p. 2). It is a 'theoretically positioned within a strengths-based perspective that embraces the agency and capabilities of children and young people' (ibid, p. 2). It means viewing children and young people as capable of social action and being sensitive to their standpoints.

Some methodological and normative assumptions in participatory research with children and young people include their competence to conduct research and fulfil their participation rights (Kim, 2016). Scholars have questioned these assumptions and encouraged other researchers to critically reflect when conducting research with children and young people (Cuevas-Parra

and Tisdall, 2019; Kyritsi, 2019). Researchers should not presume that participatory methods are inherently 'better' or desired by children (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008; Kim, 2016).

Holland *et al.* (2010) propose that power should be conceived as dynamic and relational rather than being conferred or redistributed by adults to children. It entails providing opportunities for children to exercise more power in the research process by influencing and directing it. It promotes a more equitable and child-centred research relationship (Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019). Additionally, fostering a supportive and empowering environment differs from the traditional, highly controlling or hierarchical set-ups, which reproduce or reinforce conventional power dynamics between adults and children (Cuevas-Parra, 2021). Adopting a participatory approach contributes to achieving a better balance in power differentials since the young person has a more active role in the co-construction of knowledge (Coyne and Carter, 2024). These authors state that the process involves co-constructing meaning and shared understanding from prolonged interaction and developing relationships of trust and safety.

Young people's involvement in participatory research involves different roles, such as co-researchers, peer researchers, advisory group members, collaborators, and participants (Templeton *et al.*, 2020; Freire *et al.*, 2022; Warrington *et al.*, 2024). Young people's different forms of participation are valid and meaningful (Grant, 2017). Holland *et al.* (2010) propose supporting children in developing their ways of participating and being open to whichever aspect of the research process they want to engage in. Adult researchers must communicate constantly with young people to find the most appropriate and desirable levels of involvement without overloading them (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2024).

### **Research on violence and abuse with children and young people**

Engaging children and young people in research contributes to a young people-centred understanding of violence and abuse. These are distinct from adult-centric views that have dominated policy and practice (Hackett, 2017; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2020; Roth, 2023). They have unique insights to enhance existing knowledge of violence and abuse and improve interventions that would work best for them (Cody, 2017; Kosher and Ben-Arieh, 2020; Morrison, 2023; Beckett and Warrington, 2024). Involving young people in research about sexual abuse can offer a sense of empowerment. It helps them to know their views are valued and realises their right to have a say in matters affecting them (Learning Together project, 2024).

Young people's involvement in knowledge co-production on sexual violence remains constrained. The international scoping review of Bovarnick *et al.* (2018) reveals that they have limited participation in participatory research on sexual violence due to practical and ethical barriers. Ethical guidelines for research with children and young people are often grounded in

constructions of childhood, such as their vulnerability and incompetence (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025). Exclusionary ethical practices can replicate the dynamics of violence and abuse experienced by young people. It silences them instead of enabling them to give voice to their experiences (Beckett and Warrington, 2024). Young people have expressed how their participation in violence research was beneficial for them, such as their improved awareness of the issue and feelings of empowerment and purpose (Hamilton *et al.*, 2019; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024; Warrington *et al.*, 2024).

Risk-averse guidelines with a heavy focus on protection and less consideration of their participation rights can deny the opportunity to meaningfully contribute and benefit by participating in research (Beckett and Warrington, 2024; Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025). In our article, my co-authors and I argue that participatory methods in violence and abuse with children and young people must be viewed as a balancing act between these rights. It involves continuous negotiation and adjustments depending on the context, topics of the project, and identities of the young people involved (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025).

Beckett and Warrington (2024) propose a trauma-informed approach for navigating the ethical complexities of research on sexual abuse and sensitive topics with children and young people. This approach encourages researchers to be conscious of traumas that they might have, even those unknown to them, which could affect their engagement in the project. The principles of trauma-informed practice can guide an integrated approach that balances considerations of safety and empowerment. These include safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, empowerment and cultural considerations. This approach embodies a young people-centred and reflexive practice, a more grounded and nuanced approach to understanding risk in research, and a better recognition of ethics as an embodied practice (Beckett and Warrington, 2024).

### **Ontological and epistemological positionings**

A participatory worldview asks researchers to be situated and reflexive and see inquiry as a process of coming to know (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). This participatory ontology sees humans as dynamic agents capable of reflexivity and change. The epistemology acknowledges the reflexive capacities of humans in the research process (Kendon, Pain and Kesby, 2007). Participatory ontology and epistemology stress that there is a socially constructed reality that academic researchers and participants can explore through different forms of knowledge generation and methodological innovation (Kendon, Pain and Kesby, 2007; Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2024).

This ontological view values different knowledge from young people. Researchers must be attentive to how children generate knowledge instead of forcing their participation and

contributions to conform to those aligned with adults' prescribed notions (Ryu, 2022). This scholar states that children and young people have diverse and multi-modal ways of knowing the world and expressing themselves beyond the spoken and written language.

In addition to participatory ontology and epistemology, my study subscribes to the emergence, becoming, and inexpertise ontology (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). It situates researchers as fallible and humble people seeking to learn from and with young people rather than the all-powerful adult researcher who steers the whole research process.

Following this ontology, in my study, knowledge about sexual violence and its prevention is co-produced through continuous relational interactions among young people and with me as the researcher. Emergent subjectivity means emphasising the process over the product, which involves constant innovation, adaptation, and improvisation (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008).

This ontology aligns closely with my study's emergent design and my reflexive approach, which acknowledges the 'messiness' of participatory research with young people (Fitzgerald, Stride and Enright, 2021). My study demonstrates that the collaborative co-production process with young people is unpredictable and open-ended (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008).

### **Participatory action research (PAR) principles underpinning the study**

A participatory research (PR) approach is the best fit for my research for several reasons. First, PR seeks to challenge the traditional power dynamics between adults and young people. Second, it helps me achieve my goals of opening safe spaces for dialogue and transforming knowledge production with young people. Third, it promotes mutual learning among us.

Principles of co-production and participatory action research with children and young people underpin the research: collective investigation of issues important to young people (young people setting the research agenda); respect for their knowledge and experiences to enhance the understanding of the issue (not imposing pre-conceived concepts and information in the discussion); learning as an ongoing and shared process (adopting a co-learner and facilitator role rather than a teacher-centred role); and supportive relationships (sustaining relationships with them through the successive workshops) (McIntyre, 2000; Bostock and Freeman, 2003; Bovarnick *et al.*, 2018; Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019).

Principles of Lundy's (2007) model of participation inform this study. It promotes children and young people's active role in the decision-making process: space (providing opportunities for young people to express their views such as engaging them in setting the research agenda); voice (young people must be facilitated to express their opinions like how we worked together to gain a better understanding of the issue); audience (their views must be listened to such as when we have collaborative dialogues on the method and content of the workshops) and

influence (Their views must be acted upon, as appropriate, which I put into practice in adjusting the workshop design based on their expressed remarks). These principles reflect the core values of humility, adaptability, collaboration, and mutual respect.

## **4.2 Research design and methods**

### **Research design**

Participatory group work has been proposed as an appropriate approach to engaging children and young people in sexual violence research (Warrington, 2020). I pursued the group-oriented flexible workshop approach to engage young people in dialogic and reciprocal learning, using our encounters as spaces for knowledge exchange and co-production (Whittington, 2019b). The doctoral research project of Elsie Whittington (2019a,b) on sexual consent and the guide on the development of participatory group work by Camille Warrington (2020) influenced my research approach.

Whittington (2019b) used creative, group-based activities through workshops with her active group facilitation to capture young people's 'thinking out loud' process and learning moments. They were facilitated by encouraging reflection and contribution from the young people, which enables them to articulate their thoughts and reflect on their own and others' ideas using their terms.

Compared to individual activities, group activities help challenge the individualisation of problems such as self-blame and shame. Group work may also empower individuals to collective action to create change (Warrington, 2020). Young people who joined other participatory group work research projects addressing sexual violence shared the value of their participation, such as a chance for their voices to be heard, a connection with other people, and a focus on their strengths and activities (Bovarnick *et al.*, 2018; Hamilton *et al.*, 2019). In my research, working in groups mirrors young people's preferred modes of communication.

Undertaking participatory group work entailed comprehensive planning and coordination with gatekeepers and young people to build supportive relationships and co-create safe spaces. Camille Warrington's (2020) Safe Spaces toolkit on participatory group work guided me in preparing for and conducting the workshops. The planning stage included developing my knowledge and skills in group work theory and practice, collaborative decision-making on safeguarding and risk management with the gatekeepers and young people, and ongoing reflective practice. Group work theories are essential in understanding the phases of group development, recognising different dynamics of groups, and responding to unexpected situations (Warrington, 2020).

I co-developed a flexible framework of activities for each workshop. It was informed by research evidence, discussions with young people, and preliminary analysis from previous workshops (Dunn and Mellor, 2017; Warrington, 2020). This framework allowed me to be agile in responding to group characteristics, emergent topics, and practical limitations (Dunn and Mellor, 2017).

The openness of the workshop design provided spaces for young people to influence the direction of our conversations and activities. This approach entailed constant negotiation and shared decision-making between the young people and me. Workshop development and implementation were iterative and cumulative, with each workshop eventually informing the succeeding sessions. It follows the reflection and action cycles in PAR (Heron and Reason, 1997). We developed our understanding and practice of co-producing knowledge and methodology as we progressed through the workshops

Workshop duration and group size are essential considerations in maximising young people's engagement and promoting safe and mutual learning environments. Dunn and Mellor (2017) suggested that groups of six to ten young people per group are a good size to encourage young people's participation. My study had a similar number of young people per workshop, with a maximum of 12 young people at one time. Most of the workshops had six to eight young people participating.

I incorporated games and feedback loops as essential components of the workshops (Warrington, 2020). Games are important in building trust and rapport, energising the group, and including a fun element. They also help make young people feel comfortable and relaxed with each other and me before we proceed to the activity, which deals with sensitive topics. I conducted these as an icebreaker at the start of the session. I also adapted some reflection activities into games.

Feedback provides opportunities for young people to reflect on the content and process of the workshops (Warrington, 2020; Learning Together project, 2024). Gathering and discussing feedback was an integral part of the participatory workshops. It enables reflections on how the research is going, how they feel about the sessions, and areas for improvement (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2007). Following Lundy's (2007) model of participation, I practised the audience and influence principles by sharing with them how I applied their feedback in the succeeding workshops. It reflects our co-production of the methodology.

Acknowledging young people's contributions to the project is essential to mark the project's ending (Warrington, 2020). I gave each young person a certificate of appreciation and thanked them individually and collectively for their participation and contributions to the project.

## **Research methods**

Participatory creative approaches were adopted in each workshop to enable young people to reflect and express their opinions. Using creative and participatory-based methods is valuable, especially on sensitive topics. They help depersonalise and avoid re-traumatisation if the traditional and direct methods are employed (Westmarland and Bows, 2019). Creative and participatory methods can contribute to making the process more enjoyable and fun for young people (Mand, 2012; Horgan, 2017).

Potential ethical risks due to the sensitive topic of sexual violence may be reduced if the methods do not ask the young people directly about their personal experiences (Hughes and Huby, 2002). I developed activities to maximise the young people's safety and control in the workshops. I avoided direct questions about their experiences and allowed them to share experience-informed views without directly identifying them as personal experiences (Allnock et al., 2022).

## **Participatory sense-making**

The methods in this study aimed to facilitate participatory sense-making. It involves an ongoing and relational process wherein individual sense-making processes are affected. New facets of social sense-making can be co-created that are not available to the individuals on their own (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007). This process often leads to the generation of new knowledge since it involves comparison, discussion, negotiation and reconstruction of existing representations (Qu and Hansen, 2008).

In their study of participatory sense-making with young people with disabilities, Bjorbækmo, Greve and Asbjørnslett (2022) demonstrate how dialogues enabled the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the term 'disability'. The participatory sense-making process facilitated young people's agency to contradict or articulate an understanding of the diagnosis which differs from the researchers' normative explanations and understandings. The study illustrated different participatory sense-making strategies with young people: articulating their knowledge of the concept based on their lived experiences and identities; asking questions, expressing their opinions, elaborating on what they think and feel; contradicting or clarifying definitions; resisting labels and identities play a crucial role in supporting young people to express their opinions and hold the space, even if their views might be challenging, confusing, or uncomfortable for the researcher (Bjorbækmo, Greve, ascribed by the researcher In doing so, they used their knowledge-based agency to challenge the prevailing understanding of a concept. Researchers play a crucial role in supporting young people to express their opinions and hold the space even if their views might be challenging, confusing or uncomfortable for the researcher (Bjorbækmo, Greve and Asbjørnslett, 2022).

## **Discussion groups**

Effective conversations are usually guided and directed by participants with minimal researcher imposition. Whittington (2021) encouraged the young people in her research project to go beyond what is considered 'sayable' in public about sexual consent and to participate at their own pace.

Compared to focus group moderators with a pre-defined list of questions, I used general prompts to enable discussions. Then the young people led the direction of the conversations. Like Whittington's (2019b) approach, I offered alternative opinions or more nuanced reflections on the topic to encourage more critical thought from the young people or to explore some of their ideas in more depth. The activities and prompts served as approaches for the young people to work through their thoughts on the issue. I did not expect them to naturally have insights on the topic, which can be culturally and emotionally difficult to discuss (Whittington, 2019a).

## **Concept mapping and brainstorming**

Brainstorming activities have been used in participatory research projects with young people to gather their thoughts on a given topic or prompt with little to no influence from the researcher on categories or inputs (McIntyre, 2000; Grant, 2017; Freire *et al.*, 2022). In my study, these activities were done individually, paired, and in small groups. I provided a prompt, and they generated as many inputs as they wanted (Figure 1).

These activities have resulted in co-produced lists of ideas. They enabled more involvement of young people since they all had a chance to share their insights. Some young people may be more comfortable in expressing themselves in writing than verbally. Co-producing lists of inputs helped determine the breadth and diversity of behaviours, acts, and situations that young people encounter. This method helped show the young people that all their inputs were valid since we did not ascribe hierarchy or weighing. Furthermore, the freedom and flexibility of the activity enabled them not to feel pressured to think of a right or wrong answer.

Co-generated written lists help mediate power differentials in verbal discussions where some more active or dominant voices may be heard more than others. In listing, they can put in as many inputs as they want. A limitation of the listing activity is that it does not go in-depth into young people's specific contexts and experiences. I addressed this limitation through the group discussions following the listing activity or follow-up activities in the succeeding sessions.

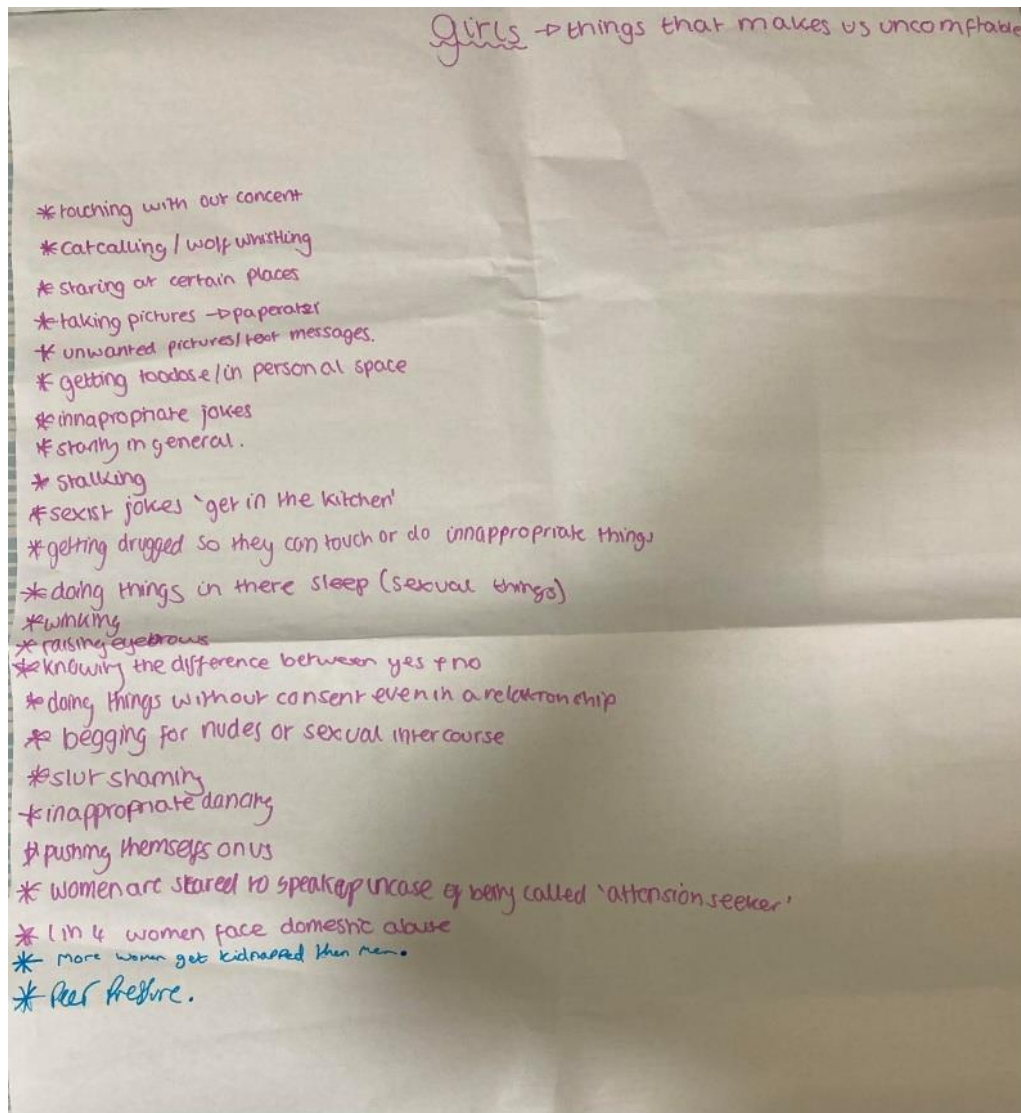


Figure 1: Example list co-generated by the young people on acts that cause discomfort (youth club workshop 2)

### Vignettes

Vignettes are broadly defined as text, images or other stimuli that participants can respond to from their perspective or one of the characters (Hughes and Huby, 2002). This method could facilitate discussions with young people about violence and abuse that participants may not have directly encountered (Barter and Renold, 2000). Commenting on fictional scenarios enables them to distance themselves from sensitive topics without disclosing their experiences. It reduces the risk of distress or re-traumatisation (Barter and Renold, 2000; Economics, 2024). It also allows them to construct their understanding of the issue, interpret different situations and courses of action, and gives them control in the discussions. It is a useful tool to foreground children and young people's definitions, meanings, and experiences of violence (Barter and Renold, 2000).

I adapted vignettes from toolkits (e.g. Laws and Mann, 2004; Vera Gray, Bullough and Kelly, 2019). I included factors such as the gender and sexuality of the characters involved, the setting where the situation occurred, and the relationship between the characters. The list of vignettes and activities used in my study is in Appendix 6. Providing a variety of situations in the vignettes allowed them to prioritise which situations they wanted to talk about in more detail during the group discussions. In terms of internal validity, I sought their feedback on the vignettes' relevance and relatability to the young people's current experiences. This approach allowed them to express if some aspects did not align with their experiences or could be improved (York, MacKenzie and Purdy, 2021).

### **Creative and arts-based methods**

Using visual and creative methods connects with the increasing recognition of art in therapeutic practices to support young people to express themselves and process emotions on sensitive topics (Warrington, Langhoff and Warnock, 2024). Some examples of visual methods typically involve arts-based and creative techniques, such as drawings, body maps, photographs, and vignettes (Khanolainen, Semenova, and Magnuson, 2021). Using visual methods enables young people to present their understanding and experiences and to transform narratives on complex topics using creative formats (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025).

Body mapping can facilitate socially shared narratives and allow participants to support and inspire one another in producing knowledge (Skop, 2016). This author discusses how individual full body maps are traced on life-sized pieces of paper to represent their embodied experience. In my project, the small groups worked on a collective body map with prompts for each part of the body (Figure 2). I used the body map activity for the topic of shame and sexual violence since it is an embodied experience that is often shrouded in silence and stigma.

A collective body map promotes conversations about acknowledging and challenging shame and brings the discussion into a more physically embodied form rather than being hidden in silence. The body map approach enabled the young people to disrupt dominant adult-led narratives of sexual violence as shameful (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025).

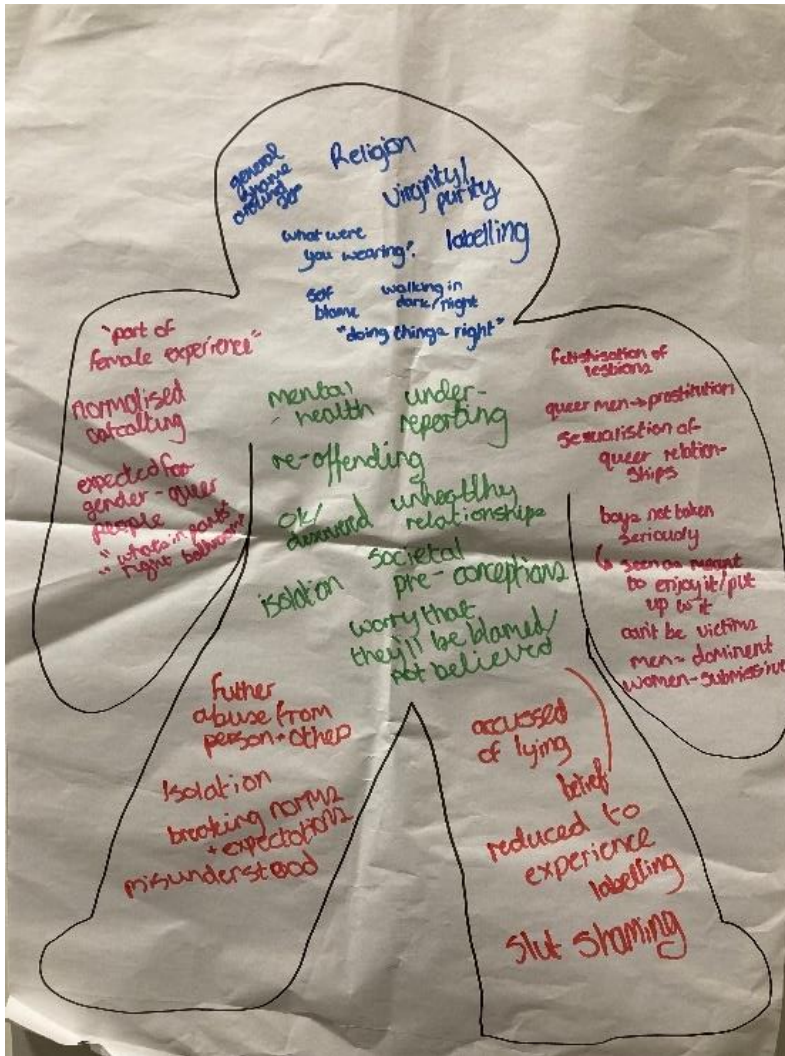


Figure 2: Collaborative body map on shame (FE group)

Another visual activity that we engaged in was the river of life. It is a participatory activity representing different stages in one's life, such as the past, present or future (Moussa, 2009). It is important to be flexible and allow the participants to choose the metaphor or image that is the best fit for them. We used the river of life activity for small groups to reflect on their perceptions of their experiences of sex education in the past, present and future. Both groups in the session chose a tree as their metaphor. The list of prompts for both activities is in Appendix 4.

### 4.3 Sampling, access, and recruitment

The inclusion criteria are: 1) 13-18 years old; 2) willingness to participate in a series of participatory workshops; 3) awareness that the project will involve discussions on sensitive topics such as adolescent sexuality and sexual violence. My initial age criteria were 14-17 years old, but some young people aged 13 years old and 18 years old joined the first workshop

in the youth club. I did not want to decline based on their age. Due to the topic's sensitive nature and the young people's involvement, applying for an amended ethics approval was necessary to extend the age group to include 13-year-olds (Appendix 11). The Department of Sociology Ethics Committee granted my ethics application amendment. Prior experience with sexual violence was not an exclusion criterion. The anonymity of the names of the organisations will be maintained following the request of the gatekeepers.

The intersectionality theory informed the purposive sampling strategy, supporting existing work and showing its importance in studying sexual violence (Crenshaw, 1991). I exerted proactive efforts to equitably involve young people of all genders and sexual orientations, from ethnic minority communities, and those with disabilities.

I did not ask the young people directly to identify their sexual orientation or if they had a disability since I only asked about their ages and gender in recording the demographics. They revealed their sexual orientation and/or disability during our discussions in the workshops or personal conversations outside the workshops. Several young people identified as gay, bisexual, and non-binary. Some expressed that they thought they were on the autism spectrum.

I am including this in the narrative for reporting purposes. Yet, I cannot claim that their participation achieved my goals of equitable inclusion of these lesser-heard young people nor influenced the analysis. Due to limitations in the participating organisations and the young people who volunteered to join, the sample who joined was not as diverse as I planned. I strove to include young people from ethnic minority communities but was unsuccessful. I sent several emails to some organisations in North East England that primarily cater to children and young people from ethnic minority communities, but I received no response.

### **Recruitment and conduct of workshops with young people from a youth club**

In October-November 2022, I sent individual invitation emails to several youth organisations in North East England. A youth manager from a youth club showed keen interest in joining the project since they have been wanting to discuss issues related to sexual health and sexual violence with them. The proposed design of the workshops aligned with the activities offered to the young people in their weekly youth work sessions. He proposed the initial timeframe of 3 months on a fortnightly basis for 5-6 sessions, which can be extended depending on the young people's interest. He shared the project materials and promoted the project to the young people attending the youth work session from a selected centre.

Fifteen young people (13-18) participated in thirteen workshops across 24 months. The group comprised of eight (8) girls and seven (7) boys. Eight (8) young people are in the 13-15 y.o age group while seven (7) young people are in the 16-18 y.o age group. They already knew each other from past youth work activities. The group was self-selecting. Several members are known to be active in joining youth work activities and volunteering for different projects. Seven (7) young people consistently attended most of the workshops. The other young people attended one or two sessions and then did not continue their participation even if they were in the centre. It followed the opt-out and flexible participation I explained to them in the informed consent process and reiterated at the start of each session.

Age	Girl	Boy
13-15	6	2
16-18	3	4

*Table 2: summary of age and gender of young people from the youth club*

Each workshop was approximately an hour, an allotted time during the youth work session in the centre and in a specified room separate from the other young people who did not join the workshops. The sessions were initially done on a fortnightly basis in the first two sessions. The schedules varied in the later sessions depending on the young people's schedules, interests, and commitments.

### **Recruitment and conduct of workshops with young people from a Further Education (FE) institution**

In November 2022, one of my supervisors connected me to an institution in Northeast England. The administrator expressed interest in supporting the project. However, the workshops can only be done weekly in a specified period from February to March 2023. The students had their examinations in the period preceding and succeeding this time frame. She disseminated the recruitment poster to a specific year level in the school in December 2022 and promoted the project again closer to the workshop date in late January 2023.

Fourteen students signed up, and nine of them joined the first workshop. Eleven young people (16-17 years old) joined five workshops. The group comprised eight (8) girls and three (3) non-binary young people. Eight (8) young people attended all five workshops, and two (2) joined later workshops. One of the additional young people was recruited by friends in the group, while the other was included in the sign-ups and could only join a later session. Some young people indicated their reasons for not attending as illness or a conflict in schedule.

Age	Girl	Non-binary
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16-17	8	3
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Table 3: summary of age and gender of young people from the FE group

Each workshop lasted an hour after the students' classes on a given day of the week. A teacher was present in the room in all workshops, but she did not participate unless I had practical questions. Workshops were held in a classroom.

## 4.4 Data analysis

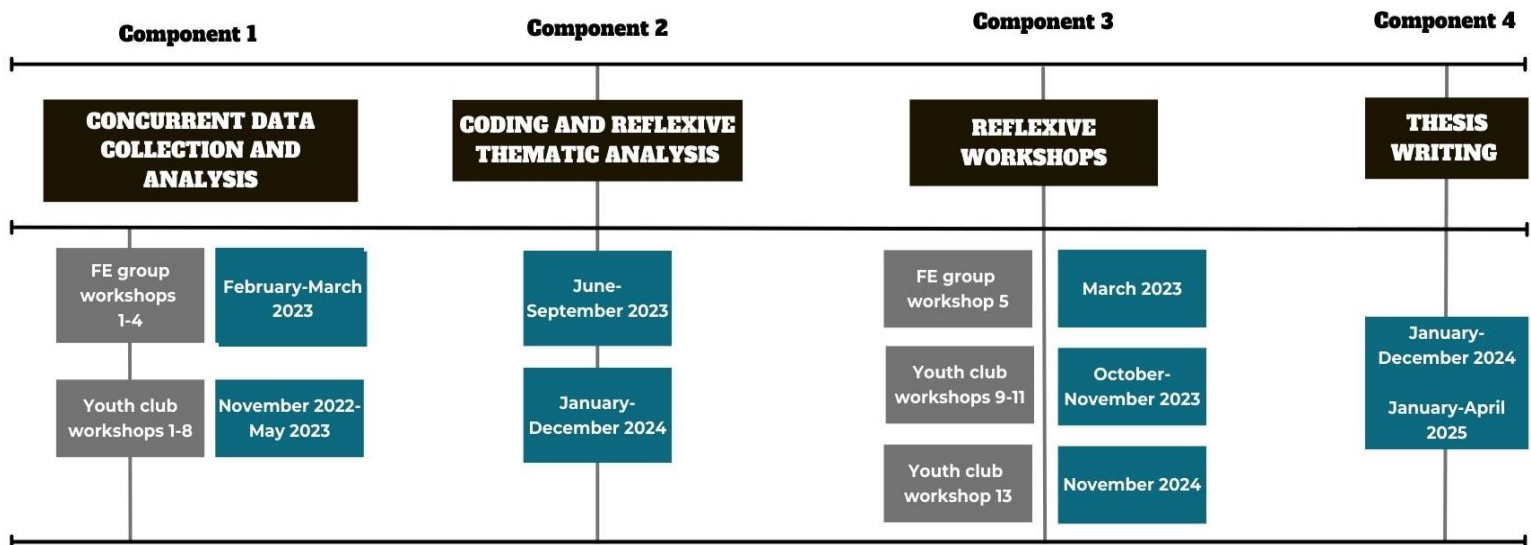


Figure 3: Data analysis components

Figure 3 shows that data analysis integrates young people-informed and researcher-led reflexive analysis to co-produce knowledge. The components did not follow a linear process but instead reflected an iterative, concurrent, and reflexive process. My study contributes to discussions about exploring data analysis possibilities with children and young people that differ from traditional data analysis (Nind, 2011).

My study generated multi-modal data such as field note reflections, discussion transcripts, and photographs of individual and group outputs such as post-it notes, co-produced diagrams, concept maps, and other visual data. I kept a research diary with field notes containing reflections about the workshops. Ongoing reflexive practice is integral to my research, and the process of reflection through field note-writing helps me assess my performance, feelings, and observations during the session (Phillippi and Lauderdale, 2018). Field notes enhance the richness of qualitative findings, which is especially important for my research, which focuses on both the content and process findings. I inputted the workshop written outputs and the transcript and coded all data generated using NVivo.

### Component 1: Concurrent data collection and analysis

Participatory data analysis with young people should be seen as an ongoing process rather than a discrete stage (Thomas and O’Kane, 1998; Holland *et al.*, 2010; Ryu, 2022). This means that academic researchers informally seek feedback in brief interactions on emerging themes and insights and involve young people in their thinking in an ongoing manner (Nind, 2011). It also involves researchers’ sensitivity to young people’s ability to make sense of the data, even if this has not been traditionally regarded as analysis (Ryu, 2022).

This approach to analysis aligns with my study design, which involves iterative and cumulative workshops with insights from previous workshops informing the succeeding ones. As explained previously, the young people had an active role in shaping the discussions, such as choosing the priority topics of the workshops and specific aspects of these topics that they wanted us to focus on more. The transcripts of our discussions and my reflective field notes documented their feedback and insights that informed the ongoing analysis and development of the workshop sessions.

## **Component 2: Reflexive thematic analysis**

Like Wallace-Henry's (2015) study with children on their views about child sexual abuse, after the analysis and discussion with the young people during the workshops, I conducted further analysis following the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I opted to use reflexive thematic analysis since it puts the researcher’s subjectivity and reflexivity at the core of the approach, acknowledging the researcher’s role in knowledge production (Joy, Braun and Clarke, 2023). Doing the reflexive thematic analysis component allowed me to unpack the data and tell a story based on my reflexivity and subjectivity as an academic researcher.

I familiarised myself with the data by reflexively journaling the key points and ideas in Component 1. I kept re-reading the transcripts and refining my notes before each workshop to ensure that the preceding inputs would inform the succeeding ones and that I could adapt the discussions accordingly.

I used an inductive approach in coding to identify themes strongly linked to the data instead of pre-defined codes by prior research (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Drawing on my subjectivity as a researcher, I was mindful of my reflective journaling notes on the concepts that surfaced as significant during the discussions with the young people. Still, I ensured that my analytic pre-conceptions did not influence the coding.

I generated a visual coding map (Appendix 10) that helped me categorise the codes into broad candidate themes with multiple sub-themes representing larger patterns across the dataset (Braun and Clarke, 2006). These candidate themes include perspectives on sexual violence,

views and recommendations on schools, and participatory process insights. These broad themes eventually shaped the focus of my four conceptual findings and discussions in chapters 5-8.

The insights derived from the first round of coding and theme development (Figure 4) informed the reflexive workshops with the youth club. I conducted continuous reflexive thematic analysis following the workshops to refine the themes as I was writing up the thesis. This triangulation process of my researcher-led analysis and the insights from the young people is necessary for internal validity (Wallace-Henry, 2015).

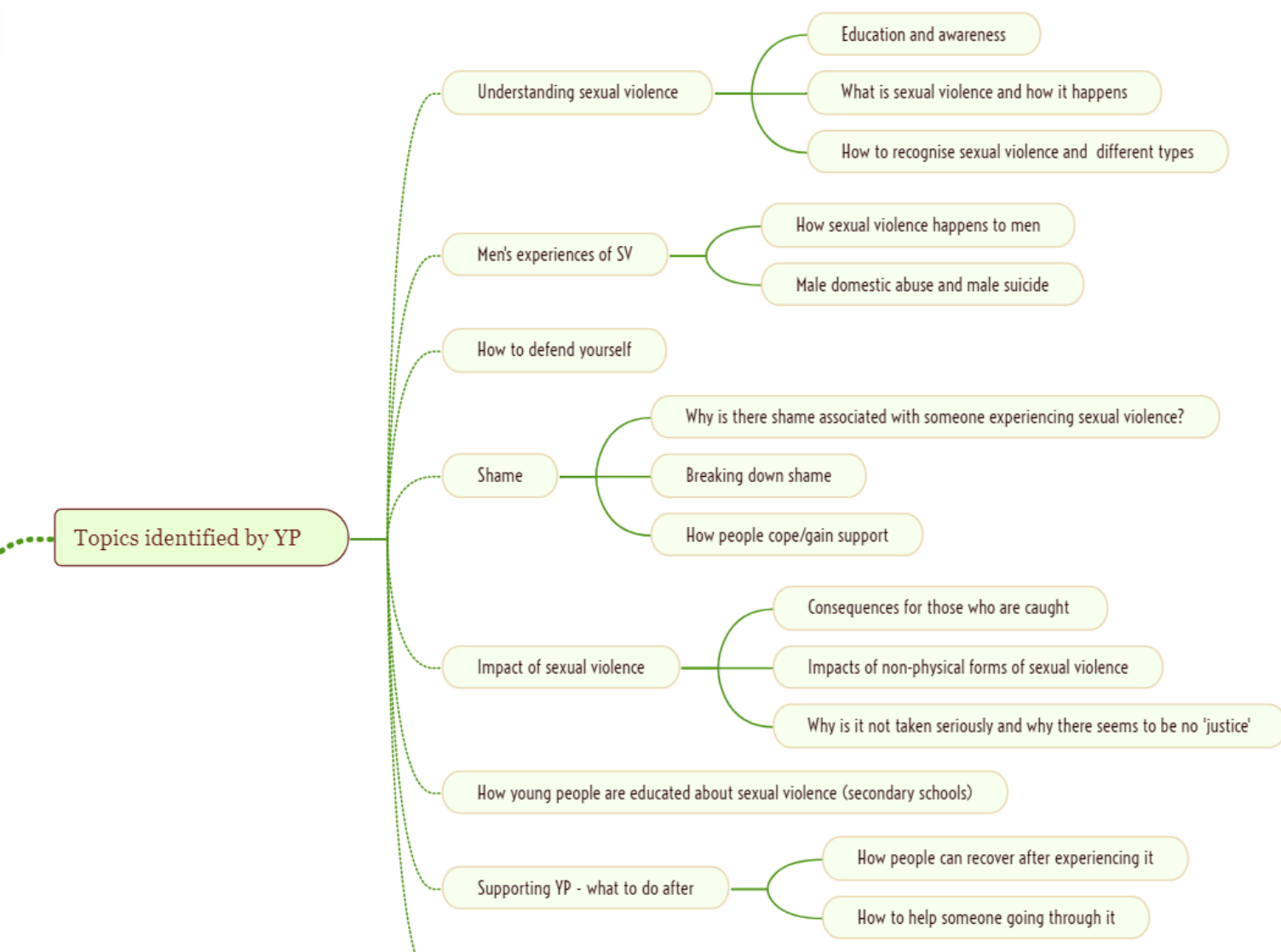


Figure 4: Coding map of initial themes

### Component 3: Reflexive and validation workshops

Reflexive and validation workshops reflect an innovative approach to member checking. Scholars engage in member checking to enhance the understanding, validate, and improve the findings by engaging the participants in dialogues about the preliminary analysis (Simpson and Quigley, 2016; Caretta and Pérez, 2019). Member checking achieves transactional validity, 'an improved shared understanding of data and analysis through a dialogical and recursive process among researchers and participants' (Caretta and Pérez, 2019, p. 370).

Following our previous workshops, I facilitated them flexibly and in an activity-based manner. Like Ryu (2022), the space was opened for young people to discuss and comment on my analysis. I also provided worksheets to facilitate their analytic and sense-making work. I framed the discussions as participatory sense-making activities. I presented how I synthesised the

insights and validated whether I represented their views accurately (Simpson and Quigley, 2016; Bjorbækmo, Greve and Asbjørnslett, 2022).

In the last workshop with the FE group, I presented a sheet summarising the main insights and recommendations we discussed in the previous workshops. They discussed their feedback in small groups and suggested the core findings and recommendations they wanted me to highlight. The summary sheet is in Appendix 7.

Meanwhile, I conducted two sets of reflexive workshops with the young people from the youth club. I facilitated the first set after the initial round of thematic analysis. I wanted to validate the initial themes and obtain their insights on some issues that needed clarification. I engaged them with the second set a year after when I had written several drafts of my thesis' findings and discussion chapters. I presented and discussed the summary of the core findings and asked them to provide their feedback. The worksheets for both workshops are in Appendix 8.

Critical moments of the member checking process included going deeper beyond identifying the themes and towards addressing contradictions and commonalities (Ryu, 2022). For instance, several young people in the FE group were vocal in highlighting priority findings about 'schools not taking sexual violence seriously' and 'victims being punished more than offenders'. Their increased attention to these themes informed my analysis and is reflected in Chapter 8. Meanwhile, the young people in the youth group told me that one of my summary findings about the language they use to communicate about sexual violence did not fully represent what they meant. Their inputs refined my analysis to be more young people-informed. Caretta and Pérez (2019) note that encountering dissent or differing views is part of striving for transactional validity. These authors claim that acknowledging incongruities does not make the research less valid but more reflexive and attuned to the participants' varied concerns.

#### **Component 4: Thesis writing and analysis**

In presenting the findings in this thesis, I drew on the collective analysis and results of the reflexive thematic analysis, the young people's insights in our reflexive discussions, and the collated data from the concurrent data collection and analysis. This component aligns with the last phase of the reflexive thematic analysis process of writing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006). I am discussing it as a separate component because my process was iterative in revisiting the other elements, ensuring links to the literature, and refining based on my supervisors' comments and the young people's additional insights. Then, I made subjective decisions on presenting the data that made sense in each chapter of the findings and linked them together in a coherent narrative.

## Reflections on data analysis

My analysis strives to platform the young people's voices, yet as part of the co-production process, I accept that as the author, I have the final say in the written interpretation and output. Like Noone's (2023) reflections on her PAR doctoral thesis, I do not deny the aspects of the process that were my decision. It reflects the reality of the limits of collaborative analysis. We both sought to follow the ethos of PAR by conducting data analysis in a collaborative process, yet some aspects of the process, like transcribing, coding, and writing the thesis, were not as collaborative and depended on us as researchers (Noone, 2023). Still, I stayed true to my co-production principles and ethos and strove to represent the voices and insights of the young people as best as I could in my thesis.

The reliability of the data in my study is evidenced in the strength of the themes and findings co-developed with the young people through an iterative process involving the four components of my data analysis. The different components represent collaborative and participatory sense-making, a reflexive process of making sense of ideas alongside others (De Jaegher and Di Paolo, 2007; Nind, 2011).

Thomas and O'Kane (1998) argue that 'both validity and reliability can be improved by allowing children an active part in determining their participation in the research and how the subject matter is approached' and 'then allowing children to participate freely and to share in the interpretation of data can enhance both' (p. 345). My study supports these claims by demonstrating that the young people's participation in data analysis at different points of the study enriched my understanding of the topic and contributed to our co-production of knowledge.

It shows a model for how their participation in the interpretation of data can be embedded organically. It does not necessitate training them to be formal researchers if that is not their preferred form of participation (Nind, 2011). Thus, approaches to participatory analysis can be formal or informal, unstructured or structured, explicit or implicit. The significant aspect is that there are clear roles for the young people as sense-makers of the data and the adult researcher, which could include co-learner, facilitator, trainer or mentor (Nind, 2011).

The workshops and the reflexive discussions allowed the young people to affirm or question the findings that best represent their views and priorities. While I cannot claim that the findings will be generalisable or representative of the truth of what happened, I can claim that they represent a collection of perspectives and recommendations of young people that point towards a young people-centred view of sexual violence and its prevention (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). The distinct insights that arose in the analysis and this thesis suggest that these are

the critical concerns of these particular groups of young people and their perspectives on the impact of sexual violence in their lives (Donovan *et al.*, 2023).

## 4.5 Ethics

Balancing young people's participation rights and protection rights is an essential ethical consideration in researching sensitive topics such as sexual violence (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025). I adhered to ethical guidelines that minimise the risk of harm to their participation and maximise the potential benefits as outlined in the Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC) guidance documents (Graham *et al.*, 2013). Reflexive, responsive, and responsible ethical practice in research with children and young people entails following ethical principles while having the space and support to make real-time decisions in the field, in what is the most ethical option (Beckett and Warrington, 2024).

I obtained ethical approval from the Durham University Department of Sociology. I applied for amendments to my ethics application to adjust as needed with changes in the research process, such as extending the age group of young people to include 13-year-olds after I conducted my first workshop with the youth group in November 2022. The age group was changed to accommodate young people who were interested in joining but were not covered in my initial application. I also responded to the ethics committee's initial feedback on my application about the parental consent process such as separating it from the young people's consent form. I discuss this further in the next section.

The ethics committee acknowledged the need for flexibility in participatory research when approving my application. Thus, ongoing ethical decisions such as adjustments to the incentives were conducted in line with the approved flexible framework. These did not require regular updates to the ethics committee since the original application and subsequent amendments accounted for these adjustments. I also regularly consulted with my supervisors to guide my decisions and ensure that they are ethically grounded. The day-to-day decisions balancing ethical considerations involving consent, flexibility, and safety are more ethically justified than rigidly adhering to decisions made when submitting the ethics application (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025).

I committed to the ethics of care in prioritising the well-being of the young people and the relationships we formed with one another while working within traditional ethical regulatory frameworks (Ellis, Hickle and Warrington, 2023; Warrington *et al.*, 2024). Mutual respect, democratic participation, and active learning were among the ethical principles I embedded in the research process (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University and National Coordinating Center for Public Engagement, 2022). Mutual respect was

communicated in the co-production of the safe space agreements. Democratic participation was practised by involving everybody and listening to their voices in the discussions, as well as my concerted efforts to share decision-making with young people. Active learning was a core aspect of the research, wherein young people learned from each other and with me.

## **Consent**

The Gillick competence principle underpinned the informed consent process. It considers young people's competency to make decisions and understand their implications. It is often applied to young people aged 14 years and older, such as those with access to healthcare or youth work (NSPCC, 2020).

I modelled a young people-centred informed consent process. It followed the principle of offering clear information about the study in developmentally appropriate and understandable formats. I reminded them at the start of every session and during the sessions that their participation was voluntary. They can opt out of any activity or any session. I consistently respected their decisions throughout the research process (Centre for Social Justice and Community Action, Durham University and National Coordinating Center for Public Engagement, 2022).

Embedding the consent process involved recognising the evolving capacities of young people to make informed decisions about their participation in the research. I designed the consent form (Appendix 1) and recruitment materials (Appendix 3) creatively and used understandable and accessible language (Learning Together project, 2024).

My supervisors guided me in refining the earlier drafts of these materials since I used academic language or jargon. They advised me to reflect on the concepts used and they can be made more accessible to young people. For instance, instead of the word 'prevention', it can be more understandable to them if it is worded as 'to stop sexual violence from happening'. Since I am not a native English speaker, I did not know which terms would be common knowledge to young people at their age. This point highlights the significance of constant reflection on the accessibility and inclusivity of language used in materials shared with young people.

As part of my informed consent process, I allowed the young people to try the workshop activities in the first workshop of both groups to help them make an informed decision about participating in future workshops before going through the formal consent process of signing the forms. shared experiences, shared impacts, and shared outrage”

experience, such as trying the activities and deciding together on the topics for the succeeding workshops. This knowledge contributed to their decision to continue participating.

Another research study on sensitive issues with young people followed a similar approach to my project. Ellis, Hickle and Warrington (2023) discuss that a young person only provided her informed consent when she gained enough information about the activities and how her data would be used. She then became one of their most engaged participants. This example demonstrates the significance of ongoing consent and enabling young people to make informed decisions.

Due to the topic's sensitive nature, the young people in my study may have felt unprepared or uncertain about what to expect with their involvement. They may have felt pressured that they have already committed to joining the project (Rabe, Jobson, & Cairns, 2025). They may not be aware that they can still say no even if their parents or the gatekeeper said 'yes' on their behalf. These spaces where the workshops were held (education and youth work) tend to have a clear hierarchy and roles between adults (youth workers and teachers) and young people, with the adults holding the locus of power and decision-making.

My approach involved a balancing act between following formal ethics requirements on obtaining informed consent while allowing the young people to make an informed decision (Rabe, Jobson, & Cairns, 2025). Providing them the space to make the decisions without the pressure of the formal consent process follows an ethics of care that prioritises the relationship with and emotional well-being of young people in the research process (Banks, 2022).

I negotiated with the research ethics committee about parental consent. Their recommendation on my initial ethics application was to include a clause on parental consent in the informed consent form. Instead of the opt-out provision in the consent form of young people, I provided the gatekeepers with a general announcement/letter that they could send on my behalf to the parents of young people involved in the organisation (Appendix 2). It provided an overview of the research, stated that some young people in the organisation would be involved, and stated they could contact me with any questions or concerns. I indicated that I would follow and respect the decision of parents who explicitly expressed that they did not want their child to participate to avoid tension between the young person, parent, and organisation.

I proposed this strategy to strike a balance between upholding the autonomy and rights of young people to consent to their participation in the research; responding to parental concerns

when expressed; and ensuring young people's protection by sharing the accountability with the partner organisation, including the communication with the parents and guardians. This proposal also addressed issues where requiring parent permission may reduce participation rates and exclude young people who are typically marginalised in sexual violence research. The gatekeepers of both groups confirmed that they did not need separate parental consent forms or processes. The youth group was covered by the general parental consent form that they signed for the young people's participation in youth work activities.

### **Promoting safety**

Co-creating safety needs to be embedded in a broader, consistent approach to promoting feelings of safety in the project. Building and sustaining relationships among the young people and I contribute to co-creating safety. In the next chapter, I will elaborate on co-creating safety with the young people and my reflections on researcher safety and well-being. Due to the topic's sensitive nature, I ensured that safeguards were in place to minimise potential harm to the young people. I developed a safeguarding plan, which I discussed with the gatekeepers and the young people (Appendix 12). The plan includes clear procedures and a frame of reference for decisions (Beckett and Warrington, 2024). It outlines the child-centred and trauma-informed approach and core values underpinning the plan and actions to mitigate the risks of harm and emotional distress, and manage confidentiality within the bounds of legislation.

I informed the young people about the information I would need to pass on, including any confidential information. I told them that they would be part of the decision-making whenever that is the case. It is essential to be explicit with children and young people and give examples of the information that will be shared and what would not be with the gatekeepers (Hackett, 2017). I followed both organisations' child protection protocols. I obtained an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service Certificate for working with children and young people.

In both groups, another adult was always in the room, like a youth worker or teacher. The other adult did not participate in the discussions yet they were present for safeguarding purposes, following good practices of having two adults in workshops with young people on sensitive topics (Warrington, 2020). Having another adult in the room was helpful for me in managing my concerns about managing potential distress or disclosures since they would be on hand immediately to support the young person. Their presence allowed me to focus more on facilitation, knowing that support for safeguarding was immediately available. Still, I also reflected on how having another adult might have affected some young people's responses,

related to social desirability bias, and not saying anything that the other adult might overhear. I mitigated this by reassuring the young people that the other adult is there for safeguarding purposes and they can speak freely. This approach demonstrates how safeguarding was a shared commitment and responsibility between the gatekeepers and me.

I co-developed risk assessments with the gatekeepers to reduce potential harm or re-traumatisation. For instance, the youth manager opted not to include a young person who had a sibling who was involved in sexual abuse. I respected his professional judgment based on safeguarding issues. He also communicated with the young person who understood the decision.

The two groups co-created safe space agreements (Figure 5). My approach replicated the good practices of other participatory studies using shared agreements to ensure everyone's voices are heard and valued (Warrington, 2020; Doucet *et al.*, 2022). The young people decided on the values and principles necessary to work together, such as respect, trust, and understanding. We also had a calm box with stress balls that young people can use when feeling anxious (Warrington, 2020). I paused at different points of the activities to confirm if they wanted to proceed with the discussions or if they wanted to step out of the room. There was no instance of a young person stepping out of the room due to distress.

As part of the strategies for managing distress or disclosures, I signposted the young people to different options for seeking support if they felt any distress or wanted to talk to someone after the workshop. These included me, the youth worker or teacher, and helplines. At the end of the sessions, we also had feedback activities to ask how they felt about the activities, mainly when we talked about sensitive issues.

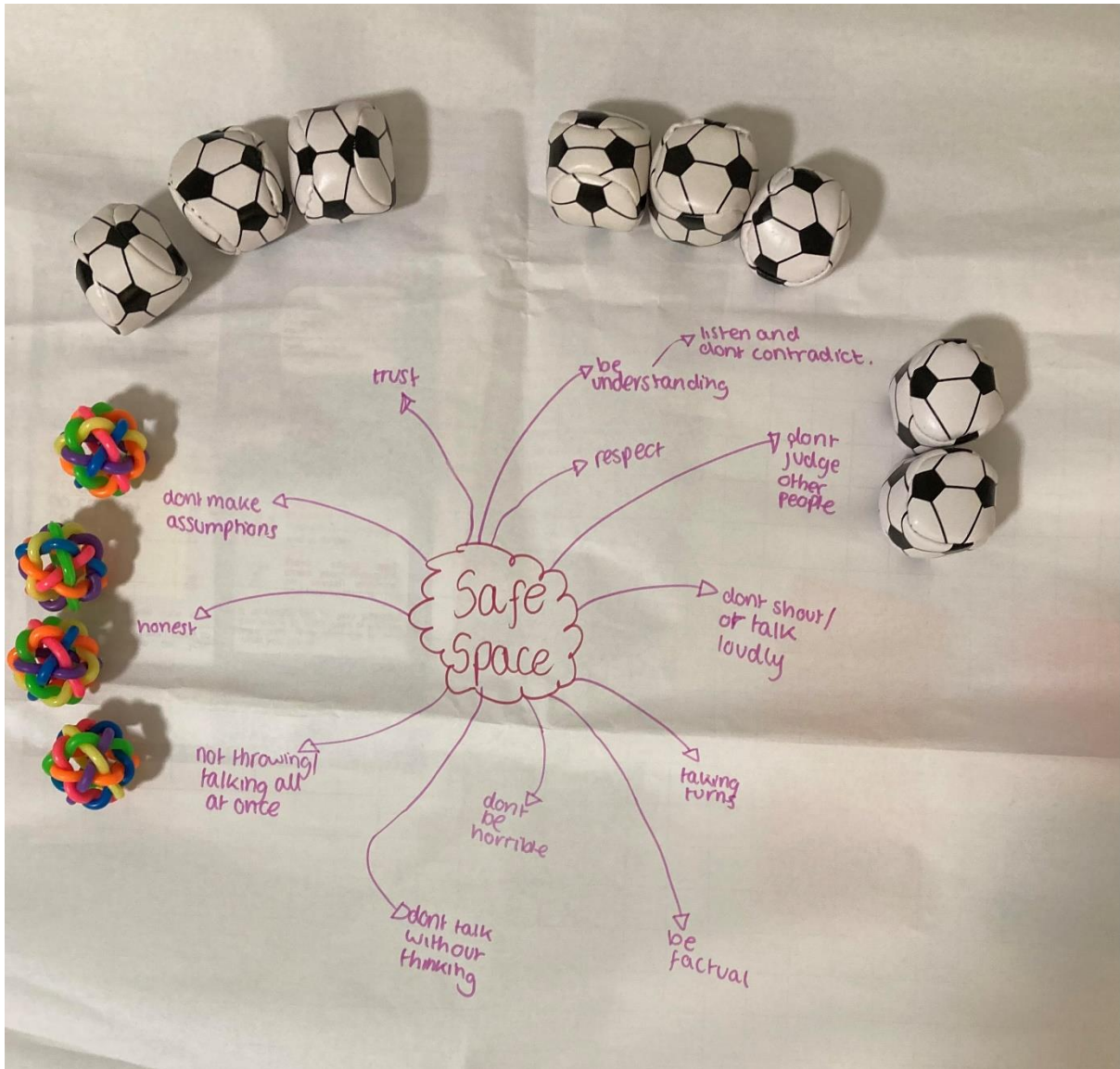


Figure 5: Youth club safe space agreement

The activities were designed to discuss their attitudes and insights about issues related to sexual violence instead of their personal experiences. I reminded them that some situations might be relatable and challenging to discuss, so they can opt-out if any conditions or discussions trigger them.

There were no reports of distress from the young people during or after the sessions. There was no clear disclosure except for a young person sharing her experience with a teacher who was complimenting her or breathing behind her back, which made her uncomfortable. I talked to her after the session to ask how she was feeling. She responded that she felt fine. I also asked the youth worker present to be certain. He said he had heard her talk about the incident before. They thought that the teacher could be 'pretty problematic', but the school did no concrete action. He assured me that she was comfortable talking about the topic.

Researcher safety is essential due to the sensitive nature of the topic. I regularly communicated with my supervisors to discuss my emotional and mental well-being. I experienced instances in my personal life related to my research topic, which affected my research journey in some periods. I will discuss this aspect in the next chapter. The research also affected my response to these instances. I sought support from my supervisors in navigating these situations and took breaks from the study as advised. I requested additional support through the counselling and therapy services from the university and the NHS.

### **Benefits of participating in the project for the young people involved**

Some of the benefits of participating in the project include an increased awareness and knowledge about sexual violence and the process of learning from their peers. These were reflected in the feedback sheets and will be discussed in the next chapter. Another benefit was the opportunity to contribute to social action and change. It was evident in the process of identifying gaps and recommendations in RSE and school responses to sexual violence done by the FE group. It was a space for action made possible by their participation. I ensured that the young people were informed about the updates on disseminating the research findings. While they may not have been involved in the data analysis and writing up of the outputs, they generated the insights that shaped the findings and should be engaged in presenting the relevant outputs. The young people and I have shared co-ownership of the creative outputs from the workshops. While I stored the physical copies of the outputs, I told the young people that their thoughts, words, and insights made the outputs and findings possible. While I might be the sole author of the thesis and succeeding outputs, I will consistently credit the young people for their input.

Providing compensation or incentives for young people's participation is a common ethical dilemma (Pavarini *et al.*, 2019). In the initial plan included in my ethics application, I intended to provide appreciation vouchers to young people joining the project as co-researchers in a specified period. Since the research design changed to a series of workshops and young people's attendance varied, I decided not to provide vouchers. Instead, I provided food such as snacks and sweets for each session, which the young people appreciated. I will discuss reciprocity in relationship-building in the methodological findings in the next chapter. I also provided certificates of appreciation to all young people at the end of the workshops. Certificates of participation are essential in supporting them in their professional development and can be used for their job or academic market applications (Goessling, 2020).

### **Confidentiality and anonymity**

All data was stored following the GDPR and Data Protection Act (2018). The confidentiality and anonymity of the personal data, especially in the group activities, were protected by using

young people (numbers) to refer to them in the findings and discussion chapters. Since most of the small group discussions were self-directed by the young people, it was often difficult for me to identify the speaker and attribute remarks to a specific young person. No comment from participants was connected to their names or any identifiable information. The organisation names are also anonymised following the request of a gatekeeper for safeguarding purposes. Complete confidentiality was challenging to achieve in group activities. Nevertheless, during the informed consent process and the activities, I assured them I would not share their identities or responses.

#### **4.6 Strengths and limitations of the participatory research approach**

Methodological and ethical reflections in participatory research are critical in recognising when researchers may unintentionally reproduce similar power dynamics with young people in traditional research. In this section, I discuss my reflections on the strengths and limitations of the participatory approach related to managing power dynamics and the implications of the flexible research design.

##### **Managing power and relational dynamics in group-based activities**

The group-based approach is both a strength and a potential constraint. It is a strength since it allows young people to learn together, find support from one another, and feel solidarity in similar experiences. Despite my efforts to facilitate and ensure everyone can participate, consistently keeping the balance was difficult.

I paid close attention to group dynamics, how it might affect the young people's interactions, and how to navigate these (Learning Together project, 2024). The youth club had mixed-gender groupings and had a wide age range (aged 13-18). I reflected that this composition occasionally impacted the dynamics of the discussion. For instance, I observed that some boys were more vocal than some girls in the big group discussions. Similarly, I noticed that the older young people were sometimes more vocal than the younger ones. Thus, I adjusted my facilitation approach to proactively ask young people who seemed quieter if they wanted to say anything, while also being mindful of their comfort level in speaking in the big group. I also provided other ways they could participate, such as writing on post-it notes. These dynamics influenced whose perspectives might be more prominent, which I reflected on during my analysis. My approach followed participatory facilitation practices as recommended by young people engaged in the Learning Together Project (2024).

Relatedly, I encountered practical constraints in the youth club, which affected the group and power dynamics. The room was relatively small and served as a resource room and office for

other youth workers, so there was limited space for the activities. It was challenging to facilitate the big group discussion with 8-12 young people; sometimes, they spoke simultaneously.

Another limitation of the group-based approach is the risk of social desirability bias, meaning they might provide answers that differ from their opinion. I addressed this by using hypothetical situations. Then, they could answer from the perspective of characters instead of their personal experiences, which could be more pressurising for some of them. Like other group-based research methods like focus group discussions, one of the limitations of my approach is that there may have been limited spaces for individual insights to be explored in depth. It affected their representation in the analysis which has been fully anonymised.

Nevertheless, the young people-led approach showed the potential for young people to moderate the discussions and encourage the less vocal ones to participate. There were instances when they were conscious that they were speaking more than others and would open the space for others to speak

### **Implications of the emergent research design and flexible participation approach**

The participatory research approach involving a series of workshops required substantial time and resources for planning, coordination, implementation, and analysis (Dunn and Mellor, 2017; Warrington, 2020). There was a short turnaround time between some of the sessions, which affected the planning and ongoing analysis of the data. This approach is substantially resource- and time-intensive and can be emotionally and mentally taxing, as I have experienced. The brief time allowed by the gatekeepers of the FE group made the process even more intensive, with me as the lone researcher and facilitator. My reflections on this aspect can help ensure the researcher's well-being by putting in breaks and seeking support as necessary.

Previous studies have reported that young people are sensitive when rushed or urged to work on the research following the researcher's pre-defined agenda or timeline. It may result in their disengagement from the project or questioning the benefits of their participation (Felner, 2020). Similarly, I reflected upon the reasons for some young people discontinuing their participation in the project. It could result from my flexible consent process, respecting their decision to opt-out at any point. It could also be that they no longer found benefit or value in continuing their participation in the project. Their involvement in the workshops depends on their youth club attendance. Since I started the sessions, most of the older young people (16-18 years) stopped attending youth club sessions due to other commitments with work and college. These are critical learning points for me in the participatory process. It is a messy, unpredictable, and uncertain process wherein I can do my best to make it as participatory and valuable as possible for the young people, yet they may still respond to it differently.

The intermittent participation of the young people across the different workshops meant that the insights came from different people at various points of the workshop who had varying input levels. It was also affected by the collaborative and flexible approach, which meant some of the issues raised were not discussed with all young people (Allnock *et al.*, 2022).

Integrating a wide degree of openness in the research process is a strength of this project. It enabled young people to influence the focus of the study and co-produce the methodology. The increased space for flexibility has also been challenging at times. The facilitation process entailed immense agility and creativity. There were several instances where I had to improvise an activity on the spot that was not in the session guide I prepared. I had to respond to unexpected remarks from young people or had to negotiate the discussions to the young people's preferences. I needed to make several in-situ decisions.

The flexibility of the sessions, while a strength, can pose challenges in replicating the approach. Adjusting to young people's feedback on the spot may be difficult for some researchers. It may also have safety considerations since some planned activities would have safeguarding elements embedded, so changing it at a moment's notice can make it challenging to address potential risks. Nevertheless, the project's strength is that the approach can be adaptable to balance structure and flexibility as the context and group composition demand it.

Additionally, the young people-led group discussions are among the strengths of my project. It exemplified the co-learner role I adopted in the project and enabled the young people to focus on the issues that mattered to them. One slight limitation of this approach is that some themes and issues were not discussed in depth since some were less vocal when I asked follow-up questions in the big group compared to the small group. Nevertheless, the benefits of this approach outweigh its potential limitations since it highlights the value of young people-directed discussions with adults having a facilitator and co-learner role.

## **Concluding thoughts**

This chapter discussed the participatory research design for my doctoral project, and I elaborated on the rationale behind the decisions. Young people co-produced the methodology and research focus through their different forms of participation throughout the research process. Working with and learning from the young people has been a fulfilling experience. I was always amazed by their brilliant ideas and their passion for change. They have led the project in exciting directions that I did not anticipate.

# Chapter 5 Methodological findings and reflections: Lead, Listen, Learn

## Introduction

Building on the previous methodology chapter, I will present my research's methodological findings and reflections. In this chapter, I discuss the three core components that underpinned my participatory approach: Leading (shared decision-making), Listening (sustained relationship-building), and Learning (co-producing knowledge collaboratively). This chapter addresses the research questions: how young people understand sexual violence (RQ1) and how they can exercise their agency in preventing sexual violence (RQ2). I demonstrate how the participatory approaches facilitated their participatory sense-making and collaborative learning about sexual violence and enabled them to take an active role in co-creating knowledge and recommendations on sexual violence and its prevention.

## 5.1 Leading (shared decision-making)

Young people's participation varies across the decision-making points negotiated between the researcher and the young people. They decided on some of the project's most significant aspects: the nature of their involvement and the priority topics of the workshops. Enabling young people to make these decisions as a collective entailed flexibility and openness on my part. This flexibility is a key aspect of my participatory approach, making it adaptable and responsive to young people's needs

### Valuing young people's preferred roles and participation in the research process

Recent research with children and young people on violence and abuse highlighted the significance of providing support and space to enable their control and choices in the process (Beckett and Warrington, 2024; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024; Warrington *et al.*, 2024). This approach entails balancing their participation and protection rights through continuous negotiation and shared decision-making (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025).

In my study, shared decision-making with the young people entailed respecting their preferred participation and role, even if it differed from my original plans. As I discussed in the methodology chapter, at the introductory workshops, both groups of young people expressed that they did not want researcher roles and wanted to join and contribute to the workshops. Reflexive practice enables researchers to change their approach when necessary, following young people's opinions when participating (Canosa, Graham and Wilson, 2018). This flexible approach acknowledges that the participatory process may be slightly messy and organic, enabling young people's experiences and perspectives to guide the project (Cahill, 2016).

I expressed doubts to my supervisors that the project might be less participatory if I designed the workshops. They assured me it would still be young people-centred. They discussed the significance of structure and flexibility, especially with a sensitive topic such as sexual violence. It may cause pressure on young people to help design activities when they find it difficult to even talk about or understand this concept. The challenging nature of the topic and their expressed limited awareness may lend themselves to an approach facilitated by an adult researcher. Similarly, Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2024) note how young people may have different preferences for participation that do not overload them and vary in time based on their ability and time. The ongoing feedback loops in my project enabled me to understand how they preferred to participate. For instance, their feedback below illustrates the differences between the two groups.

*More discussion and communication rather than writing our ideas to become more comfortable (FE group workshop 5)*

*More worksheets help us understand (youth club workshop 8)*

The anonymous feedback above reflects a common sentiment among several FE group members who preferred free-flowing discussions rather than being encouraged to write their insights on post-it notes or a big piece of paper. Meanwhile, some youth club members preferred to have more writing tasks, such as worksheets. They appreciated having the worksheets to help frame and prompt their thinking during our discussions. In the FE group, I observed that writing hampered the flow of their conversations since they had to pause while someone else was writing. Still, they appreciated writing their input when they were done creatively and visually, like co-creating a body map or a tree of life.

*I enjoy using the body map as it is visual and fun (FE group, workshop 3)*

*The maps were constructive ways of bringing ideas together (FE group, workshop 3)*

Writing their views this way facilitated their discussions since they matched the points to specific parts of the visual output. It implied that they were not as keen on writing their insights for the sake of recording them on paper. Asking them to write benefited me as a researcher, so I had visual outputs of the workshops. However, their feedback reveals that it did not enhance their discussions or participatory experience. This point illustrates instances when the administrative requirements of the researcher may not align with the young people's preferences.

Seeking their feedback helped me gain insights when some activities did not match the intended objective. For instance, several FE group members shared in their anonymous feedback that ranking activities or situations in terms of harm was challenging. They felt that a different activity would have been more appropriate.

*It's not bad, but there may have been a different method of articulating it. (FE group, workshop 4)*

*I struggled with the number rankings 'cause not very nuanced. There's not much difference in the numbers compared to the event. (FE group, workshop 4)*

My methodological reflections on the young people's preferred forms of participation underscore the significance of agility and openness to adjusting accordingly, when feasible, to their expressed needs. I am conscious that the young people had individual preferences that may differ from other group members. There is no 'one size fits all' approach so I tried to be as inclusive as possible based on their different needs and preferences (Learning Together project, 2024). Thus, I adjusted upon seeing their feedback or providing different ways for them to participate in the workshops. For instance, in the FE group, they liked writing tasks initially, but eventually, they felt that it was not working for them.

Engaging the young people through anonymous feedback enabled them to share their perspectives without fearing my reaction, such as offending me. Sharing their views demonstrates that I co-created a safe space for them to express their insights and feel assured that I would respect their opinions and would not react negatively. For example, I acknowledged that the ranking activity was not the most appropriate fit. I thanked them for letting me know that they preferred other activities. I practised humility and openness in learning about the young people's feedback and acting upon their views, embodying shared decision-making. My approach prioritised their choice and control in the research process (Learning Together project, 2024).

### **Supporting the young people's priority topics for the workshops**

Following the principles of co-production and shared decision-making, I wanted to involve the young people in determining the priority topics that we will cover in our workshops. In both groups, I asked them to write their answers individually on Post-it notes, and grouped them into similar topics. Then, we went through a voting process to rank and identify the topics. Before the topic selection process, I planned several activities for general concepts or issues that we could do. The workshop summary with the topics per session is in Appendix 4.

<b>Youth club priority topics</b>	<b>FE group priority topics</b>
How to defend themselves against sexual violence	Effects on victims. The fact that it does not have to be physical
Men's experiences of sexual violence	Shame
What is sexual violence?	How are young people being educated about sexual violence (especially in secondary schools)

Table 4: List of selected workshop topics

As seen in the table, the youth club's top two preferred topics were 'how to defend themselves against sexual violence' and 'men's experiences of sexual violence'. I admitted that I did not prepare a specific activity for those topics. In response to my remark, one of the young people suggested we could start with their third topic, 'What is sexual violence?', which might be easier than the other topics. I agreed with her and thought of an activity that connected to it, such as listing the behaviours that made them uncomfortable. Similarly, when we did the sorting and ranking activity with the FE group, I adapted an activity to fit one of their priority topics.

Admitting to the young people that I did not have a suitably prepared activity aligned with my co-learner role and the emergence, becoming, and inexpertise ontology (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). I presented myself as vulnerable and humble, seeking to learn from and with the young people instead of unilaterally making decisions based on my prepared plans. I could have gone ahead with one of my prepared activities, even if it did not relate to their priority topics. However, that would contradict the purpose of engaging them in the issues that mattered to them. It would have positioned me similarly to traditional research with an all-powerful adult researcher who steers decision-making (Gallacher and Gallagher, 2008). I wanted to show them I was open, adaptable, and responsive to their priority issues.

My exchange with the young person reflected the essence of constant communication and shared decision-making. It showed how she responded to my expression of humility and vulnerability in the research process by proposing ideas that would make it easier for me. These moments were subtle yet meaningful in how they shaped the research process.

Consistent with these initial exchanges of communication and shared decision-making, the openness of the workshop design and research process enabled the young people to influence the direction of our conversations and activities. There were several instances when they wanted to do a different activity from what I had prepared. For example, the youth club in Workshop 3 said they wanted to do role-play in the next workshop. Then, in Workshop 4, they did not seem keen to engage in the role-play activity I prepared, so I asked them if they wanted to do a different activity instead, and they concurred. I pivoted by turning the activity into a

game where they could respond to healthy, unsure, or abusive situations. The young people said they enjoyed the activity, which felt like a game show.

These instances demonstrated the 'messiness' of participatory research with young people when they might respond differently from what we expect (Spiel *et al.*, 2020). Instead of seeing them as setbacks or frustrations, I appreciated them as crucial aspects of participatory research process. It involves holding space for priorities that emerged from our discussions even if they may feel disconnected from the initial project focus (Warrington, Langhoff and Warnock, 2024).

The young people's feedback validates the benefits of my flexible approach.

*Allowed for choice in subjects/not limited (FE group workshop 1)*

*We chose what was important to us (FE group workshop 5)*

The feedback above demonstrated that they appreciated that they chose the topics and that I did not constrain or direct them to my pre-set agenda. Notably, more young people from the FE group expressed feedback on choosing the topics than the youth club. The school setting where we conducted the workshops tends to be adult-led spaces where they have little room to influence the choice of topics and flow of discussions. In contrast, in the first workshop, I already set the tone for them to choose the topics we will explore together collectively.

### **Shared roles in co-creating safety**

As I previously discussed, there were no disclosures or expressions of distress from the young people in our workshops. However, in one of the sessions, a volunteer youth worker felt uncomfortable with the discussions and needed to step out of the room. I talked to him and the youth manager afterwards to ask how he felt. I referred him to helplines in case he wanted to speak to someone about it.

I felt worried and guilty about this situation. The young people were attuned to my emotions and reassured me that they felt fine. They also validated that they and the youth workers knew that the topic of the workshops could be distressing. It would be difficult to predict what issues could be triggering.

Young person 1: I think we all know what happens in these things, it can be sensitive (girl, 16-18 y.o)

Young person 2: Even if you haven't been through this but you feel uncomfortable, everyone can find something here. It's like harsh topic, even if you didn't go through it, you can know the effects just make you aware of it (girl, 13-15 y.o)

This situation illustrated how the young people co-created safety with me. Their roles in leading and shared decision-making do not only involve the thematic discussions, but also in co-creating safe spaces. As the adult researcher, I ensured their safety and well-being throughout the workshops. At that moment, we shared the role of reassurance of our well-being. I asked them after that if they just wanted to pause for the day and play a game to lighten the mood, which they agreed.

Researchers may feel guilt and question the appropriateness of their approach and the impact on others 'being triggered'. These represent opportunities for reflective conversations on proportional responses to risk, informed by the young people's perspectives and not the researchers' anxieties (Beckett and Warrington, 2024). The young people's insights reveal their awareness of the risk of discomfort due to the topic's sensitive nature. They decided to continue their participation with this in mind. Supporting their agency and autonomy in the research process entails respecting their informed decisions about their involvement. They are informed by their needs and developmental capacity (Beckett and Warrington, 2024).

#### **5.1.4 Synthesis: Outcomes of shared decision-making**

Genuine redistribution of power aspired to in participatory projects with children and young people may be constrained when researchers are reluctant to relinquish decision-making power to their co-researchers (Felner, 2020). By respecting their preferred form of participation, my project demonstrates the essence of shared decision-making by letting go of the control from my original plans and adapting to the young people's preferences (Learning Together project, 2024). Allowing the young people to choose the topics of the workshops enabled me to understand the issues and concerns that are important to them.

#### **5.2 Listen (sustained relationship-building)**

Being listened to is significant for young people with lived experiences of sexual violence since they are rarely asked what could make things right for them or what could be done differently (Cody, 2017). Research also found that listening can be an effective intervention that fosters trusting relationships between young people and adults (Setty and Hunt, 2023).

The contexts of the two groups involved different forms of engagement and relationship-building. I had a flexible and long-term engagement with the youth club across 24 months, while I had a fixed-term engagement of five weekly workshops with the FE group. I adopted different approaches to respond to the two groups' specific contexts and group dynamics. Since the youth club members already had pre-existing relationships with one another, the

focus of relationship-building in that context was on developing connections with them on a prolonged basis as a researcher and youth club volunteer. Meanwhile, the FE group did not know each other before the project, so they needed more time and support to build rapport.

Promoting reciprocity and care in sustaining relationships with the youth club

Intergenerational differences between adults and young people affect the power and relational dynamics in the participatory research process (Punch, 2002; Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019). In conducting this project, I was acutely aware of my identity and positionality as a Filipino woman in my thirties and the differences in my identity from the young people from North East England. Not only can I not fully understand young people's lives in the present, but I also draw from different experiences, cultures, and languages.

In embarking on this project, I was worried about bridging these differences and developing rapport with the young people. I drew on my cultural and personal values in connecting with them. I embedded my values, such as gratitude, generosity, and reciprocity, in the relationship-building process. Similarly, in their participatory research with Indigenous youth, trust was established between the researchers and the young people through time spent together and shared food (Reich *et al.*, 2017). Their time did not focus on the research activities and outcomes but on connecting and enjoying one another's company.

Additionally, I joined the centre as a volunteer to sustain the relationships with young people outside the workshops. Building and sustaining relationships is integral to a participatory approach with them. I did not collect data from them outside the workshops or ask them about anything related to the project and the topic. My experience as a volunteer helped me understand more about their commitments in the youth centre and their dynamics as a group, which sometimes reflected in the sessions. Volunteering was also my way of giving back to the organisation and its youth worker team, who have been incredibly supportive of my project.

### **'Janelle always brings good scran': Food and games as a bridge for fostering relationships**

Filipinos share food as a way of deepening relationships with one another. Food is a language of love and appreciation (Lo, 2021). In the first workshop, I brought food I thought the young people liked, such as sweets and crisps. Eventually, I involved them in choosing the food that they would like me to get. Choosing food for a workshop might seem like a trivial decision point, but it demonstrates that I value their views on different aspects of the participation process. Constant communication is crucial in not taking for granted some decisions that

adults make on behalf of young people, like choosing food, music, or activities. Involving them in selecting the food also helped build rapport. It fostered connections between us since informal conversations about what we were eating together were interspersed in our workshop activities. These casual conversations were integral to our relationship-building and the research process. Similarly, Warrington, Langhoff, and Warnock (2024) discuss their experience of maintaining time with young people. It was represented by small acts of reciprocity and mundane activities like making tea, deciding on lunch orders, and casual chatting.

#### Youth club workshop 9

Janelle: Yes, exactly... yeah ,so if you're done with the first one, you can move on to the next one.

Young person 1: My dad tried the KFC popcorn the other day.

Janelle: Yeah I saw it and I thought it's something you would like to try.

Young person 2: Yeah, my dad tried it the other day.

Young person 3: It smells weird.

Young person 1: Maybe Janelle will try it.

Young person 2: Let's blindfold her and try it.

--

Young person 1: So what are you planning to do after [your PhD]?

Janelle: So I'm hoping to stay in the UK and visit more young people.

Young person 2: Awww come back

Janelle: If I live in Durham, I will volunteer here still.

Young person 1: We want to know

Janelle: You're invited to my graduation at the Cathedral.

All: Yeah!

Janelle: You're all my guests. You can bring your dog.

Young person 2: So Janelle's birthday is next Thursday.

Janelle: Okay let's finish this and we can talk about it after. I'm just gonna listen about the party in my recording. Okay everyone, what did you choose in the definitions?

The excerpts of our conversations above reflect the fluidity of relationship-building with the young people, which was prompted by engaging in casual conversations within the workshops. I understood that they might need a break from speaking about heavy topics, so we shifted the conversation to other, more light-hearted topics like food. In these instances, I joined the conversations instead of interrupting them and urging them to focus on the activity. As seen in the exchange above, I gently nudged them to return to the activity after we chatted.

Reciprocity in the relationship-building process from the young people happened in subtle moments of sharing food. For instance, when the youth club members ordered food, they invited me to eat with them. '*You gave us spring rolls so we will give you pizza and cookies*' (field notes). The sharing of food and resources is especially significant due to the disparity in access to resources between the young people and me. When they did have access through

the youth club, they ensured that they would reciprocate in their capacity. Food became a shared language between us in developing our rapport and relationship.

Aside from food, games became an avenue for rapport-building. I integrated food with games in some sessions by doing some competitions with food as the prize. Several young people in the youth club particularly liked the integration of food and games in the workshops, as reflected in their feedback:

*'I like it because of food and fun' (youth club, workshop 3)*

*'I liked the food and how Janelle made it fun and enjoyable' (youth club, workshop 8)*

Due to the sensitivity and seriousness of the topic, fun and enjoyment may not be typically associated with sessions related to sexual violence. Still, I embedded the fun element into the sessions to make it an enjoyable experience for the young people and to balance the heavy emotional impact the discussions can have on them. Cody (2017) notes that young people did not want their involvement to be tedious, feel like work, and wanted to have fun, creativity, and comfort.

My approach and the young people's feedback demonstrate the intangible elements of the participatory process, which encouraged their continued participation in the workshops. I valued the relational outcomes, such as the young people's enjoyment and rapport-building casual conversations, even if there may be some trade-offs in time spent on the activity discussions. Relational and project conceptual outcomes are interrelated, such that the relationships we sustained through the project enhanced the quality of the findings (Bird-Naytowhow et al., 2017; Reich et al., 2017; Warrington, 2020).

### **"Since when were you a Taylor Swift fan": using pop culture to connect with young people**

I felt anxious for the first few months of fieldwork about not connecting with the youth club members outside the workshops. I did not want our interactions to be transactional as part of the sessions. It was easy for me to connect with children and young people in the Philippines, so this experience flummoxed me.

I was afraid of rejection in the youth club's young people-dominated spaces, especially when they were hanging out in friend groups. The power dynamic has shifted in these young people-centred spaces since they can accept or reject my presence as an intruder in their circle. I was conscious that I was not seeking to be their friend. Still, I wanted us to establish rapport outside

the workshops, enabling our conversations within the sessions to be more comfortable and engaging.

I realised that connecting with young people entails listening differently. We found common ground as fans of Taylor Swift. It enabled us to find a shared identity and community as fans, which crossed the boundaries of the typical adult-young person relationship. It set me apart from other adults since I was no longer just a workshop facilitator and volunteer but could be one of them by being a 'Swiftie' (i.e. Taylor Swift fan). They invited me to join their circles when listening to music. For me, these moments felt like milestones signifying trust and comfort which translated to better rapport in the workshops. For instance, I used music and our common fandom in our games to lighten the mood in some discussions.

### **'Are these used socks? No, she obviously bought those for us': gifts as tokens of appreciation and gratitude**

Aside from food, providing gifts and tokens was part of the relationship-building with the young people of the youth club. The statement in the heading illustrates an interaction with young people when I gave them socks as Christmas gifts. They used it as mittens when we had a snowball fight after our workshop, showing the fluidity of interaction inside and outside research spaces.

Gift-giving was embedded in the flow of our interactions rather than planned at specific times or milestones of the project. These were grounded in the cultural Filipino values of gratitude and reciprocity (Pineda, 2024). I wanted to thank the young people for participating in the project through gifts. Similarly, young people in other projects wanted to communicate that they do not have to share their views, it is a gift (Learning Together project, 2024).

For instance, I brought back gifts from places where I presented at conferences like Iceland and Scotland. I was awarded the best poster presentation at the European Conference on Domestic Violence in Iceland. During the presentation, I kept saying I could not bring the young people with me there, but I represented them in graphic form. The conference attendees and organising committee responded well, resulting in the award.

The young people were delighted that their voices were on the poster. Their statements below illustrate that it was valuable for them to know their work and thoughts are essential to adults they consider as esteemed and hard to reach.

"The professors saw what we said!"

"Wow, we were in Iceland with you."

I reflected upon the reality of whose voices get heard and validated by academia, often seen as inaccessible by young people. My poster presentation serves as an example of reimagining the representation and participation of co-researchers in the academic community.

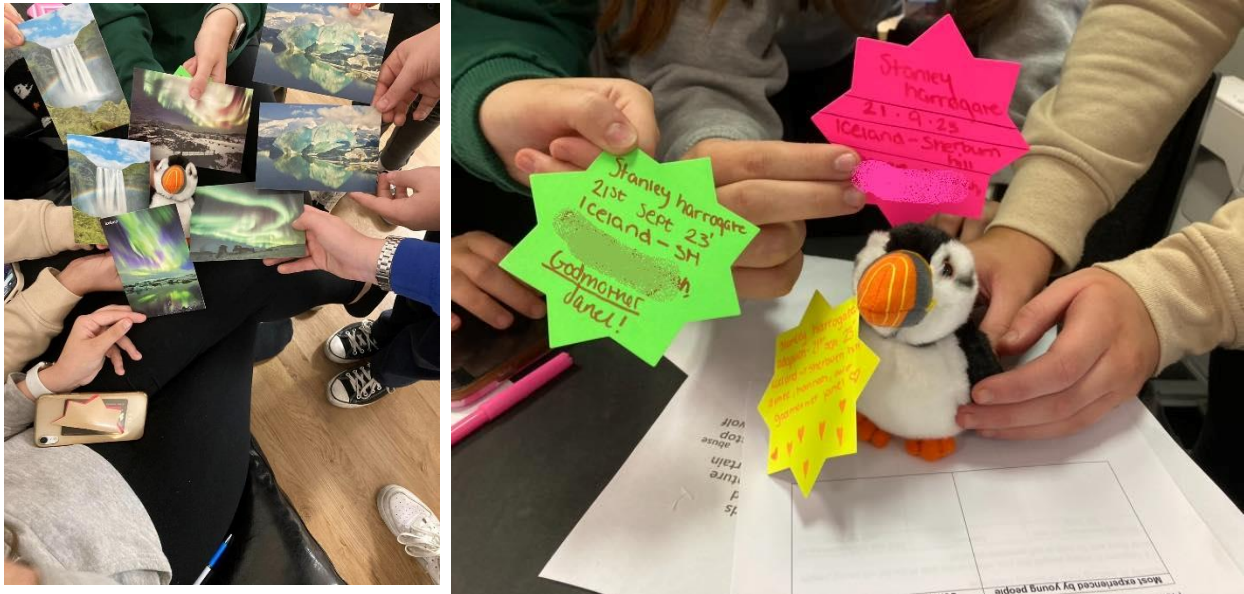


Figure 6: Gifts and tokens following a conference

Janelle: So before we start, I have to say that the reason that we have all these gifts [postcards and puffin] is because I went to Iceland and I presented the poster that we all did.

Young person 1: Omg I remember doing this.

They asked if I thought of a game. I said yes; I thought of a specific game that I knew they would enjoy involving music and the puffin, too. (field notes, Workshop 9, youth club)

The intricacies of relationship-building happen within and outside the physical spaces of the research project. The young people were sensitive to these emotional beats, like when they asked how or why I bought the puffin toy from Iceland. They were curious about my intentions and asked about my thought process since these actions exceeded the project's scope. I reaffirmed to them how I held them in my mind even outside the physical spaces and how I chose gifts and activities based on what they would like. My approach illustrates a different dimension to relationship-building with young people and extends beyond the debates on providing compensation and incentives (McCarry, 2012; Pavarini *et al.*, 2019). Food, games, and gifts were intrinsic to the participatory and relationship-building process. They were not

compensation or incentives for young people's participation but symbolic representations of my cultural and personal values of reciprocity, gratitude, and generosity.

### **Developing trust in relationships through ongoing and flexible consent**

The youth co-researchers engaged by Reich *et al.* (2017) shared that building trust with them was one of the most crucial aspects of the research process. I fostered trust between the young people and me by practising ongoing and flexible consent. I acknowledged that their participation varied from workshop to workshop or moment to moment. Several instances with the youth club illustrated the ongoing consent in practice. In workshop 9, a group of girls who have been active since the start of the project seemed hesitant to tell me about rejoining the workshop after a food break.

*The youth manager told them I would prefer they be honest about their feelings. 'Janelle would rather that you be honest with her'. They said they were tired that night and did not feel like continuing. I stopped the workshop for the day and assured them that it was okay and that we could continue another time. (field notes, workshop 9)*

Most of them did not join the succeeding workshops. I took that as a sign that they felt comfortable that I would respect their decision and not pressure them. At that point, they had actively participated in the workshops for 10 months, so it was understandable if their interest had waned or differed from the beginning. Some joined the last reflective workshop I conducted a year later, demonstrating young people's varied interests, time, and commitments across a project (Wilkinson and Wilkinson, 2024).

Researchers need to be sensitive and aware of the issues of power that may affect a young person's ability to consent or dissent regarding their participation in the research (Water, 2018). They are often unsure how to say no to adults due to traditional child-adult dynamics and whether their decisions will be genuinely respected. They usually wish to please or avoid consequences from adults they perceive as authority figures, such as the researchers (Heath *et al.*, 2007; Water, 2018).

Researchers should also be aware and sensitive to signs of dissent from young people and provide clear signals that they may opt out without repercussions or change their participation to which they are more comfortable (Moriña, 2021). In my study, consistent communication and asking them how they felt about continuing the activities and their participation is critical since the topic of the project is sexual violence.

This topic can be heavy and emotional, so young people may want to opt-out or stop participating for various reasons. It may be difficult for them to join when tired from school that day, even when I included fun games. The workshops could be a welcome change from their usual youth work activities, but sometimes, they may not have the mental or physical capacity to participate.

The participatory approach and ethos I followed valued their feelings and the relationships I developed with them over the practical aspects of the project, such as ending a workshop early. Empathy is a significant skill among qualitative researchers when engaging young people in discussions on sensitive topics. Like in my study, I prioritised their well-being over formal procedural ethics yet followed the ethical parameters (Ellis, Hickle and Warrington, 2023).

My approach to consent involved a balancing act of dealing with uncertainties in the practical aspect of the PhD and respecting their decisions and flexible ways of participation. I recognised that young people's unpredictable modes of participation, like wanting to stop the workshops earlier than planned, could affect the findings generated for the PhD project. Nevertheless, I valued it more that they knew that their choices were respected and that their relationships mattered to me. I adopted a core principle that they are more important than the data (Learning Together project, 2024).

### **Building trust through responsiveness to the young people's relational needs**

Existing relationships between group members in co-productive spaces could affect how they engage in co-production (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). In my project, some young people in the FE group wrote after the first workshop that they needed more time to feel comfortable with each other, given the topic. They did not know each other well before the workshops. One of them said: *I think with the nature of the topic, some people may be nervous and I hope everyone can be patient with each other*" (anonymous written input, FE group).

I acted upon their expressed needs by including more rapport-building activities. For instance, in the second workshop with the FE group, our icebreaker activity was human bingo. It involves asking questions to other members of the group who will fit the category to get to know each other.

**B      I      N      G      O**

Someone who is left-handed	Someone who likes to dance	Someone who's favorite food is pizza	Someone who has broken a bone	Someone who's met someone famous
Someone who is afraid of spiders	Someone who plays sports	Someone with the same birthday month as you	Someone who wears glasses	Someone who ate breakfast this morning
Someone who is an only child	Someone who loves TikTok	<b>Free!</b>	Someone who loves playing video games	Someone who can sing or rap
Someone who is a Lakers fan	Someone who likes Marvel movies	Someone who has siblings	Someone who has a pet at home	Someone who has the same favorite color as you
Someone who's an only child	Someone who's favorite subject is Math	Someone who has been out of state	Someone who is still in their pajamas	Someone who likes waking up early

Figure 7: Blank human bingo card

I demonstrated my commitment to listening to them and engaging them by acting on their feedback from the first workshop. At the early stage of our relationship building, it was a breakthrough moment of trust for them to see if I genuinely listened to them. Given the school setting, it may have been difficult for them to grasp what valuing and listening to young people meant in practice. When conducting research in schools, there is a risk that children and young people may interpret the participation in the research as schoolwork and consider the researcher in the teacher role (Punch, 2002).

*I explained the project and the importance of listening to young people's voices.*

*I also emphasised that this is a collaborative project and wanted them to lead the discussions. (field notes from FE group Workshop 1)*

The young people's feedback from this second workshop reflected that they appreciated my adjustments based on their comments from the first session:

"More comfortable session (i.e. getting to know one another)" (FE group workshop 2)

"Good ice breaker to be able to feel comfortable around peers" (FE group workshop 2)

## **Synthesis: Affective outcomes from the relational approach**

Among the key objectives of participatory research with young people is ensuring that their participation has benefited them (Graham *et al.*, 2013; Bird-Naytowhow *et al.*, 2017). The benefits should outweigh the potential harm due to the sensitive nature of the research (Graham *et al.*, 2013; Bovarnick *et al.*, 2018).

A notable outcome of the project is that the young people articulated the benefits of their participation. Affective and relational aspects are important yet overlooked outcomes or indicators in participatory research. These outcomes are even more valuable due to the topic of our workshops on sexual violence, which can be emotionally heavy or distressing. It also represents a change from their experiences in RSE classes when they felt they were not as comfortable or understood due to the traditional pedagogy of lectures.

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and limited spaces for young people to discuss their views openly, safely, and comfortably, it is vital to establish trust among them and with me as a researcher. Trust is critical in knowing that they will not be judged or criticised for their views, even when they differ from others' opinions. As shown in my study, trust and rapport between the young people and me as a researcher are built and sustained over time. Research relationships based on reciprocity, such as time, food, games and conversation in our workshops, can reduce the hierarchical nature of the research process (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007).

The young people's feedback below demonstrated that my relational approach resonated with them:

*[Janelle] outlined "Nothing leaves this room" – comforting (youth club workshop 5)*

*It was just an open space where there was no judging and she was genuinely interested in what we had to say and we don't often get that (youth club workshop 13)*

The excerpts show examples of recurring feedback across the workshops and from both groups. Several young people from both groups expressed that I helped make them feel safe and comfortable. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of sexual violence, it is crucial to promote feelings of comfort and safety among young people when conducting research and activities with them.

The relational approach discussed in the previous sections contributed to their positive feelings. This section's methodological findings and reflections on listening and relationship-building highlight the significance of sustaining relationships with young people in the participatory research process. These promote their enjoyment of the activities, alleviating distress due to the sensitive topic. The relational approach upholds their ongoing and flexible consent, valuing their feelings and our rapport over the generation of thematic findings and outcomes. Despite some trade-offs in time allocations in the workshops, the approach enriched the knowledge co-production process by integrating rapport building and co-creating safe spaces to facilitate the co-generation of findings and insights about sexual violence and its prevention.

### **5.3 Learn (co-producing knowledge collaboratively)**

In this section, I discuss how the participatory workshops promoted the young people's learning about sexual violence and its prevention. I will explore the co-production of knowledge about sexual violence as a product of cumulative learning among them and with me as the researcher. The learning and co-production process enabled the generation of young people-informed insights, which will be discussed in more depth in the succeeding chapters. Lundy and McEvoy (2012) state that participatory methods with young people entail creating safe, inclusive, and engaging opportunities for them to express their views freely and develop strategies to support young people in forming their views. They challenge assumptions that young people already have predetermined opinions and that participatory methods are needed to uncover these views.

As evident in my earlier discussion of the young people's priority topics, they wanted to understand and identify sexual violence. Going through this process entails sharing inputs from my research and understanding of sexual violence, yet also opening spaces for dialogue if these are relevant to them.

#### **Collaborative peer learning**

Young people learn better and are more comfortable discussing sensitive topics with others (Cody, Bovarnick and Peace, 2023). Young people-centred discussions entail promoting safe, open, and non-judgmental spaces for conversations with adults taking on facilitator roles rather than pedagogical roles of imparting information (Warrington, 2020; Donovan *et al.*, 2023; Renold *et al.*, 2023).

Feedback from both groups in my study demonstrated how they valued the experience of learning from one another. Workshops were spaces for reassurance, contestation, conscious-raising, and learning together (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). For instance, the FE group members

came from different secondary schools and found common ground and solidarity in sharing their experiences across other schools.

*I learned more about sexual violence and how normalised and widespread it really is – especially in schools (FE group, workshop 5)*

*I learned that it's not just /my previous secondary school that has problems with sexual violence and fails to deal with them correctly (FE group, workshop 5)*

Following a similar methodology of participatory workshops as Donovan *et al.*, (2023), the workshops in my project allowed the young people to express 'shared experiences, shared impacts, and shared outrage' (Donovan *et al.*, 2023, p. 22), on RSE and schools' responses to sexual violence. There were several learning and connecting moments between them as they discussed together. They were keen to make the space comfortable and open for each other.

Consistent with the findings of Donovan *et al.* (2023), the co-production process of the workshops served as opportunities for consciousness-raising among the young people. They could share differing opinions during the workshops based on their experience. For instance, in the youth club, we did some small group activities that enabled them to learn from the perspectives and experiences of young people of a different gender.

*Several young people said they enjoyed the gender box activity and liked seeing the other group's perspective. They were surprised that there were similar experiences. The girls did not want to read the slurs that boys get called when they step out of the gender box and said that must be a challenging experience (field notes, youth club, Workshop 1)*

Keddie (2023) reports on young people's critical awareness and active engagement in group discussions, which challenge the gendered and heterosexualised norms that they encounter. Exchanges between the young people in the small group discussions showed the potential for these critical reflections on gendered norms and assumptions.

The young people's feedback reflected that they appreciated the approach of having young people-led discussions:

*The large amount of paper gives us more space to talk and express ourselves (youth club workshop 2)*

*I liked how we were able to put forward our own opinions so I could understand other people's points (FE workshop 4)*

These feedback insights highlighted the significance of young people-led discussions and the opportunity to learn from and with each other. Their feedback reiterated the insights on safe spaces in the earlier discussion about feeling comfortable sharing their views and learning from each other. Peer learning and dialogue are significant in the topic of violence and abuse due to the taboo nature of the issue, where they do not have much space to speak about the topic with other young people.

The openness of young people-led discussions enabled them to decide on the flow of their conversation with minimal interference from me, since I adopted the co-learner and facilitator role. The young people's feedback highlighted that they valued group work as an approach to developing ideas and opinions.

*Hearing other people's opinions was insightful (FE workshop 2)*

*Group work allowed for more opinions to be heard (and a contrast in opinions)*

*(FE workshop 3)*

Their feedback aligns with previous research that showed how young people valued participation in group work as an opportunity to connect with others in spaces where they can collectively reflect (Hamilton *et al.*, 2019; Whittington, 2019a; Donovan *et al.*, 2023). They were interested in learning about other young people's views on a sensitive and taboo topic. The research project served as a vehicle for them to share their views and learn from each other. Their perspectives align with research findings on young people's preferences for interactive and participatory methods for learning about gender, sexuality, consent, and related issues (Whittington, 2019a; Setty, 2022; Donovan *et al.*, 2023; Renold *et al.*, 2023).

### **Reciprocal learning in co-producing knowledge**

Bilateral knowledge exchanges between young people and adults value their knowledge as experts by experience, from which adults also have much to learn (Egid *et al.*, 2021). The adult facilitator role can help shift the power balance between them. It demonstrates the commitment of adults to consider them as competent researchers by letting go of control so young people can carry out the research in their own way (Cuevas-Parra and Tisdall, 2019).

I took an active role in co-learning and co-producing knowledge on sexual violence with the young people. I was mindful of not imposing my insights, yet not silencing my contributions by taking a purely facilitator role instead of a researcher (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025). Throughout the workshops, I checked my understanding and did not assume I already had the

right interpretation (Learning Together project, 2024). The interaction below during the concept mapping activity with the youth club illustrated my approach (Figure 10):

Janelle: How do you understand sexual violence?

Young person: does it have to be a definition?

Janelle: however, you understand it

Field note: I put mine at the same time as they were writing, and we connected and built it together

'boundaries are crossed'

Janelle: This is my understanding, I want to know how you see it

Young person: "I'm not really clever"

Janelle: All answers are correct. We're just combining everything we think.

The co-production of knowledge among us involved the generation of insights in a cumulative manner. I conducted periodic participatory sense-making across different workshops to validate my understanding of their insights and involve them in deciding the focus of our succeeding discussions (Bjorbækmo, Greve and Asbjørnslett, 2022).

The collaborative concept mapping activity with the youth club in workshop 3 (Figure 8) exemplifies ongoing and reciprocal learning with the young people. I placed cards that represented my understanding of our shared insights on sexual violence. I used young people-informed language from previous workshops, such as "unwanted", "without consent", "inappropriate", and "uncomfortable". They then placed their cards. Together, we identified similarities in our inputs. These include "not respected/disrespect", "unwanted", "without consent/no consent", "inappropriate", and "not okay".

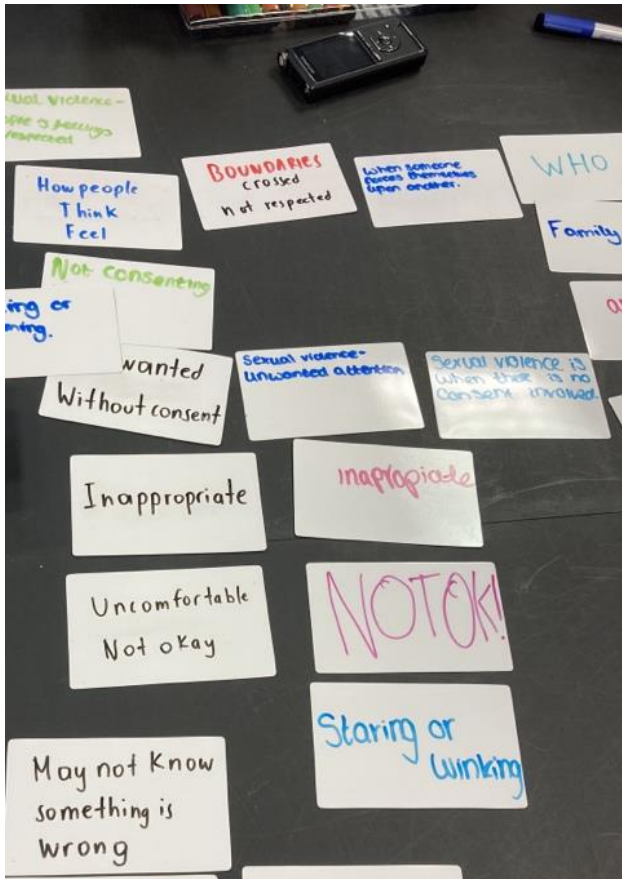


Figure 8: Collaborative concept map on understanding sexual violence. My answers are in black ink while the young people's are the colored ones

The similarities in our language indicated mutual learning and participatory sense-making (Bjorbækmo, Greve and Asbjørnslett, 2022). Compared to the first session, they no longer used words associated with physical violence like rape and assault. Meanwhile, I used words which were different from those in academic literature. By engaging with the young people in reciprocal dialogues, I gained a deeper understanding of the language that they preferred to use in communicating about sexual violence and related issues.

Compared to RSE lessons with clear learning outcomes and a baseline level of understanding, I cannot ascertain the tangible improvements in their knowledge. I also cannot determine if there would be any changes in their behaviour resulting from their participation in the workshops. Still, the young people's feedback indicates what they have gained from participating in the project.

*I learnt about different types of sexual violence which helps me to identify and understand people's problems (youth club, workshop 8)*

*I have learnt that men and women face different struggles (youth club, workshop 3)*

Their feedback above shows that they have developed a better understanding of sexual violence, with some citing that their perspectives on the issue have changed. Peer learning enabled them to enrich their understanding of the issue by learning from other young people's views. Aside from the topics and issues they have learnt, their feedback revealed the nuances of the learning process facilitated by our collaborative, participatory approach:

*I like it because it makes me feel acknowledged about the topic (youth club, workshop 3)*

*Educated, understood (youth club, workshop 3)*

These statements illustrate the relational outcomes of learning. They align with my goals for the research in making young people feel valued in the project beyond their traditional student roles and identities. Expressing that they felt 'acknowledged, relieved, and understood' indicates a deeper emotional and relational meaning to their participation. It aligns with the findings of prior studies that young people wanted to be listened to and actively involved in building a creative learning environment with each other and the teachers (Sex Education Forum, 2022; Renold *et al.*, 2023; Economics, 2024; Setty, 2024)

The young people's feedback at the end of the workshops for both groups reflected the aspects of my facilitation and participatory approach that they valued:

*I think it was done extremely well. Since a safe space was created, making us all feel safe to share our views (youth club, workshop 8)*

*She, in a structured, caring way, explained the dangers and the info school doesn't tell us. So it was refreshing to be treated like adults (youth club, workshop 13)*

The second statement demonstrates a nuanced reflection based on their previous experiences with adults like RSE following the traditional adult expert model (Setty and Dobson, 2023). Their positive view of 'being treated as adults' indicates how my approach respected and promoted their agency in the participatory learning process by sharing relevant information while ensuring they felt cared for.

### **Learning in doing participatory research as a reflexive process**

Meaningfully engaging children in participatory action research necessitates researchers' critical reflections (Pavarini *et al.*, 2019). Despite the proactive efforts of participatory researchers to exercise the virtues of care, compassion, and respect, they may also experience these as burdens and even put them at risk when navigating the complexities of relationships and the existing power differentials (Lenette *et al.*, 2019). They need to be honest and transparent in the accounts of their research work, which may be flawed, messy, and incomplete (Warrington, 2021). Other scholars have clamoured for more transparency in reporting the 'muddling through' and messiness of the participatory research process with children and young people (Spiel *et al.*, 2020; Fitzgerald, Stride and Enright, 2021). It entails ongoing reflexivity.

I acknowledged honesty, vulnerability, and uncertainty in researcher safety and well-being as critical reflexive learning points (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007; Silverio *et al.*, 2022). For instance, I felt emotionally and mentally exhausted at the seven-month mark of my fieldwork. Thus, I discussed with the youth club group if they wanted to continue. Some said they would be keen to continue, while others were unsure. I said that we could pause or stop the workshops at that point. I was uncertain when I would be in a better emotional state to resume the workshops, but I wanted to involve the young people in the ongoing consent process. We decided to pause for a few months while they were busy with summer activities.

Vulnerability and honesty are crucial in engaging young people on sensitive topics. Some researchers feel that self-disclosure with participants indicates reciprocity in the research relationship (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). However, I must also protect myself from being in a vulnerable emotional state that may cause undue distress to the young people too.

The stress and energy expended on the intensive nature of the research and personal circumstances took a toll on me, so I had to take a step away from fieldwork. Taking a break from the workshops proved to be a good decision. It allowed me to rest emotionally, physically, and mentally from conducting the workshops. I also started therapy during the break, which helped me process my issues and improved my emotional and mental state. Diving back into the data allowed me to take a step away from the workshop facilitation and planning to understand the data better and plan how I want to proceed with the project's next phase. They included participatory analysis and reflective workshops on the insights we have co-generated in the previous workshops.

My account of reflexivity, vulnerability, and honesty demonstrates the messy realities of doing participatory research with young people on sensitive topics. It is a critical learning point for early career researchers like me that we have lives and identities outside our study. Personal and emotional distress make it challenging to manage discussions with young people on an issue that affects our lives daily, like sexual violence. Engaging them on this topic entails immense enthusiasm, creativity, and mental and emotional energy, which personal experiences could constrain. I realised, in taking a break from fieldwork, that the PhD is essential but not at the cost of my emotional and mental health. Emotional and physical exhaustion in research occurs among qualitative researchers working on sensitive topics due to the sheer number of interviews or the research topic (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007). Researchers may also face various emotions such as vulnerability, guilt, pressure, fear, shame or distress (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007; Gaskell, 2008; Klocker, 2015). Exploring emotional responses (Gaskell, 2008), seeking debriefing with supervisors, accessing formal psychological support, reflecting in journals or diaries (Silverio *et al.*, 2022), and practising self-care (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007) are significant strategies for minimising the harms of researching sensitive topics and promoting researcher safety and well-being.

Promoting the well-being of researchers should not be an individual responsibility but should be shared with the broader research community, such as supervisors, colleagues, academic departments and ethics committees. I am fortunate to have PhD supervisors who are always concerned for my emotional and mental well-being and supported me when I was undergoing my issues and navigating difficulties in writing and analysing data that are related to my circumstances. We also included researcher safety in the risk assessment for my ethics application, which should be standard practice. Researchers often prepare to ensure participant protection and safety, especially when engaging children and young people, yet there should be proportionate plans and strategies for promoting researcher well-being (Dickson-Swift *et al.*, 2007; Gaskell, 2008).

Promoting learning about participatory research with children and young people on sensitive topics like sexual violence requires being open and vulnerable about the realities and messiness of the process. More attention is needed to promote safe spaces for researchers working on these sensitive topics with children and young people. It includes how we dealt with under-acknowledged emotions such as failure, confusion, sadness, and uncertainty by being vulnerable, open, and empathetic with one another as friends and colleagues.

My experience and reflections remind us that we are people first and researchers second. Our mental, emotional, and physical health should not be taken for granted in pursuit of the

outcomes we want for our research. We will also be doing a disservice to the young people because they are sensitive to our emotions and motivations as researchers and respond accordingly. We owe it to them and ourselves to be in the best position to do meaningful research.

## **5.4 Synthesis**

In their systematic review of participatory methods with children and adolescents, Freire *et al.* (2022) lamented the limited robust methodological description in most of the included studies, which may make it challenging for the reader to be confident about the value of the participatory approach and the validity of the findings. In Chapter 4 and this chapter, I covered the suggested checklist for sufficiency of reporting the participatory approach: intent, geographical area, facilitator description, participant description, intervention and resource description, phases and methods of the research, and evaluation of the participatory approach. This chapter focused on evaluating the participatory approach and the factors influencing engagement. I synthesised the insights based on the identified categories of Freire *et al.* (2022) in the discussion below.

### **Logistical and activity enablers and barriers**

These include the type of activities, the extent of interaction between the adult researchers and the project timeline (Freire *et al.*, 2022). My study demonstrated that our multi-modal and diverse activities during the workshops enabled them to participate effectively. Their feedback illustrated that the activities allowed them to communicate their views better individually and collaboratively with other young people. For instance, one young person wrote: '*The body map is a good way to get our ideas down on paper and to expand on them*'. Additionally, the format of the activities, such as individual, paired, and small group activities, allowed more significant and different interactions between them (Freire *et al.*, 2022). As I discussed previously, the logistical barriers to my study were the FE group's short timeframe and the youth club's physical space limitations. They affected the young people's participation differently. The shorter timeframe with the FE group meant that I did not develop a deep rapport with them, and the physical space limitations affected the quality of the discussions when they sometimes spoke over one another.

### **Collaboration, shared decision-making, and engagement enablers and barriers**

These factors include flexibility in allowing the young people to lead, the extent and type of shared decision-making and the steps taken to prepare them to reflect on their co-researcher role (Freire *et al.*, 2022). I discussed the enablers and barriers to these categories in the Lead

and Listen sections. My study demonstrated the significance of respecting and adjusting to young people's preferred extent of participation in the research. While both groups decided they did not want to adopt co-researcher roles, I embedded several opportunities for shared decision-making. The workshops promoted collaborative engagement among them, which they valued in their feedback. One young person said, '*Enjoyed cooperative work/conversations*'. One of the engagement barriers is that the long-term model for the youth club resulted in intermittent participation with only a small group of young people who engaged consistently in the different activities. The ongoing and flexible consent process influenced their varying levels of engagement.

## **5.5 Conclusion: Lego Model of Participation**

I introduce the Lego Model of Participation as a conceptual methodological innovation. It is represented by the three building blocks of Lead (shared decision-making), Listen (sustained relationship-building), and Learn (co-producing knowledge collaboratively). Legos are adaptable in building different structures depending on what the individual or group had in mind. Similarly, my co-production process with the young people entailed not having pre-existing outcomes or ideas in mind as we co-developed the content and methodology together. The 'Lego model of participation' meant that, in practice, we could rearrange the different pieces in various ways as a group. We recognised that everyone's contribution is valid and valuable. This approach supports researchers in developing participatory processes applicable to diverse contexts and relationships with young people in their projects.

I position the Lego Model as an example of how an epistemology of the South grounded on emotions (Santos, 2016) can inform methodological approaches in Western contexts by embedding relational values into the research process. Each block represents specific Filipino values: Lead (*paggalang*-respect) learn (*pagpapakumbaba* - humility), and listen (*pakikiramdam* – *sensitivity to others' feelings and unspoken cues*).

Focusing on building blocks frames them as enablers of participation rather than proposing a hierarchy of participation. Hart's (2008) ladder of participation has been influential in distinguishing forms of young people's participation in research. However, this metaphor has been mistaken in demonstrating the necessary sequential stages of participation, implying that the higher levels on the ladder are better forms of participation (Hart, 2008). Existing participation models do not consider the complexity and fluidity of the constantly changing interactions between young people and adult researchers (Horvath *et al.*, 2012). Young people's varying levels of involvement in the research process should not be considered in a hierarchical manner of 'more' or 'less' (Rabe, Jobson and Cairns, 2025).

My study offers this model as an alternative to these approaches that emphasise categorising and labelling the type of participation achieved. Instead, I advocate for researchers' constant reflections on the values and principles that anchor their research and that they apply throughout their engagement with young people. My approach aims to alleviate the pressure on researchers, particularly when their projects are participatory, a challenge I have faced myself. It calls for seeing participation as an ethos and ongoing commitment instead of a linear progression with specified labels.

The three components showed the ethical and practical considerations I embedded throughout the project to ensure young people's meaningful participation and safety. They are interrelated in promoting their agency, amplifying their voices, and valuing their diverse involvement in the project. My participatory approach demonstrated that nuanced discussions and ongoing dialogues with young people are critical when exploring concepts related to sexual violence. It involves not imposing fixed parameters of the concepts and opening spaces for the fluidity of their experiences, recognising their relational and temporal agency.

Overall, the young people's feedback on the workshops emphasised their appreciation and clamour for having safe, non-judgmental, and open spaces to discuss and learn about the issue of sexual violence together with their peers. Their insights demonstrated that my relational and participatory approach effectively co-created safe spaces for participatory learning throughout the workshops. They have a vital role in co-creating these safe spaces with one another by practising the values we included in the safety agreements.

# Chapter 6 Young people's perspectives on understanding sexual violence

## Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss how young people conceptualise and understand sexual violence using different participatory sense-making strategies outlined in Chapter 4 (Bjorbækmo, Greve and Asbjørnslett, 2022). It addresses the research question: How do young people understand sexual violence?

The first section delves into the integration of the participatory approach in enabling young people's sense-making. These include the concepts they immediately associate with sexual violence, naming behaviours and impact, describing them, and defining sexual violence. The second section will discuss how young people communicate about it using interconnected languages of discomfort and harm. Finally, the conclusion will synthesise the findings into a young people-informed model of conceptualising sexual violence.

This chapter presents findings that emerged through a participatory process shaped by young people's priorities and evolving understandings. In our first workshops, I encouraged each group to identify specific topics that they felt most relevant for us to discuss. The youth club chose to explore sexual violence, men's experiences, and self-protection, while the FE group focused on non-physical impacts, shame, and school responses. These priorities guided the order and depth of engagement, with the concept of understanding sexual violence becoming a central and recurring theme.

Instead of imposing definitions, I invited the young people to share their baseline associations with sexual violence, which initially reflected legalistic framings. We later unpacked their views through activities that introduced discomfort as an alternative lens. This is an emergent concept rooted in young people's language and my synthesis of literature on affective responses to everyday sexual violence. This framing enabled nuanced discussions about ambiguity, harm, and normative behaviours, and supported the young people's sense-making through mapping, vignettes, and reflexive exercises.

My decision to delay our discussions on adult-initiated policy definitions until later workshops allowed the young people's conceptualisations to evolve organically. This approach exemplifies conceptual nimbleness (Cloutier, 2024), adapting to young people's shifting understandings rather than following a linear trajectory. The findings reflect not only their priorities but also their agency in shaping the conversations, offering novel insights into the

significance of the emotional and relational contexts in expanding current understanding sexual violence.

### 6.1 Associating concepts

The first workshop, began with a word association activity to explore young people’s baseline understandings of sexual violence. Without providing a definition, I asked them to respond to the prompt: “What words do you associate with sexual violence?” In doing so, I aimed to uncover the immediate ideas and discourses about sexual violence that they have grasped through media, education, and other sources. Doing this activity seeks to determine the factors and concepts they would draw on when speaking about sexual violence without me providing a definition. The table below shows a synthesis of their responses.

A. Acts	B. Descriptive words	C. Impact	D. Outcome	E. People involved
Rape (5x) Assault (4x) Harassment (3x) Harassment/words that are of a sexual nature that make someone feel uncomfortable Horrible act of attacking someone in a sexual manner e.g. inappropriate touching or rape	Aggression (2x) Forced Consent No consent Unconsensual Misleading Fault Dominance	Flashback/PTSD Abortion Cuts and bruises Fear and lack of safety/security	Crime/jail Jail Police, people of authority to stop it from happening Punish	Predators (2x) Pedophile Men, misogyny Sarah Everard Johnny Depp

Table 5: Synthesis of young people’s inputs in word association activities

Their responses reveal a dominant framing rooted in criminal and legal discourse. Across both groups, responses include terms associated with legal offences like rape, assault, harassment, and aggression. These responses suggest that several of them understood sexual violence as equivalent to criminal offenses or illegal acts. They also expressed these association in their own words such as ‘a horrible act of attacking someone’ or ‘words of a sexual nature that make someone feel uncomfortable’. This indicates their

attempts to make sense of the concepts in their own words. It reflects the complexity in the influence of dominant legalistic discourses yet the limitations in available terms to make space for young people's varied sense-making.

A closer analysis of their responses across categories, behaviours, descriptive words, impacts, outcomes, and people involved, shows how their sense-making is shaped by perceived severity, physicality, and social consequences. For example, words such as aggression, cuts and bruises, crime, jail, and predators reflect associations with terms connected to justice and punishment. These insights underscore how some young people's understandings may be only shaped by broader discourses but also by their lived realities and educational contexts.

Whilst recognising differences in delivery across schools, it is possible that their RSE lessons framed sexual violence in a legal-illegal binary which could shape their association of the concept with criminal acts. These possibilities may help explain why some young people felt that using legalistic concepts is a familiar and safe approach when discussing sexual violence. However, these concepts are often limited in capturing the ambiguity and complexity of young people's experiences that fall outside of legal definitions.

My findings confirm existing research (e.g., Wallace-Henry, 2015; Whittington, 2019a) by showing how young people's baseline associations are influenced by perceived consequences and relational dynamics related to legalistic concepts. However, they also extend this work by showing how young people navigate these discourses through personal, affective language. This underscores the need for more nuanced, young people-centred framings. Recognising this, I introduced the concept of discomfort in later workshops to support more expansive understanding.

The young people's initial associations with the term sexual violence reveal a dominant view on legalistic and criminological framings, often referencing acts like rape, assault, and harassment. These associations suggest that their baseline understandings are shaped by formal education, policy discourse, and broader societal narratives. While this aligns with existing literature on the influence of institutional framings (Wallace-Henry, 2015), my findings extend this by showing how young people also use affective and relational language to describe harm, indicating a tension between formal definitions and their vocabulary.

This insight underscores the importance of beginning with young people's language and concepts when exploring complex concepts like sexual violence. It also leads into the next section, which examines how discomfort emerged as an alternative framing that enabled more nuanced discussions of harm.

## 6.2 Naming behaviours

Following the initial word association activity, I introduced the concept of *discomfort* to support young people in exploring subtler, everyday experiences of sexual violence. I provided the prompt, “What makes young people uncomfortable?”, to enable the young people in the youth club to generate a list of behaviours such as the list below.

Collated anonymously written inputs (Youth club workshop 2)

- Comments on appearance and clothes
- Catcalling/wolf-whistling
- Sexist jokes
- Inappropriate touching without consent
- Getting close to one’s personal space
- Winking/raising eyebrows
- Inappropriate or unwanted messages
- Inappropriate or unwanted photos
- Making someone feel inferior
- Hurtful words
- Staring

These inputs reflect young people’s capacity to identify a broad spectrum of behaviours that cause discomfort when using a different prompt than sexual violence. Many of these responses fall outside traditional definitions of sexual violence. Their emphasis on these behaviours instead of the legally-defined acts suggests a more nuanced understanding rooted in their lived experience.

The quote below illustrates how I framed this shift during the workshop:

Janelle: We have been asking what is sexual violence. It is essential to also look at everyday forms of sexual violence and not just the extreme cases. If anything makes you feel uncomfortable, something is not okay, or someone did something without you saying yes to it or you wanting to do it. Those are all forms of sexual violence. We’re going to map the different things that make young people uncomfortable. (youth club workshop 2)

My interpretation is that introducing discomfort as a framing enabled them to move beyond binary legal definitions and engage with the ambiguity and affective dimensions of harm. It is illustrated in their inputs in our collaborative concept mapping activity, as seen below:

Consistent with their previous inputs, the list of behaviours above reveals that some young people are concerned with a broad and diverse range of behaviours related to sexual violence. Notably, several young people stated that they wanted us to discuss more about the emotional and verbal forms of violence than physical acts. The findings show how young people's understanding of sexual violence intricately connects with their broader experiences of violence and abuse.

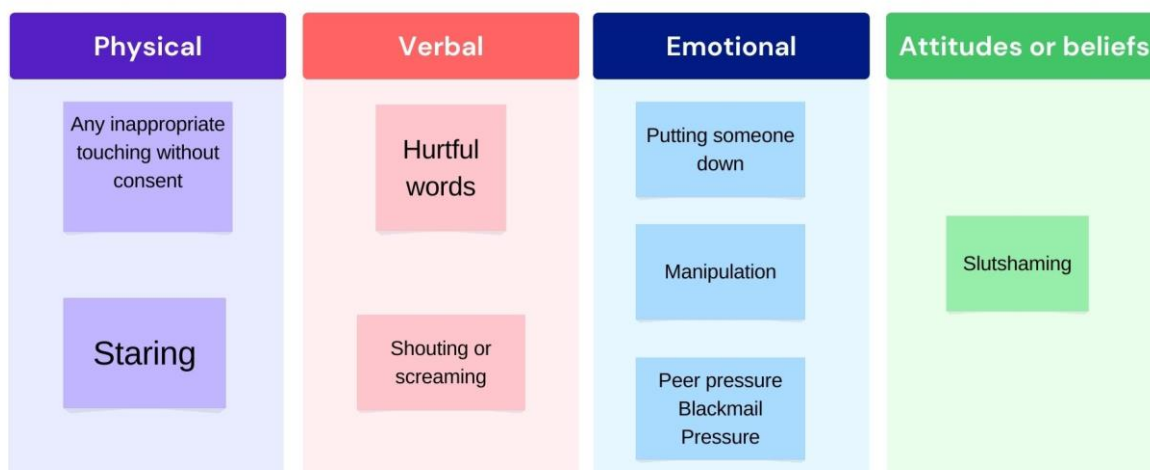


Figure 9: Concept map of behaviours and types of acts (youth club, workshop 4)

This aligns with Donovan, Butterby and Barnes (2023), who argue for recognising coercive and verbal behaviours as factors in conceptualising sexual violence. My study extends this point by showing how discomfort can serve as a conceptual tool to allow young people to articulate experiences that are often normalised or dismissed. The concept of discomfort emerged as a valuable alternative to legalistic definitions of sexual violence. The young people named a wide range of behaviours, verbal, emotional, spatial, that are often excluded from dominant discourses but still impacts them. Their responses suggest that discomfort is not only a felt experience but can also be used as a conceptual tool for identifying and naming everyday intrusions.

My study adds to this established knowledge of sexual violence and young people by suggesting that using sexual violence as a primary frame of reference for engaging young people in discussions may be insufficient. Moreover, it shows the value of using young people-informed constructs in expanding dominant framings of sexual violence. It also highlights the limitations of adult-centric frameworks that rely on severity or legality to define young people's experiences. The next section builds on this analysis by examining how young people describe and categorise behaviours using terms like emotional-oriented terms, further illustrating their nuanced understanding of sexual violence.

### 6.3 Describing behaviours

To further explore understanding of how young people conceptualise sexual violence, I facilitated reflexive activities in Workshops 9 and 10 with the youth club. Drawing from their earlier inputs, I collated a list of behaviours (Appendix 8), which participants then grouped using descriptive terms. The prompt of the activity was: ‘Which of the acts on the list do you consider as sexual violence? How would you group together the other acts? What would you call the group?’ This activity moved beyond naming acts to exploring how young people differentiate and experience them.

Activity 1: Not all acts are sexual violence, but they still make young people concerned

Which of the acts on the list do you consider as sexual violence? How would you group together the other acts? What would you call the group?

Sexual Violence	Group name:	Group name:	Group name:
	rudeness	inappropriate	harassment
b e o p q r t	a f l m v	d g h n s	c i j k

Activity 1: Not all acts are sexual violence, but they still make young people concerned

Which of the acts on the list do you consider as sexual violence? How would you group together the other acts? What would you call the group?

Sexual Violence	Group name:	Group name:	Group name:
	uncomfortable	weird	unnecessary
B E J K N O P	C G L V	A H I	A D M

List of Acts

- (A) Comments on appearance and clothes
- (B) Attacking or assaulting someone sexually
- (C) Catcalling/ Wolf whistling
- (D) Sexist jokes
- (E) Inappropriate touching without consent
- (F) Getting too close in someone's personal space
- (G) Winking/ Raising eyebrows
- (H) Inappropriate or unwanted text messages
- (I) Inappropriate or unwanted pictures
- (J) Revenge porn/ Sharing someone's sexual photos or videos to others
- (K) Blackmail
- (L) Making someone feel inferior/ Putting someone down
- (M) Hurtful words
- (N) Slutshaming
- (O) Rape
- (P) Forcing themselves on someone
- (Q) Doing sexual things without consent even in a relationship
- (R) Getting someone drugged so they can do inappropriate things
- (S) Begging for nudes
- (T) Doing sexual things to someone when they're asleep
- (U) Forced against their will
- (V) Staring

Figure 10: Reflection activity inputs

Their categorisations (Figure 11) reveal an affective and diverse vocabulary: terms like weird, uncomfortable, inappropriate, rude, and unnecessary were used to describe behaviours. Notably, the acts they labelled as sexual violence rarely overlapped with other categories, suggesting a clear boundary in their conceptual framing. However, the diversity of descriptors varying based on the young people's individual sense-making also indicate that the same act could be interpreted differently depending on context and emotional impact.

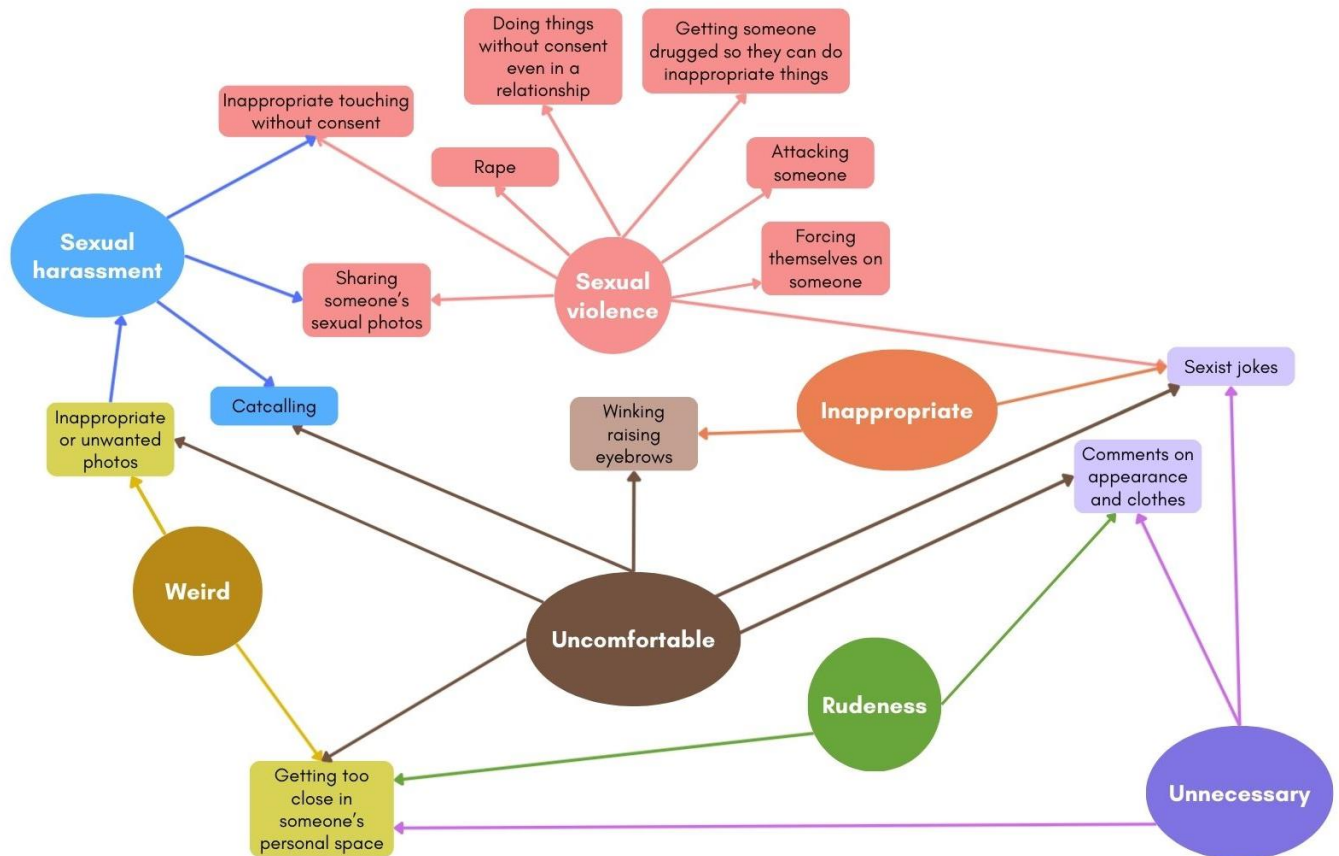


Figure 11: Spider map visualisation of young people's inputs on categorising acts

These findings resonate with Taylor et al.'s (2021) qualitative study with high school students in the United States on dating violence and Sweeting et al.'s (2022) mixed-methods study with Scottish young people (aged 15-17), who observed that their participants often use affective and action-oriented language rather than technical or legal terms. My study builds on this body of work by focusing on sexual violence specifically and showing how the young people in my study rationalise why they use certain labels.

*Weird means 'things that happen all the time, but you get on with your day which are not as bad as others.*

*Inappropriate means 'when it's weird but past the point of weird and it's something you expect someone to say something'.*

*They're not at all socially acceptable by many people. Like it's not normally what we want to happen to ourselves.*

The young people's statements articulated nuanced reasons for grouping the acts based on their experiences. These reflections suggest that discomfort and disrespect are central to their sense-making.

Discomfort is implied in the words: 'weird', 'uncomfortable', and 'inappropriate'. It entails identifying and communicating personal discomfort about other people's behaviours. It signifies a feeling of something bothering or concerning the young person.

Disrespect is another relevant factor. The terms indicate 'rudeness', 'unnecessary', and 'not nice'. Rudeness may be defined as an act of disrespect to someone. Some young people define sexual violence as disrespect for someone's feelings. This finding aligns with Honkatukia's *et al.* (2023) study with 36 Finnish young people (aged 15-19) wherein some participants constructed their sexual citizenship by identifying themselves as individuals who knew and respected their boundaries and those of others. My study builds on this work by adding the young people's view that associates disrespect with disregarding a person's feelings or thoughts through lack of communication about a sexual situation.

Consent is a process involving communication, negotiation, and respect for sexual boundaries. Disrespect can then be interpreted as a manifestation of the lack of consent or no active effort to obtain it from both individuals involved in the encounter. Discussions on pressure and consent connect to young people's understanding of rights, such as the right to have one's feelings respected (Sweeting *et al.*, 2022). Aligning with the insights of the young people in my study, using force and disrespecting the other person's feelings contribute to identifying the behaviour as 'not OK' (Sweeting *et al.*, 2022). In my study, I interpret that some young people's association of disrespect with consent indicates that the latter term is a significant factor that shapes the young people's understanding of sexual violence.

Their views suggest that disrespect and discomfort are part of their sense-making of sexual violence through their descriptions. These terms illustrate the commonalities specified by young people: *"It's not normally what we want to happen to ourselves"* (*unwanted – disrespect*) and *"It makes us feel not normal"* (*weird -discomfort*). My study highlights that these two concepts and commonalities are also captured in the young people's understanding of sexual violence as 'not okay' and not acceptable.

Persistence also emerged as a factor in describing sexual violence. In the youth club workshops, the young people explained how repeated actions especially after being told to stop is considered harmful

*'It can be considered abusive if it doesn't stop and is constant'*

*'If it [is done] continuously, it is a problem' (youth club).*

This reflects a pattern-based understanding of violence and abuse where repetition of the action and disregard of expressed boundaries signify harm. This aligns with Kruger *et al.*'s (2022) study with Black students in the United States on sexual harassment where young

women emphasised the significance of assertively objecting to harassment as the victim and as a bystander. Meanwhile, in my study, the young people identify persistence and disrespect of clear assertions for the behaviour to stop as an indicator of the behaviour being abusive or harmful. Both studies highlight how young people interpret continued behaviour after clear objection as a violation of agency and consent.

In my study, young people went further by articulating the emotional consequences of being ignored or invalidated:

Janelle: How do you differentiate when something is violent or inappropriate? How do you draw the line?

Young person 1: When you tell them to stop and they still do it (girl, 13-15 y.o)

Young person 2: If you tell them to stop and they don't and get mad at you. (girl, 13-15 y.o)

This adds a layer of emotional complexity to the concept of persistence. The young people in my study highlight that it is not only repetition of behaviour that matters, but the response to boundary-setting. My interpretation is that they are not just identifying harm, they are actively asserting their rights and interpreting disrespectful reactions as part of the abuse. This builds on the findings of Sweeting et al's (2022) study whose participants also drew on the concept of their rights.

My study findings extend Kruger et al.'s (2022) and Sweeting et al's (2022) work by foregrounding the emotional and relational dimensions of conceptualising sexual violence. They also reinforce the importance of recognising young people's distinct frameworks for understanding harm, which often go beyond rigid legal definitions to include affective and interpersonal cues.

In Workshops 9 and 10, young people categorised behaviours based on frequency and perceived harm.

Most experienced	Most harmful
Catcalling	Rape
Getting too close in someone's space	Inappropriate touching without consent
Commenting on appearance	Sharing someone's sexual photos)
Winking	Attacking someone sexually
Staring	Blackmail
Sexist jokes	Forcing themselves on someone
Inappropriate or unwanted messages	Getting drugged so they can do
Inappropriate touching without consent	inappropriate things)

Table 6: The young people's classification of acts based on frequency and harm

The table illustrates how young people frequently encounter subtle, everyday sexual behaviours, which might be difficult for them to identify as harmful or classify as sexual violence. Meanwhile, the list demonstrates a recurring perception across the workshops about the known harm of severe physical acts of sexual violence. They include the acts which many young people felt confident in identifying as sexual violence.

Their responses reveal a nuanced understanding of sexual violence that extended beyond legal definitions. Notably, inappropriate touching without consent appears in both lists, as one of the most commonly experienced behaviours and one of the most harmful.

This dual classification presents an important insight. While the phrase does not explicitly mirror legal terminology, young people consistently recognised its seriousness. In our discussions, they explained that physical contact, regardless of context, was often perceived as more harmful than verbal or emotional behaviours. This perception reflects the influence of dominant legal framings, where physical acts are more readily associated with sexual violence. However, it also reveals young people's distinct frameworks for assessing harm, which include emotional discomfort, boundary violation, and relational dynamics.

I knew definitely which ones were sexual violence... but for the other ones, I found it strange. Mentally and physically, they are like the big ones... could be verbal or physical.

They have something unconsensual and also something that goes into the sexual part.

These reflections suggest that the young people consider different factors such as the physicality of the behaviour, consent, and emotional impact in their sense-making about the impact and unacceptability of behaviours. Inappropriate touching without consent may occur in everyday settings (e.g., corridors, classrooms) and be minimised socially, yet it is still recognised as harmful. These findings challenge rigid legalistic framings and highlight the importance of young people-centred approaches that account for context, emotional impact, and multiplicity of their experiences and perspectives.

The young people's categorisation of behaviours reveal a diverse and context-specific understanding of sexual violence. Their use of descriptors such as discomfort, disrespect, and persistence reflects a relational and affective approach to harm, one that goes beyond legal definitions. It recognises the emotional and social dynamics of everyday interactions. Importantly, they articulated why certain behaviours felt harmful, drawing on personal experience and peer norms.

These findings extend those of Carlisle et al. (2022) and Sweeting et al. (2022) in emphasising the importance of young people's reasoning in how they label and interpret behaviours. My study contributes to this literature by showing how young people use their vocabulary to navigate ambiguity. This discussion is continued in the next section, which explores how they negotiate with adult-initiated definitions of sexual violence and develop their own framing.

## **6.4 Defining sexual violence**

As discussed in Chapter 2, UK policy and child protection discourse lack a consensus definition of sexual violence whilst young people's perspectives are notably absent (Wallace-Henry, 2015). To address this, I facilitated a definition-focused activity in Workshop 10 with the youth club. By this stage, they had already explored behaviours, impacts, and contexts of sexual violence through previous workshops. This scaffolded approach enabled them to engage critically with adult definitions and articulate their own.

I presented three definitions from UK policy (e.g., Keeping Children Safe in Education) and child protection organisations (e.g., Rape Crisis, NSPCC). The first prompt asked: "Which of these definitions do you think is most relatable for young people?" This was followed by: "Sexual violence for you is...", inviting them to write their own definitions using language that reflected their understanding and prior discussions.

(1) Sexual violence is rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault or causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent (Keeping Safe in Education)

(2) Sexual violence is any kind of sexual activity or act (including online) that was unwanted or involved one or more of the following - pressure, manipulation, bullying, intimidation, threats, deception, and force (Rape Crisis England and Wales)

(3) When a child or young person is forced or persuaded to take part in sexual activities. This may involve physical contact or non-contact activities and can happen online or offline (NSPCC)

Most young people in the youth club selected the second definition, noting its inclusion of manipulation, pressure, and online experiences as particularly relevant.

Anonymous inputs (Youth club workshop 10)

*It just gave more depth and for me gave more general which I was looking more at and it being unwanted, sexual activity and pressure, manipulation; that can be a big thing especially intimidation and manipulation for young people.*

*Sounded what sexual violence is described as if you understand what I mean; including online, not always gonna be physical but people will not speak.*

*That's the one. I'm a young person, and that stood out to me.*

These reflections show that the young people value definitions that include emotional, psychological, and relational aspects, not just physical force. Their own definitions, developed in response to the second prompt and earlier concept mapping activities (Workshop 3), echoed these themes:

Anonymous inputs (Youth club workshop 3)

*Sexual violence – people's feelings disrespected*

*When someone forces themselves upon another*

*Sexual violence is when there is no consent involved*

Anonymous inputs (Youth club workshop 10)

*Sexual assault that can lead to something bigger*

*Manipulative acts involving sexual activity*

*Sexual conduct which one party is not consenting*

*Doing something physical (mainly) / verbal that is not consensual*

*Any unconsensual and violent act that relates to people's sexual orientation*

These young people-developed definitions refer to the written responses they generated during workshops, drawing on their own language. While they varied in emphasis, some

focusing on manipulation, others on lack of consent, they consistently reflected a broader understanding of sexual violence than legal definitions typically allow.

The findings demonstrate that the young people felt these factors were integral to their understanding of the phenomenon (Wallace-Henry, 2015). This finding on their definitions of sexual violence contributes to understanding what they consider sexual violence without referring to specific acts and behaviours. It supplements the findings in the previous sections about the young people's sense-making by naming and describing behaviours. Identifying concepts such as pressure, force, and lack of consent can help in engaging young people in discussions about sexual violence and its prevention. It illustrates the significance of using young people's language in sexual violence prevention initiatives.

The participatory process illustrates the value of embedding adult-centric definitions in policy with young people-informed definitions in their own words. It supports Bjorbækmo, Greve and Asbjørnslett's (2022) argument that young people should be supported to contradict or clarify adult-initiated definitions. My findings contribute to this by showing how young people sense-make sexual violence through relational, emotional, and contextual cues.

Consent emerged as a central theme as shown in the conversation below:

Janelle: So you said last week, last time, it was easy for you to know which ones were sexual violence. Why was it easy for you to know?

Young person: I think they had something... they had something nonconsensual that was part of it. And there was also something not good about it... like the sexual part of it. So I put those in sexual violence like rape. Cause that's clearly sexual violence. (girl, 16-18, youth club)

This suggests that some young people consider consent as a crucial factor in identifying a behaviour as unacceptable and as sexual violence. Some young people also described contexts that negate consent, demonstrating their nuanced understanding of situational and relational dynamics.

*Forced against their will*

*Forcing themselves on someone*

*Doing sexual things without consent even in a relationship*

*Getting someone drugged so they can do inappropriate things*

*Doing sexual things to someone when they're asleep*

These insights reinforce the importance of using young people's language and concepts to inform sexual violence prevention and education. They show that young people can articulate definitions using their preferred terms that challenge rigid, legalistic framings and reflect the realities they navigate.

The young people's engagement with adult-initiated definitions of sexual violence reveal similarities in concepts they find relevant such as manipulation and pressure. Meanwhile, the young people-developed definitions consistently emphasise lack of consent, discomfort, and disrespect, suggesting that they conceptualise sexual violence in ways that extend beyond legalistic or policy framings.

This finding contributes to existing literature by validating young people's capacity to critique and reframe dominant definitions (Bjorbækmo et al., 2022; Wallace-Henry, 2015). My study extends this work by showing how participatory, scaffolded engagement enables young people to articulate definitions that are affective and reflective of their lived experiences and sense-making. Their emphasis on emotional impact challenges narrow, criminal act-based definitions and foregrounds the importance of language and context in shaping understanding. These insights connect to the next section, which explores how young people perceive the impact of sexual violence.

## **6.5 Naming impact**

This section explores how young people conceptualised the impact of behaviours they find concerning. In Workshop 5 (youth club) and Workshop 4 (FE group), I introduced a set of vignettes (Appendix 6) depicting varied scenarios involving different power dynamics, relationships, and contexts. The activity was framed with the prompt: "Rank these situations in terms of how harmful you think they are". This open framing allowed young people to reflect on both short-term and long-term impacts, drawing from their own experiences and perspectives.

The activity aimed to challenge linear models of harm by inviting young people to consider emotional, relational, and physical consequences. However, some young people in the FE group expressed difficulty with ranking the scenarios, noting that all felt harmful. This feedback prompted my reflection on the unintended effect of asking them to create their own hierarchy, despite my intention to disrupt such models. It highlighted the need for more nuanced tools to explore impact without reinforcing comparative judgments. The young people's responses reveal how everyday behaviours, often dismissed as jokes or harmless, can have significant emotional effects as seen below:

*Especially teenage boys, even if they don't mean it in a horrible way, they might do it (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

*People might think it's just a joke and are confused if it's hurting somebody (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)*

These reflections show how ambiguity around intent can make recognition of harm more difficult. This aligns with previous research on young people's confusion in identifying inappropriate behaviour (Keddie, 2020; Setty, 2022; Women and Equalities Committee, 2023).

While some frameworks, such as UNICEF's international definition of violence against children, emphasise it being deliberate intent to harm, this does not align with UK policy definitions. I indicate the UNICEF framework here not to apply it directly, but to illustrate how young people's reflections challenge intent-based models. Their insights suggest that perceived harm does not always depend on the perpetrator's intention, but on the emotional and relational impact on the person affected.

This shift in focus, from intent to impact, supports a young people-centred approach to understanding sexual violence. It avoids victim-blaming and recognises the emotional consequences of behaviours that might be minimised.

The young people's insights reveal how dominant heteronormative gender norms shape their understanding of sexual violence, peer dynamics, and emotional impact. These norms were evident in our discussions of everyday language and behaviours used to regulate gender and sexuality.

In both groups, the young people described the prevalence of homophobic terms like "gay," "you puff," and "you faggot". These are often used to police boys' conformity to masculinity. Girls highlighted the prevalence of slut-shaming, noting how women and girls are often judged for perceived sexual behaviour and identity.

These insights reflect how gendered scripts are enforced in young people's everyday peer dynamics through language and judgment. They echo the insights of prior research, which show how boys who fail to perform heterosexual masculinity such as not showing interest in girls or by refusing to join in jokes about homosexuality, are labelled as fags (Messerschmidt, 2000). Meanwhile, girls who may be perceived as 'too sexual' are called 'sluts' (Romeo et al., 2017). My study findings align with Collier et al. (2013) and Hlavka (2014), who argue that language functions to discipline those who deviate from normative gender roles.

The young people's reflections demonstrate their awareness of these heteronormative norms not only on their interactions but also their perceptions of themselves and their gendered

identities. In the first workshop with the youth club, I conducted a gender box activity with them using the prompts 'expectations of men/women' and 'words said to force men in the 'man box' and 'woman box'. They reflected on gendered expectations and exchanged perspectives across gender lines.

The insights reveal the impact of language in socialising young people into heteronormative gender roles and expectations on appearance (e.g. why don't you have muscles, no body hair), emotional regulation for boys (e.g. stop showing emotions, why are you crying) and victim-blaming narratives for girls (e.g. fear of disbelief, fear of being judged). I interpret these as the messages that they hear from peers, adults, and the media. These may then affect how they see their gendered selves and also the expectations they have of other young people.

These findings echo the study of Donovan et al (2023), who state that the impact of gendered messages affect young people's sense of self in the present but also their actions in the future. My study extends these findings by showing how young people navigate these gender norms and exercise their agency in resisting through individual and collective ways, which I expound in the next chapter. Both studies highlight young people's agency in not accepting gender norms passively and transforming their practice and impact in their lived realities.

One example is how some boys in my study expressed discomfort with these norms and harmful gendered practices. One male youth club member (aged 16-18) remarked, 'I don't really make sexist jokes', distancing himself from peers who 'cross a LOT of lines'. This suggests an implicit awareness of the harm normalised in everyday interactions, even if not all boys in my study articulated this explicitly.

In contrast to studies where boys deny the extent of sexual violence or focus on false accusations (Horeck et al., 2023), several boys in my study acknowledged girls' experiences. They expressed a desire to explore sexual violence against men. While reflecting on an activity where they had to list behaviours commonly experienced by boys and girls, one boy (aged 13-15) explained: 'I found it very hard to do the men list because it doesn't happen as often. When it happens, it's not widely spoken. You don't know much about it. I really struggled to contribute to the list because I don't know about it. I know about the women's one.'

This statement reflects a dual recognition of the gendered visibility of sexual violence and a gap in knowledge about boys' experiences of victimisation. While some boys described girls' experiences as 'well-known' or 'obvious', I interpret these comments as not dismissive but rather show their interest in expanding the conversation on boys' experiences.

This finding contributes to the literature on boys' engagement with sexual violence by showing a form of consciousness-raising rather than defensiveness. Unlike the positioning described

by Horeck et al. (2023) and Women and Equalities Committee (2023) where boys frame themselves as victims of societal bias and perpetrators, the boys in my study sought to centre male victim-survivors while acknowledging girls' experiences. This nuance is important in prevention work, as Flood and Burrell (2022) caution against overstating male victimisation or adopting gender-neutral approaches that obscure structural inequalities.

Overall, these insights underscore the need to critically engage young people on discussions about gender norms and their impact as part of sexual violence education. They also highlight the importance of creating space for boys to explore underrepresented experiences, including their own, without reinforcing false equivalence or minimising the disproportionate frequency of girls and women's experiences. The participatory approach, particularly in mixed-gender settings, enabled the young people to reflect on their own and others' experiences, fostering empathy and expanding their understanding of sexual violence beyond dominant heteronormative narratives.

Janelle: What do you think about gender and sexual violence?

Young person 1: Genders don't matter. (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: I learned in criminology in domestic abuse – a woman is most likely to be abused (boy, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Janelle: Women experience it more frequently, but boys can be victims too.

This exchange illustrates a moment of differences in opinion and potential for peer learning. The first young person's comment reflected a gender-neutral perspective that risks obscuring the disproportionate prevalence of sexual violence experienced by girls and women (Flood & Burrell, 2022). Rather than dismissing his view, I facilitated a conversation that acknowledged his perspective while introducing evidence and validating the second young person's contribution. My implicit statement, 'gender does matter', was not a correction but an invitation to reflect more deeply.

This example had several implications. First, it supported peer learning as the second young person drew on education to challenge the gender-neutral claim. Second, it allowed me to reinforce a key message from earlier workshops. Boys can be victims, yet the harm and frequency are differently experienced by girls and must be recognised and not dismissed. This approach helped shift the conversation from individual opinion to broader structural awareness. The first young person continued to express similar views across sessions, suggesting that gender-neutral framings were part of his worldview. Still, by consistently engaging these moments with openness and insights from research, I observed how the young people's insights shifted in our discussions with a growing recognition of the influence of gender and other structural factors in shaping their views of sexual violence. This finding

supports Horeck et. al's (2023) observation that researcher facilitation can help young people collaboratively recognise gender inequality in sexual violence.

Young people in both groups demonstrated a clear understanding of the impact of sexual violence. Their responses often aligned with dominant bio-medical trauma discourses described by Vera-Gray and Fileborn (2018), which associate sexual violence with long-term emotional and psychological harm. For example, a young person described it as something that "it can leave you scarred for a while; most trauma." Others echoed this framing in their anonymous workshop inputs:

*Mental or physical harm therapy may help; fear*

*Poor mental health, low self-esteem, mistrust, find hard to form another relationship*

*Mental illness, therapy, distrust, physical harm*

These responses align with dominant trauma-informed discourses in the literature, which emphasise the psychological and relational consequences of sexual violence (Woodiwiss, 2014; Vera-Gray & Fileborn, 2018; Ligiero et al., 2019; Mathews & Collin-Vézina, 2019). They also reflect the prominence of the 'ideal victim' narrative, where harm is legitimised through diagnosable trauma outcomes. It also indicates the impact of dominant knowledge systems on sexual violence in influencing the young people's view of impact and harm.

My thesis argues, informed by the primary data from young people's insights, that overlooking the impact of everyday forms of sexual violence influences minimising and dismissive attitudes. Additionally, focusing on specific manifestations of harm as trauma inadvertently invalidates other experiences that do not align with the dominant perception. This is more salient as the young people described the impact of more subtle, everyday behaviours, such as inappropriate comments and gestures, that may not result in long-term trauma yet can result in emotional and embodied responses. This was evident in their responses to Vignette A, which involved a teacher making a sexist remark and winking at a student:

Young person 1: They will flinch

Young person 2: Yeah, the body language will show.

Young person 3: Yeah, your body language will be like. AHH. Your body will just like stiff up.

These responses suggest that young people experience discomfort as a legitimate form of impact. Their descriptions of flinching and bodily tension indicate involuntary, affective reactions to inappropriate behaviour. Drawing on Ahmed (2004), I interpret these responses as evidence of how far discomfort is felt not only in isolated moments but through accumulated

histories of unease. Discomfort, as Ahmed (2007) and Chadwick (2021) argue, disrupts one's sense of ease in familiar environments and can manifest in physical and emotional disorientation.

This interpretation is further supported when a young person shared a powerful experience of her feelings about her teacher's actions, illustrating the physical and emotional impact of discomfort:

*He will literally stand behind me, and I will feel him breathing on my neck. I hate it. He just stands behind me and just breathes...Yeah, it's really awkward. It's awful! I'm just sitting there* (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Here, the young person articulates both the behaviour and its emotional impact. Her use of 'hate it' and 'awkward' signals discomfort as an embodied experience. This may not meet clinical thresholds for trauma but may still be distressing for her. She identified the acts (standing behind, breathing) and connected them with a descriptive, emotional response (hate it, indicating discomfort).

In a broader discussion on discomfort about discussing sensitive topics, some young people reflected on how discomfort affects their emotional well-being and daily routines:

Young person 1: Everyone can find something uncomfortable. Like harsh topics to talk about. Like even if you haven't been through it, obviously you can know the effects and you can be more aware of it. (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club,

Young person 2: And think about the effects on it, like it's not your usual routine. I will literally cry about what's wrong. (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 3: Like for example, when something's different with my routine. It'll take me days to get over. (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 4: Like you'll be so annoyed the whole day (male, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Their comments suggest that discomfort has emotional consequences: *'takes them a while to get over'* or *'makes them cry'*. While these impacts may not result in diagnosable mental health outcomes, they still matter to young people. They disrupt routines, affect mood, and shape how they navigate social and institutional spaces.

Based on these findings, I argue that the impact of everyday sexual violence must be taken seriously in policy and practice, even when it does not conform to dominant trauma narratives. This argument is informed particularly by the young people's descriptions of emotional and bodily responses to inappropriate behaviour. Their insights support a broader conceptualisation of impact that includes discomfort, unease, and disruption as valid and meaningful.

This finding has implications in understanding safety and harm in schools. As Shute, Owens, and Slee (2008) note, girls often feel unsafe in specific school spaces due to boys' comments. Similarly, Chadwick (2021) argues that discomfort can morph into other affects such as guilt, anxiety, and shame. These findings suggest that discomfort is not a minor or fleeting feeling, it is a signal of risk and a response to cumulative experiences of intrusions and boundary violations. The findings across this section reveal that the young people possess a nuanced understanding of the impact of sexual violence, encompassing both overt trauma and more subtle, everyday experiences of discomfort. While some drew on biomedical trauma-informed language, others described emotional and embodied responses to everyday behaviours that are often minimised. These insights challenge the assumption that harm must be clinically diagnosable to be valid and instead foreground discomfort as a legitimate affective response. Recognising discomfort as a form of impact expands current understanding of sexual violence and opens space for more inclusive, young people-informed frameworks.

Importantly, young people also demonstrate an awareness of how gender norms shape these experiences. Through activities like the gender box and mixed-gender discussions, they reflected on the pressures to conform to heteronormative expectations and the emotional impact of being judged. Some boys expressed discomfort with sexist peer dynamics and expressed a desire to explore underrepresented experiences of male victimisation. Others acknowledged the disproportionate frequency of sexual violence experienced by girls. These reflections suggest a form of consciousness-raising that resists gender-neutral framings and recognises structural inequalities.

Taken together, these findings support my argument that focusing solely on visible trauma as the marker of harm risks invalidating the emotional and relational impacts of everyday forms of sexual violence. The young people's views illustrate that discomfort, unease, and disruption are meaningful forms of impact that deserve recognition.

## **6.6 Communicating about sexual violence**

This section explores how young people communicate about sexual violence using two distinct but interconnected languages: the language of discomfort and the language of harm. These languages reflect not only how young people describe behaviours, but also how they articulate their emotional responses to those behaviours.

The language of discomfort emerged through young people's use of everyday, affective terms such as weird, awkward, uncomfortable, and not okay to describe behaviours that disrupted their sense of safety or ease. These terms were not imposed by me but were drawn directly from their descriptions during workshops. For example, some explained the use of these terms

as *'not normally what we want to happen to ourselves'* and *'something you expect someone to say something'*.

These statements reflect how discomfort is experienced as a bodily and emotional reaction to boundary violations. As Chadwick (2021) and Ahmed (2007) argue, discomfort signals a disruption in how one inhabits space and relates to others. In my analysis, I consider these descriptive words as reflective of the language of discomfort to highlight their conceptual coherence and to distinguish them from more formal, legalistic terms.

In contrast, the language of harm was evident in young people's references to sexual offences such as rape, assault, and harassment. These terms were often used when discussing behaviours with clear legal or policy implications. Young people linked these behaviours to outcomes like mental illness, mistrust, and fear. These associations align with dominant trauma discourses in the literature (Vera-Gray & Fileborn, 2018), where harm is validated through visible psychological outcomes.

The model I developed (Figure 12) synthesises these insights by mapping young people's descriptors onto two conceptual frames: discomfort and harm. They were directly linked to specific behaviours and experiences discussed in workshops. My categorisation of these terms into the language of discomfort and harm was an analytical decision, informed by their consistent use across sessions. This model illustrates how the young people distinguish between describing a behaviour and describing their experience of it, revealing varying degrees of impact and emotional resonance

Using the language of harm allows them to identify these behaviours as inappropriate, abusive, and violent as connected to the different manifestations of harm, such as negative mental and emotional consequences. Meanwhile, the language of discomfort validates their broader experiences, including the sexual behaviours they display or encounter that connect to unease or uncertain physical and emotional responses.

My study contributes to the literature by proposing a framework that integrates young people's language with technical terminology used by practitioners and policymakers. This approach challenges the assumption that only trauma-based or legalistic language is valid in discussions of sexual violence. It also responds to critiques of discomfort as a subjective and variable concept by showing how young people consistently use it to signal unease, uncertainty, and emotional disruption.

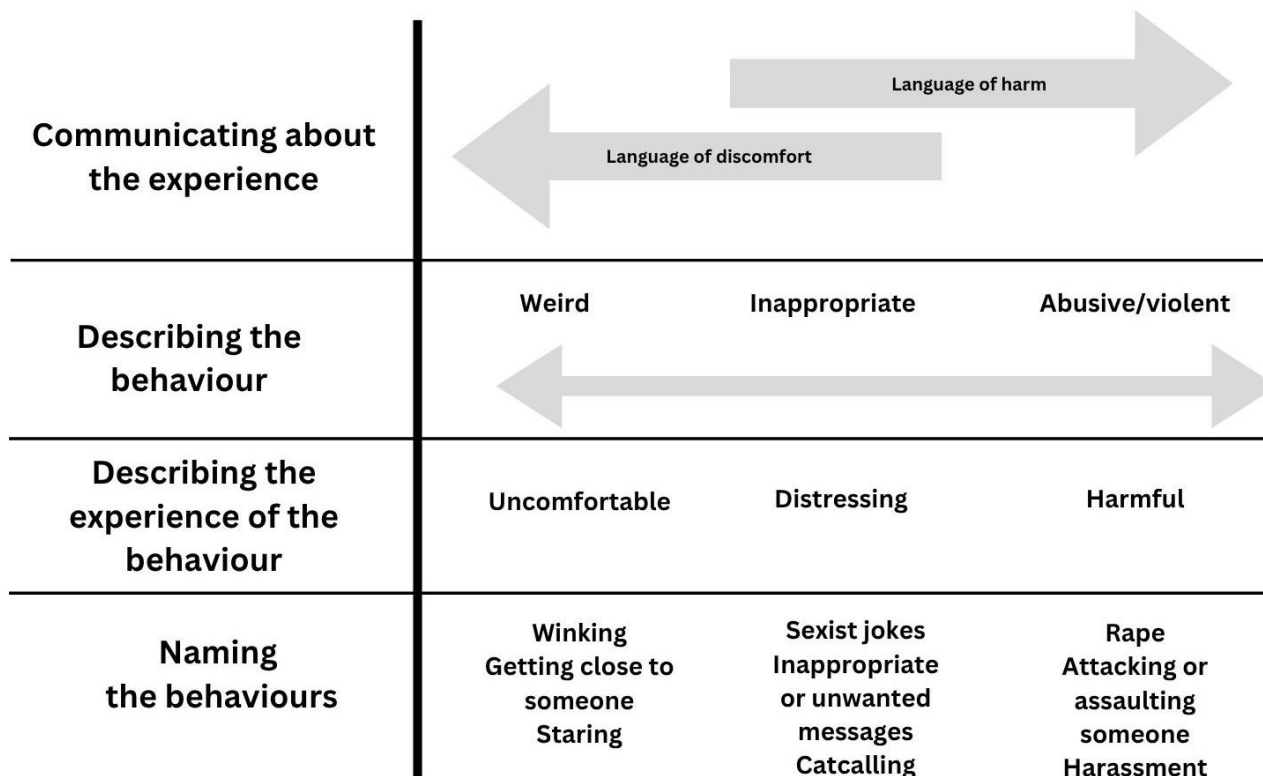


Figure 12: Young people-informed model on communicating about sexual violence

Validating the language of discomfort does not minimise experiences of physical and severe sexual violence. Instead, it calls for expanding the vocabulary available to young people and adults for recognising and responding to early signs of distress. As the CSA Centre (2025) and Cossar et al. (2019) argue, young people’s indirect disclosures often go unnoticed when they do not conform to adult expectations of clarity or severity. My findings show that discomfort can serve as a relational cue for trusted adults to initiate reflective and empathetic dialogue with young people and a different kind of listening.

The construct of discomfort offers a valuable lens for understanding how young people make sense of subtle behaviours that they perceive as ‘something wrong’. These behaviours may not meet the threshold of legal definitions of sexual violence, yet they still produce emotional and embodied responses. Recognising discomfort as a valid impact challenges dominant constructions of sexual violence that prioritise physical acts and observable trauma, constructions often shaped by legal and medical frameworks (Vera-Gray & Fileborn, 2018).

Ignoring discomfort risks reproducing violent structures by normalising everyday intrusions (Ahmed, 2017; McGlynn, 2024). In this context, discomfort is not merely a fleeting feeling, it is a signal of potential harm and a prompt for action. My analysis highlights how young people

use discomfort to navigate ambiguity and make sense of experiences that fall outside dominant definitions of sexual violence.

The construct of discomfort may connect these subtle behaviours that young people identify as 'something wrong' with the growing recognition that these could be harmful. Recognising discomfort as an impact challenges dominant constructions of sexual violence and harm that focus on physical acts and observable trauma. These constructions, often informed by legal, medical, and criminological lenses, overlook the cumulative impact of everyday behaviours of boundary violations. These dominant views silence the experiences and voices of young people who experience these forms of violence by privileging the trauma and harm model associated with sexual violence (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018).

Dismissing young people's uncertainty and discomfort risks reinforcing epistemic injustice, where their knowledge and experiences are devalued within adultist systems (Hlavka, 2019; Cody, Bovarnick & Soares, 2024). Conversely, staying with discomfort can be a radical and ethical practice that resists systematic ignorance and opens space for relational understanding (Chadwick, 2021). This requires a shift from expecting young people to speak in adult-defined terms of harm, to validating the language they use to describe their own experiences.

My study challenges the binary of victimhood and agency by showing how young people navigate complex emotional contexts. Their reluctance to label certain experiences as sexual violence is not necessarily a denial of harm, but a reflection of the social and relational implications of using such terms. As Khan et al. (2018) argue, young people may avoid labels like rape or assault to protect their identity, preserve relationships, or avoid positioning themselves or others as perpetrators. This insight was evident in our reflective workshops, where young people responded to a summary statement I proposed. The statement below shows a summary finding statement in the reflective workshop worksheet that I validated with them to see if I captured their views correctly (Appendix 8):

*Some young people find it easier to talk about sexual violence using terms related to discomfort like 'weird', 'uncomfortable,' or 'inappropriate' rather than serious terms like 'sexual harassment', 'assault' or 'rape'. Why might they find it easier to use these terms?*

Their written and verbal responses reveal a range of perspectives:

*It sums it up more in similar words we use more often  
It may be down to trauma or an uncomfortable situation  
We are used to using the words and more understandable*

These insights helped refine my understanding. While some young people preferred everyday language for its accessibility, others emphasised the importance of normalising serious terms to reduce stigma and promote open dialogue. Thus, we discussed their views further:

Young person 1: It may just be down to like, opinion on trauma. Yeah. Like, not everybody wants to use those words that way. So they find alternative ways to use (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: Sometimes we've got to get a little bit out of our comfort zones in those proper words, and there's so much stigma behind them that it becomes one of those things you can't actually talk about. OK, so if you, if we normalise using those words like assault or rape or anything, then it becomes a thing that and often if we talk about it's taken seriously. People don't feel nervous if they do actually have an experience... I think you have to like understand that it can be part of harassment. But to be fair, weird, uncomfortable and inappropriate does sum it up well. (boy 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Janelle: So what we're saying, if I can verify, is for the terms for experiences which are very serious, like rape and assault. It's good to normalise using those terms, yes, but for other experiences which are more everyday

Young people (in unison): yeah

Our co-produced discussion clarified that discomfort and harm are not separate categories but interconnected languages that young people use to describe experiences across a continuum of sexual violence. In general, they considered their broader experiences to be part of the continuum of sexual violence, particularly connected to harassment. Their insight rectified one of my misconceptions in analysing the data when I thought they wanted their broader experiences acknowledged as a separate category from sexual violence. Our conversation illustrates that introducing constructs like discomfort to frame our discussions created opportunities for dialogue, yet they still felt their experiences could relate to sexual violence. Our dialogue illustrated my consistent efforts to ensure that my analysis is informed by young people's understanding and the insights generated from the co-production process, demonstrating participatory sense-making (Bjorbækmo, Greve and Asbjørnslett, 2022).

The insights in our conversation suggest the interconnectedness of the languages of discomfort and harm. The language of discomfort allows young people to express subtler experiences that exist on a continuum with the more explicit, legally defined forms of sexual violence. For some young people, using casual language makes it more understandable since they use it more often. For others, while everyday terms like weird, uncomfortable and inappropriate capture everyday experiences, it is significant for them to normalise words like assault or rape.

Using these words challenges the stigma associated with sexual violence and helps them become more comfortable with speaking about sexual violence. These sentiments echo those

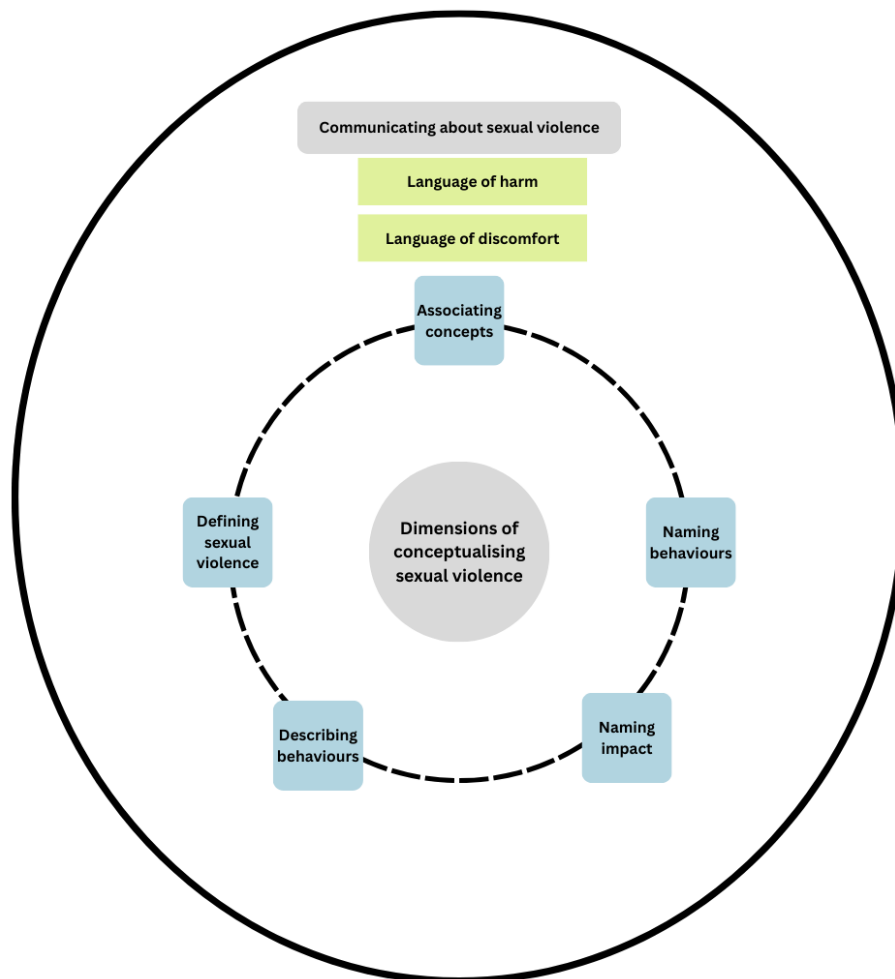
of other young people in the FE group. As one young person put it, *'Feel like the use of rape is avoided, sex is avoided taboo because they're uncomfortable to be said to kids but it's important to talk about them'*. Their collective views indicate the significance of supporting young people to communicate in a way that is understandable and comfortable while normalising the use of terms indicating serious offences such as rape and assault.

The young people's insights align with Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel's (2022) assertion that normalising specific terminology in public discussions and sex education can contribute to prevention and help-seeking strategies. These insights support Cossar, Belderson and Brandon's (2019) point that the education system influences young people's ability to articulate their experiences.

This section shows that young people communicate about sexual violence using two distinct and interrelated languages of discomfort and harm. Their use of everyday affective terms challenges dominant trauma-based models and offers a young people-informed framework for recognising and responding to a broader spectrum of experiences. The model developed in this study contributes to the literature by integrating young people's language with practitioner terminology, bridging the gap between lived experience and institutional response.

By validating discomfort as a legitimate affective response, this study foregrounds young people's agency in making sense of sexual violence. It also highlights the importance of participatory approaches that centre young people's voices and support them in articulating their experiences in ways that feel meaningful.

## Conclusion



This chapter has explored how young people conceptualise and communicate about sexual violence through a participatory, scaffolded process (Figure 13). Their insights reveal a nuanced understanding shaped by constructs such as consent, pressure, discomfort, and harm. Young people demonstrated the ability to engage critically with dominant definitions and articulate their experiences using language that felt accessible.

The communication model developed in this chapter synthesises these insights into a young people-informed framework. It illustrates that young people's views of sexual violence are informed by various sense-making processes such as associating concepts, defining sexual violence, naming behaviours and impact. Their insights reveal a coherent view of sexual violence that is shaped by the constructs of consent and pressure. The findings show that engaging them with the concept of discomfort enabled them to view sexual violence beyond the physically severe acts.

The model includes the integration of the languages of harm and discomfort in young people's sense-making about sexual violence. My findings provide insights into how young people identify some aspects as indicative of sexual violence. They suggest how they delineate between behaviour that is unacceptable and normal. The model does not impose a binary between what constitutes sexual violence and what does not. Rather, it reflects the continuum of experiences and the fluidity with which young people navigate them.

Engaging with the concept of discomfort enables young people to broaden their understanding of sexual violence and to distinguish between behaviours that felt uncomfortable and those they considered explicitly violent. These are not contradictory findings but complementary insights. Discomfort functions as a conceptual and communication tool, allowing the young people to explore ambiguity while also identifying boundaries.

The data confirms that pressure in dating and relationships is common. It is crucial to understand how young people perceive control, manipulation, and pressure in dating and relationships, since these can help inform violence prevention programs before these behaviours escalate into other forms of violence like sexual violence (De Sousa *et al.*, 2023). Non-physical forms of control and abuse play out in various ways in young people's relationships, and it may be difficult for them to identify when they occur (Donovan, Butterby and Barnes, 2023).

In research and practice, there are often silos in the knowledge produced and interventions developed according to the young people's different experiences of violence. However, my findings suggest the interconnectedness of their perceptions of sexual violence and relationship violence. Furthermore, this finding indicates that young people's sense-making of sexual violence entails drawing on constructs and concepts from different but related forms of violence and abuse. Such insights point to the need for researchers to be flexible in exploring young people's understanding of a specific form of violence and abuse by linking it to other forms of violence and abuse.

This chapter explores the young people's understanding of sexual violence by presenting the language and constructs they used and then unpacking the factors that shape their narratives. This chapter foregrounds young people's affective language and collaborative sense-making. It calls for adults to engage with young people's insights in a meaningful and sensitive way. It also shows how my study's participatory approach shaped the co-development of the findings. For instance, my discussions with the young people using the concept of discomfort evolved. I initially used it to explore alternative frameworks of sexual violence beyond the dominant model of physically violent acts.

# Chapter 7 Young people's agency in dealing with sexual violence

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on young people's agency in dealing with sexual violence. It explores their different options and actions, such as identifying their experience as harmful, disclosing, reporting, help-seeking and challenging harmful behaviours. It addresses the research question: How can young people exercise their agency in dealing with and preventing sexual violence? It explores their agency as relational and temporal.

The analysis examines constraints and opportunities made possible by relational and institutional structures. It will also discuss individual and collective strategies for navigating anticipated risks and rewards. The chapter presents young people's views and responses to vignettes (Appendix 6) representing scenarios they identified as significant or common, offering insight into how they make sense of and respond to sexual violence.

## 7.1 Complexities in articulating discomfort and refusal

Across different workshops, several young people discussed the difficulties of speaking out when their boundaries are crossed. The scenario below depicts behaviours that they cited as common and harmful, specifically 'touching without consent' and 'any inappropriate touching without consent'.

Vignette D: While kissing, Tom starts to touch Betty's breasts. She's not sure if she wants him to go further but goes along with it because she thinks she'll lose him.

Responding to this vignette, several young people identified the scenario as challenging to identify as harmful. One explained: '*She doesn't know if she wants to go further, it's a difficult situation*' (16-18 y.o, girl, youth club). Her remark underscores the ambivalence and ambiguity in young people's sexual consent cultures.

My study findings confirm and extend existing research that highlights the complexity of communicating consent in 'grey areas' (Whittington, 2021). In her study with adolescent boys, Setty (2022) reports the respondents' concerns that some people are unsure if they mean or feel 'yes' or 'no' and can regret their decision afterwards. The line distinguishing 'wanting to have sex' and 'willing to have sex' due to a sense of duty within the relationship can be blurred (Donovan, Butterby and Barnes, 2023). My study findings confirm and extend existing

research that highlights the complexity of communicating consent in 'grey areas' (Whittington, 2021).

Several young people recognise these realities in their interactions. While we were discussing when they would draw the line for behaviour to be unacceptable or abusive, one of them expressed her uncertainty, '*you may not know how to feel*'. This sentiment reflects the impact of the 'culture of confusion' in young people's lives as they try to make sense of their own and other people's sexual behaviours (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023). My study shows how young people's confusion is not just a knowledge and competency issue, usually shaped by dominant knowledge systems that equate sexual knowledge with biological maturity. The insights highlight the relational aspects which are distinct in adolescent interactions, shaped by their fears of peer rejection and social expectations.

Additionally, many of them find it challenging to communicate their refusal due to social and interpersonal pressures and the awkwardness and discomfort associated with refusing sex (Setty, 2022, 2025b). Adolescent girls may face pressure to keep quiet, like in the vignette scenario, due to the fear of losing their partner if they express their refusal (Barter, 2006). This reflects dominant heteronormative gender norms that position girls as gatekeepers of sexual activity and boys as initiators (Hlavka, 2019). My study critically unpacks these gender norms by foregrounding young people's perspectives, reflecting ambiguity and uncertainty.

Interestingly, several young people focused on Betty's actions but were silent regarding Tom's. In the scenario, he did not communicate with her about the sexual touching to confirm if she was comfortable proceeding to more physical intimacy. Righi *et al.* (2021) state how adolescent boys may test boundaries, and if their female partner allowed sexual activity to occur, meaning no explicit verbal refusal, then sexual consent was present. Studies reveal that while some young men might consider silence as indicating consent, several young women stated that they believed their male sexual partners would identify signs of sexual refusal through non-verbal cues (Righi *et al.*, 2021; Setty, 2022).

The emphasis on Betty's ambivalence and silence, and the relative absence of comments on Tom's actions, may reflect how some young people in my study have internalised gendered expectations around communication and responsibility in sexual encounters. This suggests a gendered burden of communication, where girls are expected to manage sexual boundaries, while boys' roles remain less discussed.

At the same time, I remain cautious not to overinterpret young people's silences or to impose adult-centric readings onto their perspectives. Their lack of explicit comments or focus on

Tom's actions may not necessarily indicate that they adopt a similar view. It may reflect discomfort or uncertainty about what they felt comfortable discussing in a group setting. They might have needed explicit prompting from me to shift the discussion to Tom. My analysis offers one possible interpretation, informed by existing literature. Still, it is grounded in a participatory ethos that respects young people's ways of meaning-making.

Another aspect of speaking out pertains to recognising imbalanced power dynamics between the individuals involved. The scenario below responds to some young people identifying adults and families among the people who can cause harm through sexual violence.

Several young people reacted strongly to this vignette, highlighting the substantial impact of the adult's actions on the child:

Vignette H: Charles sat very close to his nephew and put his arm around their waist. He then placed his hand on the child's knee and started moving his hand up.

*"He's moved his hand up which could lead to the child's genitals. Touching is relative and lots of damage." (FE group, 16-17 y.o)*

*"It's the worst one it's a young child, physical touching, and can cause major long-term effects." (FE group, 16-17 y.o)*

In the context of agency and speaking out, the young people recognised how the significant power imbalance and trusting relationship with an adult can make it difficult for children to resist or disclose harmful behaviour. Adults may have the power and ability to intimidate them or keep them silent (Horvath *et al.*, 2014; CSA Centre, 2025). Also, when touching occurs, they might struggle to believe what is happening to them since it feels unreal or unbelievable (CSA Centre, 2025). The young people's recognition of the severe impact indicates their awareness of how boundary violations like inappropriate touching can lead to more severe forms of violence and abuse and also the long-term impacts of abuse.

The two scenarios in Vignette D and H involve inappropriate touching that was left open-ended to encourage reflection on the impact and the challenges of expressing discomfort or refusal early in the interaction. These scenarios were selected based on young people's identification of common behaviours related to sexual violence, often more subtle and ambiguous than overt physical violence. They also highlight the contrast between interactions among peers and those involving adults in positions of trust.

The scenario involving young people in an intimate relationship (Vignette D) demonstrates how young people negotiate the complexities of communicating consent and refusal. These

are affected by peer cultures reliant on non-verbal signals and heteronormative expectations of gender roles (Righi *et al.*, 2021; Setty, 2025b). Navigating grey areas when sexual interaction is not unwanted but also not explicitly wanted can be challenging for young people. My findings underscore the significance of equipping them with the knowledge and skills in negotiation and consent communication (Setty, 2025b).

In contrast, in the scenario involving the adult (Vignette H), the young people acknowledged the emotional and relational impact on the young person involved. One young person said, *'Alter ideas about trusted adults.'*

This view recognises how such experiences can disrupt a child's sense of safety and trust. Notably, the young people placed responsibility on the adult for causing harm, rather than burdening the child with the task of refusal and the potential outcome. This insight represents how young people exercise their agency in challenging norms that indicate victim-blaming, especially in situations with a clear power and age imbalance.

This finding extends the literature on child sexual abuse myths in legal contexts, where adults often raise the burden of proof to establish young people's credibility. The young people in my study articulate a grounded position on their view of harm and constraints of agency when involving adults in positions of trust. This reinforces my study's core argument on foregrounding young people's perspectives to contrast or complement with the dominant adult-informed views in legal and broader societal contexts.

A recurring theme in the data demonstrates the interconnected difficulties of navigating complex situations and seeking help. Reflecting on the scenario in Vignette D, one said: *'She wouldn't know how to get help'*. This uncertainty may stem from ambiguous feelings about the situation and expectations of negative adult reactions, where young people question whether they deserve support (Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel, 2022).

Meanwhile, one young person stated that the impact on the character in Vignette H was *'Difficult to tell anyone'*. Extensive research on intrafamilial child sexual abuse and other forms of sexual violence shows that children and young people often anticipate an adverse reaction from other family members, such as not being believed or being blamed. They often do not disclose the abuse due to the complex feelings of fear, complicity, guilt, and shame that silence them (McAlinden, 2006; Katz and Field, 2020; CSA Centre, 2025). They are often made to feel responsible for the abuse, or their feelings of responsibility and guilt are magnified by their feeling of self-betrayal if their body reacts to the sexual stimulation (Bennett and O'Donohue,

2014). They might also fear other consequences, such as the impact on other family members, the person getting them into trouble, and the risk of moving homes or schools (CSA Centre, 2025).

These findings confirm extensive literature on children and young people's expectations of not being believed or not receiving support when they disclose. My study offers a distinct viewpoint by examining ambiguous situations and peer interactions, which young people perceive as hindering help-seeking due to internalised hierarchies of harm and victimhood.

My study reveals how young people understand and navigate the complexities of speaking out about sexual violence, whether in peer relationships or with adults in positions of trust. Their responses demonstrate a nuanced awareness of power, trust, and harm. They highlight the emotional and social barriers to disclosure.

## **7.2 Dealing with gender norms and pressure**

In Chapters 3 and 6, I discussed how heteronormative gender norms and beliefs facilitate sexual harassment and sexual violence when young people objectify others for not conforming to normative gender expectations. In this section, I demonstrate how gender norms pressure them in other contexts, particularly related to their sexuality and gender identity. Gender norms are 'cultural expectations about how people should think and behave' (Nielson *et al.*, 2023, p. 365).

The young people's responses to vignettes E and G reveal their views on how pressure and threats related to gender, sexuality, and gender identity can complicate young people's capacity to consent and exercise their agency in sexual encounters and dating. The inclusion of scenarios involving male and LGBTQ+ young people who experienced harm responds to some young people's expressed needs to discuss these specific experiences in our workshops:

*How does sexual violence happen to men? I want to learn more about male domestic abuse [youth club]*

*Boys not taken seriously – seen as meant to enjoy it/put up with it; can't be victims [FE group]*

*Sexualisation of queer relationships [FE group]*

*Let's not forget LGBT – people who are in between [youth club]*

The scenario below illustrates how the refusal of an abusive partner's sexual demands can be met with increasingly punitive behaviours, such as spreading rumours about him (Donovan, Butterby and Barnes, 2023).

Vignette E: Eva wants to have sex, but David isn't ready. Eva said she'll tell everyone he's gay and will get her needs met by a 'real man.'

*If Eve is pressuring him to have sex, then it's not a nice situation to be in it at all. I think 'I'm going to tell everyone he's not a real man' is obviously very wrong (FE group)*

This response reflects a shared sentiment among the young people, that pressure and threats in intimate relationships are unacceptable. Donovan, Butterby, and Barnes (2023) describe how abusive partners can insist on or coerce sex on their terms, while the victimised partner might feel unable to refuse sex or blame themselves for not fulfilling the sexual contract. They explain that a sexual contract means that sex is expected in intimate relationships, and it becomes problematic when one partner feels there is not enough sex or not good enough sex. It can result in a partner feeling pressured by themselves or their partner to have unwanted sex.

One of the young people reflected on the potential impact on David:

*That would alter his thoughts around sex, and he could make him feel unsafe in the relationship. Maybe he thinks he has to be hypermasculine, which could turn into toxic masculinity. He will be less likely to give proper consent (FE group)*

This view indicates that the pressure to conform to masculine norms about sexual behaviour may push boys and young men to adopt toxic masculinity views and actions to prove that they are 'real men'. However, it can diminish their capacity to consent. Boys in Setty's (2022, 2025b) studies shared that they may agree to unwanted sex due to external pressures to conform to expectations about masculinity. Additionally, coercive sexual practices may be normalised within adolescent male peer cultures such that boys may pursue sex that is personally unwanted due to the social capital and reward they gain (Setty, 2025b). My findings resonate with studies that discuss boys' difficulties in speaking out when they have experienced abuse (Hlavka, 2017; Setty, 2022) and how gendered perceptions of victimhood diminish the impact of their experiences. This is especially relevant to my study when some young people wanted focused discussions on boys' experiences of sexual violence that are often less explored in current educational and public discourses.

Regarding Vignette E, some young people felt it was *not* 'as bad' as other situations we discussed since '*he can dispute it anyway*', implying it as being gay. However, when engaging with Eva, it would have been difficult for David to know how his peers, especially male friends, would react and affect his public image and relationships. These include being excluded from their friend group and being ridiculed or ostracised for not conforming to the expected sexual behaviour of wanting to engage in sex among males (Selikow *et al.*, 2009).

Adolescent cultures involve punishment through homophobic teasing, which is directed at regulating the behaviour of young people who do not conform to gendered norms (Romeo *et al.*, 2017). The young people's insights indicate that they recognise that the threat of adverse peer reactions might pressure David into proving that he is a man and not gay. However, it may have long-term consequences of being hypermasculine or toxic masculinity.

Another young person questioned the concept of a 'real man' and its negative impact on the young person involved. As they put it, '*The term "a real man" is horrible because what is a real man? It's a bit cruel and makes him think he's not man enough.*' (non-binary, 16-17 y.o, FE group). This statement indicates their resistance to gender norms by questioning manhood and masculinity. The term 'real man' connects to gender scripts and expectations of men as the initiators of sex (Hlavka, 2014; Setty, 2022). It may also indicate 'toxic masculinity', defined by male power, control, and violence (Messerschmidt, 2000).

One possible interpretation of these insights is that David may perceive Eva's threat as a challenge to his masculinity, potentially leading to overcompensation through harmful behaviours to reassert dominance. This possibility highlights how young people can simultaneously experience harm and cause harm, reinforcing the fluidity of identity and agency.

This finding highlights young people's awareness of dominant discourses on gender and masculinity, evidenced by their use of terms such as hypermasculinity and toxic masculinity. My study builds on this body of literature on masculinity norms and adolescence by exploring the underexplored dynamics of violence and intrusions experienced by boys that may underpin their behaviour that could manifest as sexual violence. While my analysis maintains a clear stance on the unacceptability of violence, it also foregrounds young people's perspectives, highlighting more complex lived realities.

This finding also connects to how a victimised partner's use of 'abusive' behaviours may be their creation of space for reaction in 'levelling the playing field' and disrupting the dynamics in a potentially coercively controlling relationship (Donovan and Barnes, 2020). However, these actions are complicated by heteronormative norms that privilege masculine control and power. These findings underscore the need to engage boys and young men in conversations that

challenge restrictive gender norms and promote alternative masculinities. Such discussions can support disclosure and help-seeking, reducing the likelihood of harmful responses to threats or pressure (Hlavka, 2017; Flood and Burrell, 2022; Women and Equalities Committee, 2023).

In the scenario below, the abusive and controlling behaviour refers to an unwanted outing due to Mark's attempt to end the relationship. The threat of an outing signifies a punitive response in re-establishing control and dominance in the relationship.

Vignette G: Mark decides to break up with his boyfriend. His boyfriend doesn't want to end the relationship and threatens to "out" Mark if he goes through with it.

*It's not nice to be outed, which is really damaging and may cause a lot of trust issues. (FE group)*

*Bullying and being kicked out of your home. Imagine you're 16, and you're kicked out, and you might end up homeless, find a job. (FE group)*

The threat of being outed represents a unique form of psychological abuse (Reuter and Whitton, 2018). It is a form of control associated with fear of perceived risks to their safety after separation (De Sousa *et al.*, 2023). The young people's insights demonstrate their awareness of the potential consequences of being outed, mainly resulting from parental rejection and being kicked out (McCauley *et al.*, 2024). These authors state that forced disclosure stress (stress of being outed) experienced by LGBTQ+ young people is magnified due to the threats and fears of being outed during adolescence. Additionally, they point out that young people are typically financially and legally dependent on their parents and guardians, so the possibility of them discovering their sexual identity and reacting magnifies their disclosure stress.

The young people anticipated that reactions to unwanted outing would likely be unsupportive, leading to adverse consequences. McCauley *et al.* (2024) report that most of the participants in their study reported the experience of being outed to their parents as extremely stressful and linked to adverse health outcomes. These stressors intersect with normative adolescent challenges and are exacerbated by minoritised identities. The young people's insights reflect a keen awareness of the stark reality of the expected lack of family support that LGBTQ+ young people receive when their identities are outed, confirming the study of McCauley *et al.*, (2024).

*'Skew his view on relationship... change how he sees sexuality and queerness'*  
*(FE group)*

This comment suggests how the character's experience could negatively influence his view of his identity and relationships as a young gay person. Donovan, Butterby and Barnes (2023) maintain that experiential power is more visible in intimate relationships of LGBTQ+ young people when they do not have adequate knowledge about sex and adult intimacy. The absence of inclusive RSE (Relationships and Sex Education) contributes to this vulnerability (Formby and Donovan, 2020). This highlights that the dominant knowledge systems are largely heteronormative, which does not reflect the lived realities of LGBTQ+ young people. It reinforces the need for young people-informed perspectives to disrupt these traditional knowledge systems that affect both adults and young people.

Without sufficient knowledge and support, LGBTQ+ young people could be situationally vulnerable to abusive partners who could groom them to believe that their victimisation is to be expected and normal in queer relationships (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). This point is alluded to in the young person's remark on how it could change his perception of sexuality and queerness. The threat of an outing can set the relationship rule of Mark's partner having the power and control in the relationship, which can eventually magnify into other aspects, such as establishing a coercively controlling sexual relationship (Donovan and Hester, 2014).

The examples in this section demonstrate how societal and relational pressures, including adhering to gender norms, shape young people's perception of their space for action, such as staying in a relationship or engaging in sexual activity with their partner. In both scenarios, the threat of punitive social outcomes narrows the young people's space for action. Whilst they might want to resist the pressure shaped by gender norms, they must weigh it against the potential social consequences.

Scholars note that non-conformity to gender norms has costs such as name-calling, bullying, and rejection from parents and peers. However, they also state that conforming to gender norms has its costs, such as affecting their mental and emotional health (Nielson *et al.*, 2022). These scholars state that non-conformity and resistance to gender norms have benefits, such as striving toward a positive vision of their gender and sexuality and an enhanced sense of self. Recognising young people's agency as temporal and relational means acknowledging their capacity to weigh these costs and benefits. Support from trusted adults and institutions like the education system and public messaging is crucial in re-imagining gender norms and alleviating the pressure on young people to conform. It is also essential for institutional-level messaging to condemn homophobic teasing and not dismiss these as 'boys being boys'.

The findings reinforce a recurring theme in the data on the interconnectedness of young people's experiences of sexual violence and coercive control in their intimate relationships. The young people reflected on how pressure distorts the capacity to consent, whether in

sexual encounters or continuing a romantic relationship. The findings align with the claim of Donovan, Butterby and Barnes (2023) that what 'counts' as sexual violence can include coercive behaviours that can 'devastate all aspects of their sexuality and/or gender identity' (p. 154). This is evident in young people's reflections on how threats can reshape perceptions of masculinity and queerness.

The findings highlight the uncertainty of support or a positive response as barriers to disclosing or help-seeking that shape their agency in dealing with experiences of violence and abuse. A relational view of agency emphasises that young people rely on others to decide or validate their actions within these constraints. It is crucial to acknowledge their ability to resist limits to their space for action with others' support (Donovan *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, the findings underscore the significance of RSE in supporting young people with knowledge and socio-emotional skills to navigate these situations of pressure and threats. They also reinforce the need to address gaps in the current guidance that is heteronormative and not attuned to young people's realities (Setty and Dobson, 2023).

This section has critically unpacked how gender norms and relational pressures shape young people's experiences of coercion and sexual violence. My analysis foregrounds their insights while resisting overinterpretation, offering possible readings that remain grounded in their lived realities and language.

### **7.3 Prosocial actions of calling out behaviour and helping others**

The vignettes discussed below involve opportunities for young people to demonstrate prosocial behaviour as discussed in Chapter 3.

Vignette B: Blake is sitting next to Janine on the couch and keeps touching her hair. She removed his hand and said to stop it. He laughed and then tickled her.

Some girls from the youth club expressed that they would take direct action to help Janine, as evident in the discussion below:

Young person 1: You can say can you come over here (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: Take her away from the situation. (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

These responses align with the concept of 'reactive bystander behaviour', meaning behaviours done after witnessing an experience, such as trying to help or support the person who was being hurt (Banyard, Waterman and Edwards, 2021). When asked to elaborate, the girls expressed empathy and concern:

One young person said about Janine's feelings, '*Uncomfortable. Under pressure.*' Their recognition of Janine's discomfort prompted helping responses. This is consistent with bystander research with adolescents showing that empathy and identification with the victim influence intervention (Casey, Lindhorst and Storer, 2017).

Some young people in my study feel that the decision to help others depends on the individual's characteristics and cannot be immediately expected of everybody.

Young person 1: I don't know. It kind of depends on the person. That's why I kind of answered if it was me. 'cause I know what I would do. (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: I think some girls would say stuff, but it depends on who you are. (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

These statements are typical of others made across different workshops, indicating the young people's strong sense of empathy and action to help others. When young people recognise discomfort in others that mirrored their own experiences, they were more likely to express helping attitudes. The findings illustrate how they wanted to engage in a collective exercise of agency and resistance to problematic attitudes and behaviours, which they have experienced similarly.

In contrast, some boys in the group provided differing responses as illustrated below:

Young person 1: I would just look away. (boy, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: Try not to be involved in it. Stay out of it. (boy, 16-17 y.o, youth club)

Young person 1: If she started like screaming, like actually panicking (boy, 16-18 y.o., youth club)

Young person 3: But if she was just happening you will turn away (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

These statements imply that they would only help another young person in these situations if there were a physically overt sign of struggle or discomfort. Since I wanted to know more about these boys' thought process, I probed further to better understand their perspective.

Janelle: So when you said that if she started screaming that would be the only time

Young person 1: If she was physically screaming or trying to fight away (boy, 16-18 y.o., youth club)

Young person 2: if you can see her distressed (boy, 16-18 y.o., youth club)

Young person 3: Like physically uncomfortable (boy, 16-18 y.o., youth club)

Janelle: Do you think this counts as physically uncomfortable? Since he was tickling her and she removed his hand?

Young person 2: It's more if she is physically trying to escape from him. (boy, 16-18 y.o., youth club)

One possible interpretation is that these boys may not feel confident intervening unless the harm is visibly and audibly clear. The vignette involves ambiguous boundary violations (e.g. touching hair and tickling). These may not be recognised as serious enough to warrant action. Their instinct to “look away” could reflect discomfort, uncertainty, or fear of escalation, as well as a lack of clarity about what constitutes harm in everyday interactions.

This behaviour may also reflect unspoken peer dynamics, such as avoidance of direct confrontation with male peers or internalised norms about what counts as ‘serious’ harm. Their silence on Janine’s verbal refusal suggests that non-verbal and physical cues are more readily recognised than verbal boundaries. This may be shaped by heteronormative norms that minimise everyday intrusions and normalise male behaviour as playful rather than harmful.

Still, as I mentioned previously, I am cautious in interpreting young people’s silence or ambiguous answers so I just present possibilities while opening the space for other meaning-making that they might not have felt comfortable at that time to articulate in a group setting.

These findings indicate that varied factors shape young people’s decisions to help others. Gendered differences were evident. Some girls responded with empathy and action, while some boys relied on overt signs of distress. This aligns with research showing that young women resist harassment through collective and individual action (Odenbring and Johansson, 2021; Honkatukia et al., 2023), but my findings also highlight how empathy and relational support are central to these responses.

The scenario below illustrates a typical situation mentioned by the young people about sexist and inappropriate comments and jokes.

Vignette C: Marc is mad that Jay’s girlfriend cheated on him, and he said, “If my girlfriend dared to do this, I would beat her to a pulp.”

When responding to this scenario, some young people initially had similar sentiments, particularly around challenging the behaviour as problematic:

Young person 1: Proper start an argument (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: A realistic situation (boy, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 3: That would happen. (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 1: Report him. (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 3: When you hear beat to a pulp, you would start a proper argument with him. (boy, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

These responses align with previous research showing that young people generally view violence as unacceptable (McCarry and Lombard, 2016; Aghtaie et al., 2018; Sundaram, 2018). However, when I probed further to explore how relational dynamics might influence their responses, the conversation became more nuanced:

Janelle: So you said you would report him to someone, what if Mark was a friend?

Young person 1: I will still. (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: Why would you be friends with someone like that? (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 3: In the first place you wouldn't be friends with him. (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 4: Absolutely 'cause I can't stand anyone talking to me like that (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 5: It could have been said in a joking way. (boy, 16-18 y.o, youth club) The exchange above illustrates that most of the young people's responses consistently declare the action unacceptable. They articulated clear statements, such as not being friends with a person like that in the first place. It connects with the finding of Honkatukia *et al.* (2023) on young people's exercise of sexual citizenship and agency by distinguishing between those who they think crossed their boundaries and do not belong in their community, in this case, friend group.

Most young people maintained that the statement was unacceptable, even if the person was a friend. Their responses reflect a form of boundary-setting and reasoning that aligns with Honkatukia et al.'s (2023) concept of sexual citizenship, wherein young people distinguish who belongs in their social community based on shared values.

It was critical to delve into Young Person 5's statement above since humour can be used to diminish the impact of problematic language or behaviour. Laughing contrasts with the clear objections to the problematic behaviour in our conversation when they would report or argue with him (Banyard, Waterman and Edwards, 2021).

A young person's comment about humour prompted further discussion. Humour can be used to downplay or deflect the seriousness of harmful behaviour (Banyard, Waterman and Edwards, 2021). I explored this further:

Janelle: What if it was in joking way? Would people still laugh?

Young person 1: No (boy, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: The room would go a bit silent. (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 3: People might laugh but not mean it. People would be like hahaha but also there's a twist. (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: it's like a nervous laugh since they don't know how to respond (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Their responses indicate broader themes within the data: agency and uncertainty. Aligning with the extant literature (Sweeting *et al.*, 2022; Barker-Clarke, 2023; Honkatukia *et al.*, 2023), some young people's responses were shaped by their relationship and perceived intent. Some felt that if the person was known to them and 'didn't mean it', the comment might be interpreted differently:

Young person 1: I think it depends if they know him. If it was someone I didn't know (girl, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: If it was said sarcastically. (boy, 16-18 y.o., youth group)

Young person 1: if I was walking and I heard it from someone I didn't know, I would be more concerned. If it was someone I knew for a while and I know they wouldn't do it, I would know they're like joking (girl, 16-18 y.o., youth club)

These statements illustrate that the young people's responses are not fixed but contextually shaped. This supports Sundaram's (2018) argument that young people's views on violence exist on a continuum of acceptability, rather than binary positions. My study extends Sundaram's work, which focuses on the gender dimension, while my findings focus on the young people's emphasis on the nuances of the relational peer dynamics, which could be gendered but also contextually influenced.

The young people also reflected on the risks of calling out harmful behaviour. One noted that it's difficult to challenge violence, while another said, *"It's awful what people say, but no one really says you can't act like that."* When asked about intervening in harmful jokes, they expressed concern about potential social consequences:

Janelle: How can you help young people being laughed at?

Young person 1: Be the person who didn't laugh. (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Janelle: How is that easy or hard to do? How can young people do that?

Young person 2: It doesn't happen very often unless it's really serious. (boy, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

Young person 3: it depends on the person that you are. (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: Some people just won't care. (boy, 16-18 y.o, youth club)

These responses show that young people exercise agency in varied ways, through subtle resistance (e.g., not laughing), direct confrontation, or withdrawal. Their actions are rooted in a clear recognition of the unacceptability of the action since it represents a violent view against

women. Defining the situation as problematic is a key step in bystander intervention (Casey, Lindhorst and Storer, 2017).

My study findings support previous research that highlights the value of positive social norms, such as acknowledging sexual violence as a problem, influencing more helping behaviours (Banyard, Waterman and Edwards, 2021). Additionally, my findings reveal that the young people were mindful of the risks they face if they had direct confrontations and their relationships with the people involved. These views indicate their affective evaluation of the outcome of their action as positive or negative and their perceived responsibility to help.

This section has shown how young people navigate the complexities of calling out problematic behaviour, particularly in contexts shaped by humour, friendship, and social risk. Their responses reflect a strong sense of social justice and empathy but also reveal the constraints they face in acting on these values. While some gendered patterns emerged, such as girls more often expressing solidarity and boys sometimes 'looking away', my analysis avoids presenting these responses as binary. Instead, I highlight the fluidity and contextual nature of young people's agency. These are shaped by relational dynamics, perceived intent, and peer and gender norms. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how young people negotiate and challenge problematic behaviour, as well as how gender norms intersect with their capacity to act.

#### **7.4 Resisting discourses of victim-blaming and shame**

Shame emerged as a significant theme across workshops, especially in the FE group, who selected it as a priority topic:

*How people cope/gain support; breaking down shame*

*Connects to victim-blaming*

*Discussion on the shame that surrounds sexual violence*

A young person explained their interest in the topic: "*Stopping shame and destigmatising shame and stopping people from feeling shame.*" This reflects a shared desire among young people to challenge the stigma surrounding sexual violence and its emotional impacts.

Vignette I: A group of boys uploaded Ayesha's sexy photos from their group chat. The online comments called her a slut.

In response, young people expressed concern about the long-term consequences of such actions

*Someone shares private photos at a young age and will be slut-shamed, and how she perceives her body will she go on with her life (FE group)*

*Pictures are going to follow her for the rest of her life, getting jobs and going to be harder for her; she might be blamed even if it's not her fault they shared her photos (FE group)*

*Nudes are most harmful since videos can hurt you in 10 years' time and they can still pop up and have an impact on future job opportunities (youth club)*

These reflections show how shame is not only internalised but socially reinforced in peer contexts through exclusion, bullying, and reputational damage (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023).

Some young people described how shame may stop them from speaking about their experience, which included the following responses on potential outcomes: *'Misunderstood'*; *'Accused of lying – belief'*; *'Slut shame'*.

These insights confirm existing research with victim-survivors of child sexual abuse and sexual violence on how fear of disbelief and stigma inhibits help-seeking (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019; CSA Centre, 2025). My findings extend this work by showing how shame operates relationally. The young people anticipate negative reactions from peers, family, and institutions, which shapes their decisions about whether and when to disclose. Aligning with a key finding in the IICSA (2022) study on CSA, this anticipation is shaped by societal and historical attitudes that tend to disbelieve and dismiss young people's testimonies.

Shame is magnified due to cultures of slut shaming. It is defined as 'the stigmatisation of an individual based on his or her appearance, sexual availability, and actual or perceived sexual behaviour and is primarily aimed at women and girls' (Goblet and Glowacz, 2021, p. 1). It is often done through rumours and insults aimed at young people in online and offline spaces, even those who have experienced sexual violence. Recognising its pervasiveness in young people's interactions has implications for understanding how shame is normalised and perpetuated. My findings show how slut-shaming narrows young people's space for action, reinforcing the need to manage sexual reputation to avoid social punishment from their peers (Hlavka, 2019).

This insight on shame highlights the intersections of age with gender norms that make young people's experiences distinct from adults' where social dynamics operate differently than in adolescent peer groups and shared spaces like schools and online platforms. These shared peer spaces magnify the threat of isolation and social pressure. Relatedly, some young people identified a range of consequences associated with shame:

*'Isolation'*

*'Underreporting'*

*'Ok/deserved'*

*'Mental health'*

These statements indicate that the young people considered varied outcomes. Some are internal and individual outcomes (ok/deserved; mental health), while others are external and social outcomes (isolation; underreporting). The phrase 'ok/deserved' connects with their sentiments about the normalisation of sexual violence that results in a resigned acceptance. Deserved aligns with 'deserving victim' and non-'ideal' victim narratives discussed in Chapter 2. These labels, when internalised, contribute to poor mental health outcomes associated with sexual violence such as depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018; Kruger *et al.*, 2023). Feelings of isolation magnify these negative consequences. My findings suggest that they can contribute to underreporting since young people want to avoid relational consequences of shame, such as isolation and victim-blaming. However, these do not prevent the internal consequences when they adopt the labels and identity as deserving victims of violence or shameful individuals for their experience.

Notably, some young people recognised the gendered differences in shame among boys and girls. They are illustrated in the exchange below.

Young person 1: I think boys' shame is different, I feel like it's not taken seriously. Like a lot of time sexual violence events like are reported but only half are taken seriously. When it's a boy, they're seen as just... they should've put up with it. It's not like seen as a real issue. (non-binary, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Young person 2: It's like unrepresented as well. (girl, 16-17.y.o, FE group)

Young person 3: People don't expect boys to experience sexual violence. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Janelle: They expect boys to be perpetrators, but they can be victims too ... what you're writing, is influenced by how we see a good woman and a good man...how we see gender. And how it affects people's feelings of shame.

Young person 1 (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group): I think there's a lot of gender perception of men is like being dominant, and like gender perception of women is like being submissive. Like it's seen as they should just deal with like sexual violence because that's supposed to happen. And men are seen as perpetrators because they are the more dominant ones. And that does happen.. And can cause like a lot of shame. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

These exchanges reveal how dominant gender norms influence who is seen as a credible victim. Underscoring one of the young people's priority topics, boys' experiences are often minimised or dismissed, contributing to feelings of shame and invisibility. In her study on

adolescent boys' experiences of victimisation, Hlavka (2017) argues that cultural norms of masculinity exclude boys from victimhood and impose expectations that reinforce stigma, especially when victimisation is linked to perceived loss of masculine identity or assumptions about homosexuality.

Several young people highlighted structural factors when responding to a prompt on the factors that promote feelings of shame as follows:

*'Religion'*

*'Virginity/purity'*

*'General shame around sex'*

. These responses point to systemic influences beyond the individual, including cultural and religious beliefs that uphold gendered expectations around sexual behaviour. In some racially minoritised communities in the UK, the shame associated with the sexual behaviour and reputation of the women extends to their families (Gangoli and Hester, 2023). Even if they were victims of sexual violence, the shame of engaging in sexual behaviour outside of marriage magnifies its embodied and relational experience (Gill and Harrison, 2019; Gill and Begum, 2023). These insights reveal the young people's views on the structural aspects that may influence shame such as intersections with age and gender.

Recognising these structural and contextual factors is crucial for understanding the constraints on agency following sexual violence. Disclosure is not simply a personal decision. It can have relational consequences for the individual, their family, and community. Framing agency as relational and temporal provides a nuanced perspective on how young people weigh these consequences over time. Aligning with Raghavan (2024), this includes how silence may itself be a reflective act of agency under constrained conditions.

The following conversation highlights the messages that the young people received or heard from their peers and adults, intensifying their feelings of shame and self-blame:

Young person 1: What did they do to keep themselves safe? That's really big online. When someone was assaulted, I can see on the comments, did they do this, did not do this. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Young person 2: They were also being asked why didn't you defend yourself, were you asking for it? (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Janelle: It's unfortunate that there are a lot of expectations, and it's what we call safety work. It's on women to do things to keep them safe. Even if she does things to make her safe, sexual violence still happens and promotes shame.

These comments reflect a broader cultural narrative that places the burden of prevention on victims, especially girls and young women. This view is explored further in the discussion below:

Vignette F: Jason has never hit Pat, but when he's angry, he often scares her by punching walls or throwing things.

Young person 1: There's no physical situation yet that can be escaped. If she leaves him now, there may not be actual consequences for her. (non-binary, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Young person 2: That's a very hypothetical situation. Assuming it's easy for her to leave the relationship. That's an ignorant way to go about it. If you're in an abusive relationship, you can leave. (non-binary, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

These responses challenge simplistic assumptions about agency and choice that do not account for young people's reflective capacity. Young person 2 critiques the idea that leaving an abusive relationship is a straightforward decision, highlighting the gap between societal expectations and young people's lived experiences. This aligns with Raghavan's (2024) critique of how agency is often misinterpreted in ways that reinforce victim-blaming. My study extends Raghavan's work, which focuses on adult women by highlighting the intersections of age with gendered expectations when exercising agency amid constraints.

Further discussion reveals how young people might internalise these expectations:

Young person: I guess not like judging what they did in the situation. Cause not everyone might be comfortable sticking up for themselves. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Janelle: What do you mean by not judging what they did in the situation? What is the usual response they get otherwise?

Young person: So like they don't defend themselves, then it might show they clearly wanted it. Obviously, not everyone can protect themselves in that situation. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

These reflections challenge dominant narratives that equate agency with explicit physical resistance. They show how young people recognise the emotional and situational constraints that shape responses to sexual violence. This challenges the notion of the 'ideal victim' that persists in legal contexts, which assumes physical resistance as proof of non-consent (Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel, 2022; St. George et al., 2022; Crown Prosecution Service, 2023).

Their insights illustrate the significance of a young people-informed view of agency, victimhood, and sexual violence, which differs from legal discourses that are informed by legal 'resistance requirements' (Raghavan, 2024).

A young person reflected on the indirect victim-blaming she experienced following a teacher's actions:

*Friends then in the next class they would ask why he was sitting next to me, why was he doing that? I was like why are you questioning me? You should be asking him about it.* (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

This young person's statement demonstrates her resistance to harmful gendered dynamics that hold girls accountable for boys' behaviour. Her response disrupts heteronormative discourses that minimise male accountability and position girls as responsible for managing male attention (Hlavka, 2014). By shifting the focus of questioning from herself to the teacher, she exercises agency to subvert these expectations and reject the shame inadvertently imposed on her.

When considering the implications of shame as a barrier to young people's agency in disclosing, reporting, and help-seeking, some reflected upon the significance of education in challenging shame:

Young person 1: Be taught not to feel shame in education – kids are being taught sex is shameful, and they're going to feel it for the rest of their lives (girl 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Janelle: Is there shame in sex education? Would it be helpful?

Young people (several in chorus): yes

Young person 2: We need to be taught about shame in schools and where we can go to deal with this shame, safe spaces to talk. A lot of people are afraid of what would happen after they speak out. (girl 16-17 y.o, FE group)

These statements highlight how silence and stigma surrounding sexual violence are reinforced through educational settings. The young people's responses suggest that shame can be challenged through safe spaces in education that validate their experiences, encourages help-seeking, and explicitly challenges shame.

When asked why young people might struggle to speak up, they offered varied reasons:

*Many young people find it hard to talk especially if it involves themselves  
The trauma and stereotype/negativity surrounding it*

*Because young people might be scared*

These reflections point to the emotional and social constraints that shape young people's agency related to sexual violence. Addressing these challenges requires collective resistance to the relational and institutional contexts that normalise shame and victim-blaming. In my study, young people demonstrate this collective resistance and agency by co-creating messages of support and solidarity. When asked what messages could challenge shame, they responded:

Young person 1 (girl, 16-17 y.o, school group): Something like "You shouldn't have been put in that situation".

Young person 2 & 3: (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group: I like that one.

Young person 1 (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group: Like it's not on you, it's on the person.

Young person 3 (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group: Maybe a simple I'm so sorry you have to go through that.

These responses illustrate that these young people value sentiments of support, comfort, and empathy. These messages redirect the blame away from the person affected by sexual violence and towards the offender. These messages challenge the typical victim-blaming discourses by highlighting that they did not do anything for the situation to occur.

Their statements align with Valanzola's (2021) experience of supporting a student who disclosed her experience of assault after their lesson. This author recounted, 'By starting off with "I am sorry this happened to you," I acknowledged the gravity of her trauma, while trying to articulate that I empathised with what she had been forced to endure... In a culture that frequently resorts to victim-blaming, telling survivors, "This is not your fault," is deeply reassuring, even though they may not yet believe it themselves.' (p. 191).

Many young people in my study were passionate about messages of solidarity and support in disrupting the silence and shame associated with sexual violence. '*You are not alone*' was a powerful and recurring message that the young people wanted others to hear. During action planning for awareness-raising materials, they co-developed messages such as the following:

*Speak out, you are not alone*

*Don't worry, you are not alone. You can always reach out to...*

*Nobody is alone, there is support.*

*Talk if you're not happy.*

*Talk to other adults if it feels toxic.*

# “Speak Out, You are Not Alone” : Amplifying the Voices of Young People in North East England on Addressing Sexual Violence

Janelle Rabe, Doctoral Researcher, Department of Sociology

Co-created poster with young people: Winnie\*, Lulu\*, Tom\* Dobby\*, GG\*, TJ\*, Ron\* Sarah\*, Mylah\*, Sav\*

## HOW DID WE WORK TOGETHER?



Engaged 29 young people (13-18 y.o) in a school and a youth club in North East England



Aimed to understand their perspectives on sexual violence, related issues, and their recommended responses



Collaborated in a series of 17 participatory workshops with young people deciding on the priority topics

## WHAT DID WE FIND OUT AND PRODUCE TOGETHER?



Young people expressed difficulties in identifying and responding to acceptable, ambiguous, and abusive behaviour



Identified the need for young people-informed language on terms associated with sexual violence instead of adult-centric concepts



Co-produced model of responses to young people affected by sexual violence throughout a timeline and embedded with core values

## WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE’S MESSAGES ON HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS?

### CONSENT

You can change your mind even after saying yes  
Only do things both people say yes to  
Don't do anything you don't want



### PUT YOURSELF FIRST

Don't try to make it work if it won't work  
It's okay to end things if the time comes  
Set boundaries with your partner



### COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Talk if you are not happy  
Let your friends know what is happening  
If it feels toxic, talk to trusted adults



Scan me for more information about the project!

@janelle\_rabe

anne.j.rabe@durham.ac.uk

bit.ly/JanelleRabesite

Durham University  
Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse

UKRI  
Economic and Social Research Council

Figure 14: Co-produced model of young people’s messages

These messages reflect a relational view of agency. They were similarly concerned with dealing with their own experiences but also in supporting others. When asked why the statement “you are not alone” was significant, they responded:

*There is so much stigma towards victims of sexual violence, so it needs to be made aware it isn't the victim's fault*  
*It helps them in knowing they're not alone, safe space*  
*Let victims know they are not alone*

These responses show how young people use empathy and solidarity to expand their own and others' space for action. Their messages challenge isolation and self-blame and encourage collective support. While these messages are directed at their peers, they also call on adults to respond with empathy and support. These messages underscore a key finding of this chapter on how situations of uncertainty and ambiguity can make it difficult for young people to identify the harm and seek help. The messages of 'speak out' and 'you are not alone' prompt collective action and solidarity to combat feelings of isolation. The young people's core message signals to others that they empathise with them. They also wanted to encourage other young people by assuring them they could find support.

This section shows how young people resist victim-blaming and shame through relational and collective exercise of agency. Their reflections and co-created messages demonstrate that agency is not simply about individual action but instead, it is shaped by relationships and social context.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter builds on extant the extant literature (e.g., Beckett, 2019; Nico and Caetano, 2021) that frames young people as reflexive agents who negotiate their choices amid structural constraints and limited options literature (e.g Beckett, 2019; Nico and Caetano, 2021) that frames young people as reflexive agents who negotiate their choices amid structural constraints and limited choices. Their agency is shaped by heteronormative expectations in sexual behaviours and interactions, power dynamics based on gender, age, and sexuality; the prevailing discourses of shame and victim-blaming; and the nuances of adolescent peer cultures affecting their actions. Through their responses to vignettes and workshop discussions, the findings reveal how sexual violence is often embedded in broader patterns of coercive control, including threats, pressure, and humiliation, extending the work of Donovan, Butterby and Barnes (2023) by providing distinct adolescent perspectives.

A key finding of this chapter is that ambiguity in social interactions, particularly around consent and discomfort, can constrain young people's ability to speak up or seek help. The findings show that young people were attuned to factors such as power dynamics, gender norms, and ambiguities in communicating consent. This highlights the need to develop their confidence

to speak up and articulate discomfort, as well as recognise when their or others' boundaries are crossed.

My study makes a distinct contribution by framing young people's agency as relational and temporal. A relational view of agency recognises that young people's capacity to act is shaped by their relationships, with peers, adults, and institutions. For instance, young people may need others to prompt them to speak about their experiences. They make indirect disclosures through everyday language on experiences and behaviours associated with sexual violence (Jackson, Newall and Backett-Milburn, 2015). I argue that when young people feel supported and validated about broader experiences of sexual behaviours that they are uncertain about, they will feel more confident and encouraged to speak about future experiences. This relational dynamic is central to understanding how their agency is exercised in constrained conditions.

Temporal agency, meanwhile, highlights young people's reflective capacity to consider the future implications of their actions on themselves and others. Their decisions are shaped by evolving understandings of support and risk. My findings show that young people are attuned to the affective and relational consequences of disclosure. These emotional considerations challenge simplistic notions of 'doing the right thing', recognising the complex factors that shape their decisions.

This chapter also highlights how young people resist dominant narratives of shame and victim-blaming. Shame emerges as a key barrier to disclosure, but also as a site of resistance. The young people in my study challenge stigma and co-create supportive spaces for themselves and others. These findings deepen current understanding of how young people navigate the complex terrain of sexual violence and transform cultures of shame and silence into solidarity and empathy. They engage in collective forms of resistance that expand their own and others' space for action.

# Chapter 8 Young people's views and recommendations on schools' responses to sexual violence

## Introduction

This chapter seeks to address the research question: How do young people perceive the prevention of and responses to sexual violence? The scope of the chapter focuses on school responses, aligning with one of the priority topics identified by the FE group.

Most of the insights in this chapter are reflections based on their recollections of other students' experiences. It presents limitations in the depth of information they shared in our discussions and the extent of their knowledge about the situation and their school's response. Still, their perspectives can provide valuable insights which can improve the responsiveness of secondary schools' efforts related to sexual violence.

## 8.1 Consistent communication

A recurring sentiment expressed by several young people was that their schools *'did not take sexual violence seriously'*. Their feelings are valid based on their lived realities and perceptions. However, their schools' priorities and decisions may not be visible to them. External and systemic factors may constrain their capacity to deliver whole-school approaches (Bragg *et al.*, 2022). These findings highlight this tension between institutional constraints and young people's expectations, offering a nuanced understanding of perceived inaction. These young people's perceptions may be rooted in their expectation of assurance from their school. As one young person put it, *'Assurance from school that sexual violence is taken seriously.'*

The findings reveal that there are three areas in which young people expect more communication from their schools: (1) Sexual violence as an issue; (2) Positive outcomes after seeking help; (3) Availability and accessibility of support. These areas represent areas for reflection and improvement in schools to foster trust and reliability with students.

### Sexual violence as an issue

Many schools are acknowledging sexual violence as a priority (Ofsted, 2021). However, for several young people in this study, their perceptions seem to be at odds with this view. This point underscores their expectations of more communication from their schools: *'Schools are not saying enough'*. This view seems to be informed by a view shared by other young people that sexual violence is a taboo topic in schools (Safelives, 2022; Setty, 2024).

*Schools see sexual violence as taboo (FE group)*

*There's a pattern that no one got taught in the past. It wasn't talked about since it's a taboo subject. Schools think it makes people uncomfortable. (FE group)*

These young people's views of discomfort and awkwardness when speaking about sexual violence may connect with broader concerns of teachers and school staff, who vary in their ability and confidence to discuss these sensitive topics (Setty, 2024). As discussed in Chapter 3, many teachers wanted more information, training, and policy guidance in dealing with HSB (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023).

Some young people felt that the taboo associated with speaking about sexual violence might be indicative of broader societal attitudes of silence related to sex.

Young person 1: There's so much misunderstanding and it's not being spoken about. It's like a hush hush keep it to yourself kind of thing. It's not an accepted conversation. People feel that they have to keep it to themselves. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group):

Young person 2: **Sex**, in general, is not spoken about, so it's harder to talk about sexual violence. If you can't talk about sex, then more on sexual violence (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

These insights demonstrate how perceptions of sexual violence as a taboo topic have a concrete impact on young people's everyday realities. It includes the occurrence of misunderstanding about the issue and a reluctance to discuss their experiences and concerns. These have implications for their disclosure and help-seeking. My findings foreground young resistance to the culture of silence and stigma associated with sex. It reflects the impact of adult-centric knowledge systems that prioritise overprotection at the expense of opening spaces for dialogue on sensitive topics. Still, the young people's insights reflect their expectations of schools to provide safe spaces where discussions about relationships, sex, sexual behaviours, and sexual violence can be normalised (Safelives, 2022).

Some young people recommended practical actions for their schools. They suggested including sexual violence in school announcements with messages such as: *'It might happen'*, *'it might be possible'* or *'this can happen, then do this'*.

These messages align with Ofsted's (2021) recommendation: 'They should assume that sexual harassment and online sexual abuse are happening in their setting, even when there are no specific reports' (p. 8). These recommendations indicate that they wanted to receive direct messages about the frequency of these behaviours and the likelihood that they might experience them. Recommending these messages in public announcements implies that they wanted sexual violence to be discussed in other avenues and not just in their RSE classes. This recommendation is also rooted in their observation that they felt that they did not have enough RSE classes that discussed sexual violence.

*1 lesson in the whole sex education experience*

*Teach more frequently – not just a few sessions*

These statements underscore the potential of implementing whole-school approaches that augment RSE classes. Schools can provide alternative sources of information instead of relying solely on RSE sessions.

The Everybody's Invited movement may have influenced their recommendation about public announcements. Some young people confirmed that their school was included in the list. News reports and the Ofsted (2021) review show how some school leaders may minimise or deny its occurrence in their schools (Booth, 2021). By requesting public announcements, they perceive that it signifies their schools' institutional recognition of sexual violence as a significant issue (Cowan and Munro, 2021).

A young person highlighted the benefits of speaking more about the issue: *If sexual violence was talked about, it would be less taboo; people would speak out more and be more comfortable talking out (girl, 16-17 y.o., FE group)*. This statement highlights the importance of open and frequent communication from schools in fostering young people's comfort and confidence in speaking about the issue and ultimately disclosing or seeking help. My findings confirm and extend existing research on school responses that identify gaps (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023; Lloyd and Walker, 2023) by focusing on young people's recommendations seeking cultural change within schools through visibility and dialogue.

While some young people felt that their school did not talk about sexual violence, some acknowledged their school's efforts. For instance, a young person recalled the topics that his school discussed.

*I'd say first my school, they touch upon it like they say, like name calling isn't all right. Things like that. And then they go a bit more in depth with the serious things*

*when. So, the less serious things get a little bit sort of neglected in terms of talking about them. (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club)*

This young person's view connects to the observation of Setty and Dobson (2023) that upholding the law is the underlying principle of the RSE guidance. It may shape how some schools focus on preventing physical and illegal behaviours by drawing attention to them. My findings add a different lens to this critique by showing how young people notice the uneven attention given to different forms of harm, and how this shapes their understanding of seriousness. It highlights the significance of embedding young people's voices in adult-initiated policy critiques that are grounded in their lived experiences.

Nevertheless, it is promising that some schools are drawing attention to behaviours such as name-calling in their communication and responses. The young person's remark suggests that they would benefit from more attention to these behaviours while still acknowledging the impact and seriousness of other physical acts. He elaborated more on how his school communicates the distinction between different behaviours:

*Schools, they always touch upon things separately, so they touch upon the serious thing and the less serious thing in separate like time period, so like they don't associate the less serious bits with the serious bits (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club)*

This young person's view connects with the findings of Kelly and Dhaliwal (2019), wherein some staff may designate some behaviours as different levels of sexual harassment. These scholars claim that this approach to atomising sexual harassment as discrete and scalable incidents is shaped by safeguarding concerns and situations where staff must act. My findings extend this critique by showing how young people interpret these distinctions that could inadvertently reinforce a hierarchy of harm. This young person's remarks signify an opportunity for school leaders and staff to reflect on how they are communicating about sexual violence. It may send a message about an inadvertent 'hierarchy of harm' that affects young people's disclosure of the so-called 'low-level' concerns (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019). Consistent dialogue and messaging with young people in RSE and other components of the whole-school approach are crucial. It could help them understand the connections between the everyday subtle forms of sexual violence with the severe physical acts and the cultures and practices which may minimise the impact of the everyday forms (Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024).

### **Positive outcomes after seeking help or reporting**

Several young people wanted information about other students that their school has supported:

*Tell the stories of students who have spoken out and what happened to help encourage others (FE group)*

*Tell someone's story of what happened after they speak out; if they've been given help then that would serve as an incentive to others (FE group)*

Practitioner respondents in Setty, Hunt and Ringrose's (2025) study acknowledged that processes following reporting are often opaque to young people. Additionally, Ofsted (2021) reports that young people often felt little control in the process after reporting and were not involved in the decisions made about them. The young people's recommendations about learning from the positive experiences of other students illustrate that these measures can enhance transparency and trust between students and school staff.

*If victims can see there is justice and there are consequences. It also sets everyone's idea of what the school would do so everyone would know how it will handle it. Then that will be carried into the future and how they would treat it as adults. (non-binary, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

With limited knowledge, some young people may develop negative perceptions of their schools, influencing their help-seeking behaviours. My findings contribute to the literature by showing how young people's desire for transparency is embedded on their desire to shape collective expectations and institutional accountability in addressing sexual violence with consistent efforts. Their recommendation about positive stories helps bridge this information gap. Implementing this suggestion requires dialogue between students and school staff to determine its benefits and feasibility. Schools must consider the limitations of the information they can provide based on procedures and the potential impact on the young person whose situation they would discuss.

### **Availability and accessibility of support**

Some young people said that they had limited information about the available support and the processes of accessing it.

*No support = not aware (FE group)*

*You'd want to know the support is there (FE group)*

*Knowing someone would help us and who to go to (FE group)*

The availability of support is not enough since they also want the assurance that they can trust the people providing the support. It is essential since they recognise that some young people may consider schools as their primary source of support if they cannot rely on their friends and family.

*Essential for students to know they can trust their teachers (FE group)*

*For some people, the only people they can talk to without being judged are teachers, so it is crucial that teachers are always there (youth club)*

*School is an important place since not everyone has family and friends you can go to (youth club)*

The excerpts above illustrate that young people also wanted to know more about the process of help-seeking through helplines and other resources. Young people's access and use of helplines is even more significant due to the barriers they face in reporting or seeking help in other avenues (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019).

Young person 1: I think they are given to you, but they don't tell you what scenarios you can use them. To help can keep you safe. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Young person 2: We were told about childlines like that in primary school, but in secondary school, we weren't told about any childlines like that (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Their insights can help them identify the type and depth of information they need to make informed decisions about disclosing or reporting to helplines. Meanwhile, some young people in the youth club cited the value of well-being officers and counsellors in supporting them. Students' experiences with these support services may shape their trust and confidence in their institution's services and resources to help victim-survivors (Marques *et al.*, 2020).

Young person: In my college, we have like a counselling support programme where you can go and see a counsellor, or they have like a yeah. So like if there's anything wrong you can go and see them and they'll keep that to themselves... And I think it should be normalised more in school because I know they've got two support staff, but I feel like also having a counsellor there will help a lot. (girl, 16-18 years old, youth club)

My findings reveal that young people have different preferred sources of support. Some wanted to speak to helplines, while others appreciated their experience with their well-being officers. They also suggest that young people's preferences in support services is shaped by relational dynamics and perceived confidentiality. This insight highlights the need for further research on which services young people consider for support and the information they need to benefit from these. It is also significant to explore how young people view these support services as part of the school system. When some categorically said that their schools 'do nothing' or 'not doing enough', it is unclear if they also considered these services as part of their school's overall response.

In summary, this section reveals that the visibility, consistency, and relational aspects of communication and support shape young people's perceptions of school responses to sexual violence. My findings confirm and extend existing literature by showing how young people interpret institutional silence, hierarchies of harm, and unclear processes as barriers to trust and disclosure. Their recommendations highlight their appeal for schools to move beyond policy compliance and toward cultures of care and transparency.

## **8.2 Relational approach to supporting young people with experiences related to sexual violence**

My findings reveal the influence of supportive school cultures as enablers of young people's agency. Several indicated that it is important for them to know who they can trust to discuss experiences that concern or bothered them. One young person said, 'It is important for students to know they can trust their teachers.'

Some young people stated that continued negative interactions with teachers they deemed intimidating discourages some from speaking about their experiences.

Young person 1: Yeah, I feel like it varies from person to person about because if. Like you're the type of person that's for you and someone getting told off like by every teacher. Yeah. Like everyone in school. Then it's you don't have that. A member of staff because you're just like, yeah, you're quite intimidated by. (boy, 13-15 y.o., youth club)

Young person 2: Some of them can be intimidating. (girl, 13-15 y.o., youth club)

Their insights reveal how some students may receive more consistent negative reactions from their teachers, such as being 'told off'. The reason for this experience is uncertain, but it has implications for how they may be more reluctant to seek help. My findings extend existing research on disclosures (Alaggia, Collin-Vézina and Lateef, 2019; Allnock and Atkinson, 2019) by showing how relational dynamics, particularly perceptions of staff as punitive or

intimidating, could constrain young people's likelihood of disclosure and reinforce silence. This insight suggests that preconceptions of students as misbehaving and always being reprimanded may influence their interactions with teachers.

Studies on disclosure with survivors of child sexual abuse show that young people may display behavioural issues following abuse, but they may be called out for their bad behaviour (IICSA, 2022). This insight points towards the need to engage teachers and school staff in reflecting on their responses to young people who may display behavioural issues (CSA Centre, 2025). More attention and sensitivity are needed to understand the young person's needs and experiences that may manifest as acting out instead of labelling them as an 'awful child' (IICSA, 2022) or responding based on assumptions of their characteristics like ethnicity, sexuality or disability (CSA Centre, 2025).

The young people's observations and reflections on engaging with school staff reveal the values and characteristics that matter to them. As discussed in the previous section, some young people appreciated the consistent support they received from their welfare officers:

Young person 1: Yeah, they'll tend to be comfortable to go talk to their welfare officer, whatever the welfare office or anything. (girl, 13-15 years old, youth club)

Young person 2: That's what I do (girl, 16-18 years old, youth club)

Janelle: Have they been supportive?

Young person 1: I talk to my welfare officer everyday (girl, 13-15 years old, youth club)

Young person 2: There should be systems in place then it just takes that little sort of push in yourself to go help to inform them (boy, 13-15 years old, youth club)

These young people's statements indicate the value of sustained trusting relationships with school staff that enable them to speak about difficult experiences and feel supported (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019). Their views resonate with the findings of Moore and McArthur (2024) on the characteristics of adults that young people value when raising concerns: being respectful, listening intently, trying to understand them, and taking their worries seriously.

It is crucial to find these values in individual staff and within the school cultures and systems. These include reliability, openness, trustworthiness, and supportiveness. If young people perceive that these values are lacking in their system, they will be discouraged from speaking out and seeking help. The dialogue between the young people illustrates this point.

Young person 1: I think people don't speak out because they are afraid of what will happen after. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Young person 2: Cause like if they've been given help, it would be an incentive or something (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

The conversation above reinforces a common sentiment within the data that positive experiences of receiving support promote trust in the system and encourage disclosure. The psychological and health benefits of disclosing to a supportive person have been explored in prior research (Cromer and Goldsmith, 2010). Additionally, enablers and barriers to disclosure are shaped by institutional factors such as how they manage the young person's need for control, choice, and confidentiality (Cossar, Belderson and Brandon, 2019).

The young people's views reflect their acknowledgement of the critical role of educators and school staff in supporting their safety and well-being. [Valanzola \(2021\)](#) shows that teachers and school staff must be able to respond confidently to disclosures since reacting well establishes trust with the students and allows them to feel safe. Several young people expressed that they did not expect all teachers to have the capacity and knowledge to respond to their needs appropriately, but knowing who they can turn to would be helpful. This insight pertains to ensuring teachers have training and support to cope with vicarious trauma and care for their emotional well-being after engaging with the student (Valanzola, 2021).

This section highlights the relational dimensions of school responses to sexual violence. My findings build on and extend existing literature by showing how everyday interactions, emotional safety, and perceived respect shape young people's trust in staff. The data reveal that young people value staff who listen, understand, and respond with care. Conversely, repeated negative experiences can hinder their willingness to seek help. These insights underscore the importance of embedding relational values into school cultures and ensuring staff are equipped to respond to disclosures with sensitivity and confidence.

### **8.3 Safe and supportive spaces for learning**

RSE is a critical component of a whole-school approach in supporting young people's agency to identify and respond to various situations and behaviours related to sexual violence. It is vital to consistently support young people since they may feel uncertain or confused even when they learn about topics through RSE (Setty, 2022). Similarly, some youth group members remarked on their uncertainty:

*A lot of people don't know. They might say it's not bad*

*When it happens, it's not widely spoken. You don't know much about it.*

*Raising awareness that it's not okay and you can speak [to] someone about it.*

These statements align with studies with young people in Australia who felt that formal opportunities to learn about sexual abuse could increase their knowledge in knowing which issues to raise with their parents or other adults (Moore and McArthur, 2024). Relatedly, several young people in my study expressed difficulty identifying some problematic behaviours. They highlighted that they wanted support in identifying sexual violence and associated issues. To illustrate, they expressed the knowledge and information that they wanted to learn from their schools through RSE and other sources:

*What I want to learn is how to recognise and prevent sexual violence*

*Need education on what to do when it happens*

*Need education to make sure it doesn't happen*

*They don't talk about what happens after*

These statements show common sentiments among young people in this study on wanting practical information to guide their thinking and decide which situations or behaviours could potentially be harmful or abusive (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023). Their learning needs reinforce that the scaffolded education approach to HSB, proposed by Setty and Hunt (2023) and discussed in Chapter 3, may effectively support them. This approach seeks to develop their critical thinking skills in dealing with these situations from different perspectives, such as a bystander, a person who was harmed, or who may have caused harm.

Their views also reflect that they wanted to learn about sexual violence beyond identifying behaviours, but also in its prevention and aftercare support to victims. My findings show how young people conceptualise education as a tool for the transformation of cultures, systems, and interpersonal dynamics embedded in empathy and support. It includes exploring ways of respecting their needs and rights, and those of others (Economics, 2024; Setty, 2024).

Several young people said they did not engage in enough discussions on consent. When asked about their education experience related to consent, some young people across different workshops reacted strongly. They observed that the lessons were too focused on saying no, yet there were few discussions on stopping or preventing it.

*Discussions on consent focus on "it's okay to say no."*

*It was taught as yes or no.*

These statements show that they receive similar messages about consent, which presents a binary encounter of yes or no. Their views are consistent with prior research, which showed that young people have a more complex and nuanced understanding of consent and sexual

agency that contradicted the notion of consent as a binary of yes or no (Cense, 2019; Whittington, 2019b; Setty, 2022).

Supporting this perspective, one young person from the FE group (girl, 16-17 y.o) asserted, *'There needs to be wider discussions of consent in different contexts, it can be anything you can think of and with different people like family, friends, people you know or don't know.'* This statement reveals a deeper understanding of consent that is not constrained to sexual encounters. This finding suggests how some young people conceptualise consent relationally and contextually. It challenges rigid and binary frames and advocates for broader, more inclusive conversations to reflect their lived realities where sexual intimacies are one part of a bigger relational network.

In response to the perceived inadequacy of discussions on consent, several youth club members co-created messages that they included in an advocacy poster.

*You can change your mind after saying yes*

*You can always say no if something changes*

*Only do things both people say yes to*

*Don't do anything you don't want*

These statements represent the messages they felt were significant for other young people to hear from their RSE lessons and public messaging from their schools. They show nuances of their understanding of consent. The first two statements reflect the concepts of agency and ongoing consent, acknowledging that people can change their decisions and communicate them. Consenting to one act does not mean consenting to all acts. It highlights the value of communication. The third statement emphasises the importance of mutual negotiation that benefits both partners through effective communication. The last statement seeks to alleviate the pressure on young people who may experience difficult situations.

These views align with the recommendations of other research that focuses on equipping young people with practical skills such as communication, negotiation, and empathy. Setty (2025) recommends providing opportunities for young people to practice socio-emotional skills and literacy to identify and navigate gendered pressures and power dynamics within sexual interactions. The young people's suggested statements allude to an implicit recognition of these pressures and power dynamics.

Their proposals of including these messages in RSE reflect the need for young people to engage in dialogues with educators and adults about consent and sexual encounters that align with the fluidity and ambiguity of their lived experiences (Whittington, 2019a; Setty, 2022). Setty (2025) cautions that teachers who insist that there are 'no grey areas' in teaching consent may be unhelpful for young people when they encounter uncertain situations or worse, may encourage a persistent pursuit of yes, including pressure, where they might interpret yes as a sign of consensual sexual activity.

Several young people highlighted that their priority recommendation for enhancing their RSE experience included starting conversations on sexual violence with a younger age group. They did not specify the age group they felt would be ideal to start the conversations, although they implied that secondary school was already late.

Young person (non-binary, 16-17 years old, FE group): Starting conversations at a younger age group is going to have the most long-term effect and make it so much easier to have a mature conversation at a later age like 17. A conversation is different with an 11-year-old and a 17-year-old. But also it lends it more easily and gets them more used to this type of conversation, the topic, and the language. We have people at like year 9 who are giggling whereas if it's the right language, it's expected and talked about at such a young age then it's normalised.

Some young people felt that conversations at a younger age allow for progression with age, including more serious scenarios and language. This view aligns with other research. Some young people felt that introducing topics like relationships and sexual violence can reduce the abrupt and unnatural way it is introduced in discussions (Safelives, 2022). In my study, the young person above reflected on the concrete impact of later discussions that some young people might react awkwardly, affecting their learning and engagement. However, if talking about the topic is normalised at ages that reflect the realities of their experiences, it enables them to feel more comfortable with the discussions (Safelives, 2022). This approach is crucial since they have varying experiences of sexual behaviour and violence which might occur at different ages.

When talking about the topic of sexual coercion, a young person said that he felt it did not apply to them since they were too young. He said, '*Only 13, so sex doesn't apply*'. (boy, 13-15 y.o, youth club). This statement demonstrates how some young people might have misconceptions about sexual behaviours and sexual violence applying to them if these are not discussed in their RSE sessions. The updated RSE guidance introduced age limits for when

educators should teach sensitive and complex topics. Issues regarding sexual harassment should not be taught before year 7 (11-12 years old), and any explicit discussion of sexual activity before year 9 (13-14 years old) (The Education Hub, 2024).

The exchange below illustrates the other young people's responses that refuted his claim:

Young person 1: Some 13-year-olds are different (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: Some children in our school have had sex (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 1: In the school my mom used to teach, other 13-year-old are a lot different than others (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: Some are sexually active (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Their discussion emphasises how the age limits on tackling sexual activity do not match the realities of some young people's sexual experiences. Effective RSE can develop their knowledge about safer sex, build their capacity to develop healthy sexual relationships and identify harmful behaviours (DfE, 2024). My findings contribute to this debate by showing how young people themselves recognise the disconnect between policy-imposed timelines and their lived experiences. Their recommendations on an earlier introduction of topics related to sexual violence imply that they will benefit from the knowledge before they or their peers engage in sexual activity.

These insights consider the reality that young people may be engaging in sexual activity and experimentation at younger ages than adults might expect. McAlinden (2018) claim that adults must be open to discussing with young people the 'new normal' in their sexual behaviours and how they can support them in navigating the complexities safely. Adults do not need to know all the answers, but can open safe spaces for dialogue (Setty and Hunt, 2025).

Regarding the method, a young person stated, '*Schools feel they're doing much already. Powerpoint slide then they move on*' (FE group). This view aligns with the findings of Renold *et al.*'s (2023) mixed-methods participatory study with young people in the UK (aged 14-17) who felt that approaches such as outdated Powerpoint presentations and watching videos repeatedly were ineffective methods in engaging them. However, some teachers and educators do not feel they have adequate training or feel comfortable facilitating active participatory approaches that young people prefer (Meiksin *et al.*, 2020; Setty, 2024).

They identified other methods of engaging them, such as small group discussions:

*Have them carried out in small groups, perhaps with students' friends (as opposed to a large class/assembly) so it feels less intimidating (FE group)*

*Small group work means opinions and ideas can be voiced and heard by others (FE group)*

This view resonates with previous research with young people demonstrating their preference for having open discussions and small group sessions with peers they felt comfortable with (Safelives 2022: Sex Education Forum, 2022; NSPCC, 2023). These active learning strategies position them as autonomous and agentic individuals who can influence the learning process, reflect on the information they receive, and contribute their insights and experiences (Cense, Grauw and Vermeulen, 2020; Economics, 2024; Setty, 2024). The young people in my study provided recommendations that support this point:

*Make it more relevant and make students feel included*

*Engage students in activities and questions*

The findings in this section reinforce the themes in prior research on the benefits of a learner-centred and rights-based approach to RSE (Cense, Grauw and Vermeulen, 2020). This approach provides safe and inclusive spaces for young people to explore their questions and concerns, aligning with their realities. It equips them with skills and knowledge to identify harmful and healthy behaviours and build their confidence to navigate uncertain situations (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023; Economics, 2024).

This approach requires shifting from the traditional 'adult expert' model towards a co-learner model, valuing young people's and adults' expertise and views. This shift requires additional training for teachers. Some young people acknowledged a general need for teachers to receive training, especially if teaching RSE was not part of their initial expertise: '*Tutors of other subjects like history or humanities have RSE as an added workload*'. One of them suggested, '*Make sexual violence seminars compulsory for teachers to learn how to teach about sexual violence*'.

My findings highlight how the young people not only critique current methods but also offer constructive, practical alternatives. Their suggestions point to the need for teacher training that builds confidence in navigating difficult conversations, including the 'grey areas' of consent and sexual violence (Setty and Hunt, 2025).

This section underscores the importance of aligning RSE content, timing, and delivery with young people's lived realities. My findings extend existing research by showing how young people challenge assumptions about age-appropriateness and critique didactic teaching

methods. Confirming other literature (Sex Education Forum, 2022; Renold *et al.*, 2023), they advocate for participatory and dialogic approaches. Their insights reflect a desire for sex education that equips them with the tools to navigate complex social and sexual dynamics.

#### **8.4 Perceptions of school responses to concerns about teachers**

The discussions on Vignette A allowed young people to share their experiences and feelings about certain school teachers. When presented with a list of scenarios, both groups paid more attention to Vignette A. It implies that experiences with teachers are an interesting topic for discussion.

Vignette A: Diana's sports teacher constantly whistles and winks at her when she runs by him. She doesn't look at him. He tells her to smile and that she needs to learn how to accept compliments.

In our discussions, young people raised concerns about alleged sexual misconduct with a student, sexist language related to young women's appearance and uniform, and general feelings of unease around some male teachers. These behaviours should be differentiated, with varying responses and impacts on the young people involved.

Several young people shared about sanctions imposed on teachers for their problematic behaviour. A young person remarked, '*It's weird that in both our schools there are teachers arrested. We think it's quite rare, but it happens*' (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group). This observation suggests that the case involving the teacher relates to a criminal offence in which the policy guidance is clear regarding the school's expected actions (DfE, 2024). Some young people remarked on student-teacher interactions and their perception of the expected school response. One of them shared her views, as seen below:

*There's a teacher in our school who's now engaged with a former student. He still works there. He got a student pregnant, and they're engaged. Isn't that grooming, though? She was in sixth form and she was in year 11, she just freshly turned 18. She was 18 when she got pregnant. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

This statement reflects the young person's confusion about her school's response. Even if the young person involved is above the age of consent at 16 years old, the Sexual Offences Act (2003) states that it is a criminal offence for an adult in a position of trust to engage in sexual activity with any person under the age of 18. My findings highlight how young people might deal with tensions in legal and ethical boundaries, especially when institutional responses appear inconsistent or unclear. The young person's concern also reflects her empathy for the student involved and a desire for accountability beyond school policy.

These examples indicate the need to provide education, through RSE and other avenues, that helps young people recognise potentially abusive or coercive situations involving people in positions of trust. Contextual factors in institutions like schools increase their vulnerability and risks to sexual abuse from authority figures, such as power differentials and institutional cultures of denial or silence, which make disclosure of abuse more difficult (Simon, Luetzow and Conte, 2020). They often do not disclose the abuse due to the complex feelings of fear, complicity, guilt, and shame (McAlinden, 2006).

The situation presented in Vignette A enabled them to think about the potential consequences of teachers' non-verbal sexual behaviours, such as winking and whistling. For instance, a young person's remark below implies that the teacher getting arrested meant that it might have reached the harm threshold. However, it is unclear if it was about the winking or another behaviour.

*They will never wink because it's obvious they will lose their job. A teacher got caught and arrested. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

*Winking and whistling are over the line. Telling her to smile is just sexist. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

The second statement differentiates between non-verbal and verbal sexist actions. It suggests that the former crosses a disciplinary threshold while the latter is minimised. My findings show how some young people interpret institutional boundaries of acceptability that shape their understandings of harm and consequences. In the vignette scenario, men asking girls and women to smile in public is an example of one of the most overlooked forms of sexual harassment whose harm is poorly recognised (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018).

Some young people reflected on how the impact differs between teachers and students in schools. One said, *'The teacher is in a position of trust and power'*, while another remarked, *'Teachers are supposed to be professional, and they're not supposed to do that'*.

Relatedly, some young people in the youth club talked about their school suspending a teacher in their form year for commenting on a girl's clothes, *'He got banned after talking about a girl's fishnets, and he was saying you do not wear fishnets or shorts that we can see things with so he got banned for being our form tutor.'*

Another young person responded that this teacher had said worse statements before, such as, *'Are you wearing a skirt? We can see your ass hanging out.'* The school's response sends a clear message that such behaviour is unacceptable. Still, I question whether these incidents reflect isolated actions of one teacher or a broader school culture where sexist comments by male teachers on girls' bodies are normalised. It is also unclear how the actions of one teacher

saying these sexist comments affect their view of male teachers in general such as feeling uneasy or seeing them as 'weird'.

The teacher's statements align with justifications given for policing uniforms, such as 'not wanting to distract boys or male teachers in school' (Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland, 2020). The underlying message reflects attitudes on victim-blaming and responsabilisation of women and girls: a thinly veiled attempt by schools to convey the message to young women and girls that if they are sexually assaulted by boys or male teachers who are 'distracted' to see the female body exposed, then those young women and girls will be partially, or fully, responsible' (Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland, 2020, p. 25).

Several girls in my study cited their teachers' comments on their physical appearance, clothes, and bodies as a constant source of discomfort and unease. They include comments from teachers about their hair or skirts. Recent survey data from End Violence Against Women Coalition (2023) shows that almost a third of their respondents expressed discomfort with teachers' comments on their bodies or uniforms. They did not specify if these referred to male or female teachers or overall.

Young people's feelings of discomfort and unease about their teachers' actions do not signify harm or that they consider them to be sexual harassment. However, their feelings of unease may reflect the broader impact of policing girls and young women's uniforms and bodies. Rape Crisis Tyneside and Northumberland's (2020) research with girls in Northeast England schools state the negative impact of the policing of their uniform on many young women and girls, including their mental health, self-esteem, interactions with teachers, self-consciousness, and anxiety.

A young person (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club) recalled her experience with a teacher who constantly commented on her appearance, making her uncomfortable and uneasy. It is unclear whether his comments were made as part of enforcing the uniform policy or as part of a general interaction with students. The 'culture of confusion' surrounding perspectives of appropriate and inappropriate behaviour may make it difficult for young people to make sense of these experiences (McAlinden, 2018). Some messages are overtly sexist and sexualised, like the previous example of the teacher, but the behaviours and words in other instances may not be as clear-cut.

The young person only mentioned the emotional impact on her and other students. She said, *'It's happened to other people, then it feels wrong. If it just happened to me, then fair enough, I might be wrong but when it happened to many other people, it gets to the point [inaudible]'*. Her statement shows that she recognised that what she experienced might be a cause for concern. She considered the school's response to determine if the action was wrong: *"But he*

*puts off other people with his behaviour; if something were wrong, they would just send him away straight away."*

This implies that she interpreted the lack of disciplinary action as evidence that the behaviour did not meet the threshold for harm or safeguarding intervention, as stated in school policy like the Keeping Safe in Education guidance (DfE, 2024). My findings highlight how some young people rely on institutional responses to determine whether their experience is serious or valid.

In dealing with her experiences, she told the youth club manager, who responded positively: '*I already told [youth club manager] about it. We can joke about it*'. She stated further that she felt reassured when she talked to him and could '*laugh about it*'. Her statement implies she was not seeking a school disciplinary response about the teacher. She wanted her experience validated and supported when discussing it with him. This example demonstrates how, for some young people, listening without the need for a formal response is a valid intervention in itself (Setty and Hunt, 2023).

These findings reflect the limited options for young people to make sense of their experiences. In the case of the young person and her teacher, she had few options to describe the people involved. Several young people described their teachers in terms as 'weird' and 'n\*nce'. Reporting untoward behaviour may put her teacher into the latter category. It will then place her into the victim identity.

Another young person reflected on this discussion, '*victims are often right until proven wrong, but there are no actual victims*'. This finding raises questions about the identities available to young people who experience discomfort and those who cause them beyond victim and perpetrator. These identity labels have a profound impact on the people involved (Khan *et al.*, 2018). Other young people expressed concern about the consequences of reporting:

Young person 1: unless you're perfectly sure, you don't go telling around to your friends, or you go tell an adult. If it gets around, you can ruin someone's reputation. You can get someone physically in trouble and if you get someone in trouble then that's majorly unfair obviously to teachers (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

Young person 2: 'cause they could lose their jobs and over it (girl, 13-15 y.o, youth club)

These statements demonstrate their awareness that telling someone about feelings of discomfort about their actions may result in dire consequences for them.

In this study, the young people primarily focused on their discomfort with male teachers. Their views could be influenced by the scenario in the vignette, the impact of the implicit messaging

in uniform that their bodies could become distracting for male teachers, or reflective of a broader experience of discomfort around adult men in other spaces outside of schools. My study acknowledges that male teachers may prompt negative emotional responses from students even when they have not acted inappropriately. Prior research on male teachers demonstrates their fear and worry about being falsely accused of child abuse or inappropriate behaviour, even when doing their responsibilities, like providing emotional support to the student (Cruickshank, 2019). Similarly, they must enforce uniform policies like their female colleagues. This study presents the perspectives of young people, yet it still acknowledges the situation of teachers and how young people's views may inadvertently adversely affect them.

In our discussions, the youth club manager shared his perspective on the concrete impact of negative perceptions and labels. It shows the view of a male adult professional that reflects the complex situation for some male teachers.

Youth club manager: The reason that youth work is so difficult for men is the stigma of why do men want to work with kids, especially in senior schools. We can't have the same aspects as women have. Youth work is mostly female, those who work with kids should be female. If you're not a female, you're a pedo\* and believe it or not, the number of times that me and another staff member have been called by bunch of people on the streets

Young person 1: Are these like young kids? (boy, 13-15 y.o)

Youth club manager: These are adults on the streets.

Young person 2: That's just like immature though. (girl, 13-15 y.o)

Youth club manager: That's because of the stigma that men can't work with kids.

Young person 3: Is it someone like coming up to you and being like oh you're a pedo? (boy, 13-15 y.o)

Youth club manager: That joke then carries on.

Young person 2: Then it gets people into trouble. (girl, 13-15 y.o)

Youth club manager: The fact is starting that rumour can't be helpful towards a man. If I was accused of that, even if it was proven that nothing ever happened, it still won't clear me.

The conversation illustrates how derogatory labels have lasting damage on the person involved. It indicates the factors that shape the young people's hesitation in reporting their teacher by thinking of the potential consequences for them. The KCSIE guidance includes responses related to 'low-level' concerns like causing a sense of unease to students and behaviour on a broad spectrum that may be inadvertent (DfE, 2024). My findings suggest that young people may not be aware of these policies and instead assume that any report could lead to severe sanctions.

The results of my study reinforce the need to engage young people in nuanced and reflective discussions about their views and experiences of interactions with their teachers. The data suggests that conversations with them must emphasise caution in conflating teachers under the ambit of 'weird teachers' or using derogatory terms such as n\*nce when they display different types of behaviours. Dialogues with young people can enable them to practice socio-emotional skills, such as empathy and respect, and critical thinking skills by considering how their teacher might be affected by the words they use to describe them. For instance, the young person in my study demonstrated her critical thinking and reflection on the potential consequences of unfairly labelling her teacher.

The findings also highlight the significance of engaging young people in discussions about some teachers' behaviours and their impact on them. A young person suggested, '*General student population needs to be asked, especially if there's a rumour. Ask what they think. You can tell in the way the students feel about them if they are at risk.*' Another young person in my study proposed anonymous methods for reporting: *you can speak to someone about it and report people without being called a grass through anonymous lines.* These recommendations highlight the value of student involvement and consultation about their concerns while keeping them safe from potential backlash like being called snake or grass (Allnock and Atkinson, 2019). My findings contribute to the literature on disclosure by showing how young people want to be involved in shaping institutional responses to respond better to their lived realities such as navigating the social risks of speaking out.

When engaging students in these discussions, school staff and leaders must strike a balance between validating young people's views and not unduly vilifying some teachers. It opens spaces for dialogue between young people and adults on what they consider inappropriate or unacceptable behaviour and their rationale. For instance, if students feel uncomfortable with certain teachers, it must be unpacked to determine whether this discomfort is caused by specific individual actions or a corollary effect of students' perceptions of their teachers due to policy implementation or the problematic behaviours of other teachers. My findings suggest that discomfort is not always a clear indicator of misconduct or harm, but it is a signal that warrants a relational response.

This section reveals the complexity of young people's perceptions of teacher behaviour, institutional response, and the emotional and social consequences of disclosure and reporting. My findings show how young people interpret discomfort, validity, and safeguarding thresholds through their lived experiences. Their reflections highlight the need for schools to foster open and emotionally safe spaces where concerns can be explored without fear of backlash. The

data also calls for improvements in schools' efforts to facilitate young people's increased awareness of safeguarding policies, including low-level concerns.

## **8.5 Views of school responses to behaviours concerning young people**

Several young people discussed the behaviours of students in their schools, which concerned them. These included the sharing of inappropriate photos and unwanted touching. They discussed other situations in broad terms, such as 'big incident', and implied that it involved the police.

*There are Instagram accounts of boys taking photos of girls at schools and sending them around... that was so bad.. it got deleted after a while (16-17 y.o, girl, FE group)*

*There was this girl who got groped on the bus. The boy said I did this and that. The girls asked her if he touched her and she was saying like no (16-17 y.o, girl, FE group)*

These examples demonstrate the range of behaviours that young people experience from other students in their school, which includes online and offline actions and physical and non-physical acts. They reinforced recent research findings about the pervasiveness of these actions in their everyday lives (Ofsted, 2021b; End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2023a; Women and Equalities Committee, 2023).

A recurring point in the data concerns young people's expectations of consequences for those who display harmful sexual behaviours. One young person said, '*More consequences for offenders even out of school.*' The qualifier 'more consequences' can refer to the severity or frequency of the sanctions. Some young people drew on the zero-tolerance policy in our discussions.

Young person 1: There should be zero tolerance on sexual violence (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Janelle: Speaking of zero tolerance, what should be the punishment for offenders?

Young person 2: Extreme actions need extreme consequences. Expulsion is just a straight and long-term punishment that can deter others from doing it. (FE, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Janelle: What can be the punishment for catcalling?

Young person 3: Isolation or suspension can be appropriate. Expulsion for consistent violation (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Janelle: What acts merit suspension?

Young person 2: Case to case basis. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

The phrase 'extreme actions' implies that the young person was referring to physical sexual offences like sexual assault and rape. My findings align with Lloyd and Bradbury (2023) who find that when schools took an explicit zero-tolerance approach, student responses reflected a similar exclusionary and sanctions-based approach. Meanwhile, when schools positioned HSB as a welfare issue, students in their study spoke more about the responses they might expect, including support offered by staff (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023).

Although, our discussions did not cover the specific policies, it is possible that institutional positioning and messaging influenced some young people's strong views on exclusionary measures. Still, it is worth noting that their school's policy positions and implementations may be among the factors that affect some young people's strong views on exclusionary measures.

Young person 1: The offender needs to be punished appropriately, and the victim needs to be reassured and not put down. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

Young person 2: To deter future victims. Offender has more consequences (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)

These statements reveal that the young people's expectations of penalising consequences such as zero tolerance measures are motivated by their empathy for victims. Aligning with other studies that explored sexual violence adult victim-survivors' justice interests related to consequences, these young people's expectation of sanctions was rooted in their desire to prevent future harm (McGlynn and Furgalska, 2019; McGlynn and Westmarland, 2019; Hester *et al.*, 2023). Their statements allude to broader outcomes for past and future victims, such as reassurance that the school system will take appropriate action.

Our discussions highlight their perspectives on how focusing on incidents implies a threshold of harm that warrants a behavioural policy response. In the statement below, the young person seems to be implying that their school had an immediate exclusionary response to a physical violence incident. My findings support prior research on how teachers may be more willing and prepared to respond to reports involving physical violence (Lloyd & Walker, 2023).

*It's not just about sexual violence. Someone beat up a kid in my school, and they got kicked out right away. For sexual violence, it wasn't taken as seriously as*

*physical violence. Extreme actions need extreme consequences. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

The phrase, 'got kicked out right away' illustrates how young people might equate seriousness with validation. This statement aligns with Lombard's (2013) wherein young people distinguish between 'real' and 'unreal' violence depending on adults' responses, like school staff, following a linear sequence resulting in bodily injury, adult intervention, and a consequence.

My findings suggest how young people may apply similar reasoning to sexual violence, constructing a hierarchy of harm based on institutional responses. The disparity between schools' swift response to physical violence and delayed response to sexual violence may shape young people's interpretation of the latter as less serious.

The equivalence of school action, particularly sanctions, as validation is challenging. It is especially concerning when connected to inappropriate and problematic behaviours such as sexist comments, catcalling, and inappropriate touching among students.

*The bigger ripple effect it causes, if it causes a big stir, they are gonna act on it. If not, they are not going to do anything about it because it might not be substantial enough (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

This statement reflects a desire for adults to take young people's concerns seriously, respect, and affirm their feelings and views instead of writing them off. These findings align with Moore and McArthur (2024) who find that the young people in their study felt that adults tend to focus on evidence or proof than emotional impact. Similarly, the young people in my study expressed anticipation of disbelief or dismissal for behaviour that is ambiguous or not explicit physical harm.

Some young people's concern for the victim's treatment in the process is evident:

*In our school there was a big incident, they called the police. The police didn't do anything about it, so it was shouted out at the assembly and laughed at. There were no consequences. The girl involved in it just said she didn't want to talk about it. (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

*There was a boy at my school, and he got reported, but there was nothing. He could still go to school (girl, 16-17 y.o, FE group)*

These statements about 'nothing' being done about the victim-survivors' reports align with the findings of Setty, Hunt and Ringrose (2025). Police respondents acknowledged that the lengthy process involved in the investigation may lead young people to think that no action is

being taken about their concern, eroding their trust and confidence in the system. Some of their respondents felt that they could better explain their actions to show that things are happening in the background that the young people might not know (Setty, Hunt and Ringrose, 2025).

My findings suggest that some young people may equate visible disciplinary action with justice. My interpretation is that when schools apply non-punitive responses counselling or restorative conversations with the Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL) (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023), some young people may not recognise these as meaningful interventions. This disconnect can shape their perception that schools are not doing 'enough'.

To address this, schools could benefit from providing age-appropriate information about the range of responses available when a report is made, in line with Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance (DfE, 2024). Even if young people might expect an immediate disciplinary response, schools have a responsibility to uphold the rights of all young people involved, including those reported to cause harm and respond proportionately.

The Women and Equalities Committee (2023) recommends providing 'a safe, non-judgmental space for students responsible for 'low level' behaviours to reflect on and talk about their behaviour'. The Committee proposes adopting a supportive and compassionate approach when engaging with boys and young men, enabling them to reflect on the impact of their words and behaviours on girls and young women. My findings support this approach, while also emphasising that it should be extended to all young people of different genders and sexualities.

Some young people also reflected on how the young person who experienced harm was put in a complicated position that sometimes led to them denying their experience.

*She was saying like no (FE group)*

*The girl who was involved in it just said she didn't want to talk about it (FE group)*

These statements suggest that young people recognise the relational complexity of disclosure and help-seeking, especially among peer groups. Silence may indicate that a young person feels uncertain or unsupported. My findings highlight the significance of responding not only to explicit disclosure but to signs of discomfort and hesitation that require a proactive relational approach to support young people in articulating their experience.

A recurring assertion among several young people in this study was: '*Victims get punished more than offenders.*' Victims' punishments include social exclusion, intimidation, or bullying from other young people (Lloyd & Bradbury, 2022). In his seminal book on adolescence,

Coleman (2011) elaborates on the significance of peer relationships to adolescents and the adverse impacts of exclusion and rejection, such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and poor academic performance.

As one young person (13-15 y.o, girl, youth club) put it, '*Isolation happens so much if someone doesn't like one person, everyone will start hating that person*'. Some young people expressed sentiments about the value of friendships, which shape their decision-making when experiencing sexual violence.

*People worry a lot about how friends view them (youth club)*

*Because when you're young you are growing up, trying to maintain friendships (youth club)*

My findings highlight how social dynamics in adolescence and school contexts shape their experience of the outcome. They suggest that despite achieving the behavioural policy outcomes available within the school system, this does not equate to a sense of justice and fairness. My study builds on the work of McGlynn and Westmarland (2019) with adult victim-survivors that considers justice outcomes beyond procedural aspects by contributing the lesser-heard perspectives of young people and how they might negotiate with the concept of justice even if we did not explicitly discuss it.

When asked why young people might be worried about how others would see them if they talked about their experience of sexual violence, some young people explained their thoughts:

*Young people are such judgy people so some people would say 'they asked for it' in how they display themselves and call each other 'slags' or 'whores' (youth club)*

*They may be made fun of or be judged for it (youth club)*

*Because we are living in a society where a lot of people judge (youth club)*

These statements illustrate that the punishment is a judgment of their reputation. My findings indicate a seeming incompatibility between the young people's expectations and the realities of school system responses. On one hand, the school adopts penalising measures, which could result in negative social consequences for the young person affected. On the other hand, if they do not act on it in a punitive enough way, then the young people feel that people are getting away with it. It puts schools in a difficult position to fulfil young people's expectations. Addressing this dilemma entails moving beyond actions on individual cases and looking for solutions at a cultural and contextual level.

Terms that refer to those involved, such as 'offender' and 'perpetrator', shape young people's expectations of punitive responses. They serve to 'other' the young person involved and may obscure the reality that they are a young person with rights and needs that the school must support (Hackett, 2020). My findings reinforce my earlier critiques of binary labels and advocate for more fluid identity descriptions that align with the complexity in young people's experiences. This point is even more resonant when involving both young people such that 'offender' does not apply to everyday behaviours that cause discomfort or negatively impact others.

The findings also underscore the need to engage young people in reflective discussions on how they perceive peers who display problematic or harmful behaviours and the impact of being labelled as perpetrators. Police respondents remarked that young people with alleged harmful sexual behaviours can also be negatively affected by delayed and prolonged procedures, resulting in isolation and mental health issues (Setty, Hunt and Ringrose, 2025).

Additionally, it is crucial to engage them in reflections on how they may not be aware that they have caused harm to others directly or in peer behaviours such as isolation and teasing. My findings support a shift from primarily disciplinary responses to restorative and rehabilitative approaches that enable young people to reflect on how they might encounter HSB as a victim, bystander or the person causing harm, building on recommendations by Setty and Hunt (2023).

I reflected later while conducting my analysis that I inadvertently used the term 'offender' in our discussions. It could have influenced their responses that drew upon narratives of punishment. This point helped me realise that even when I was critiquing legalistic and criminal-oriented approaches to sexual violence responses, I still adopted constructs that aligned with these lenses. This reflexive insight underscores the importance of language in shaping young people's understanding of harm and justice. Researchers must be mindful of the terms we use when engaging young people and endeavour to use terms that are not stigmatising, such as 'young person who may have harmed' instead of a perpetrator (Safeguarding Network, 2022). Future research could explore how young people might respond differently if dialogue about school responses did not use terms such as offender or perpetrator.

This section reveals the emotional, relational, and institutional factors that influence young people's views of school responses to young people-perpetrated harm. My findings show how reputational judgment, peer dynamics, and institutional language influence young people's sense of justice. The young people's reflections call for a shift from punitive models to

relational approaches that consider the complexities of adolescent lived realities which require nuanced responses.

## 8.6 Synthesis of young people’s recommendations

The young people’s views present opportunities for school staff and leaders to reflect on how they can address their underlying needs for communication and transparency. This reflective process involves ongoing dialogue with young people to understand their needs better and explain the school’s capacity to fulfil them. These themes highlight the value of young people’s voices and perspectives as a crucial component in sexual violence prevention.

The figure below represents a young people-informed model of consistent care based on their recommendations. It synthesises their recommendations throughout this chapter. It aligns with and extends existing frameworks on whole-school approaches (End Violence Against Women Coalition, 2023a; Setty and Hunt, 2023), offering a practical roadmap for schools grounded on young people’s insights. It includes a timeline of suggested actions before experiencing sexual violence (prevention), once they report or seek help (protection), and aftercare and support to the victim-survivor (progression). Participation is at the centre of this model to emphasise the value of young people’s involvement in co-developing responsive and victim-centred interventions. The complete matrix of their insights and recommendations is in Appendix 7.

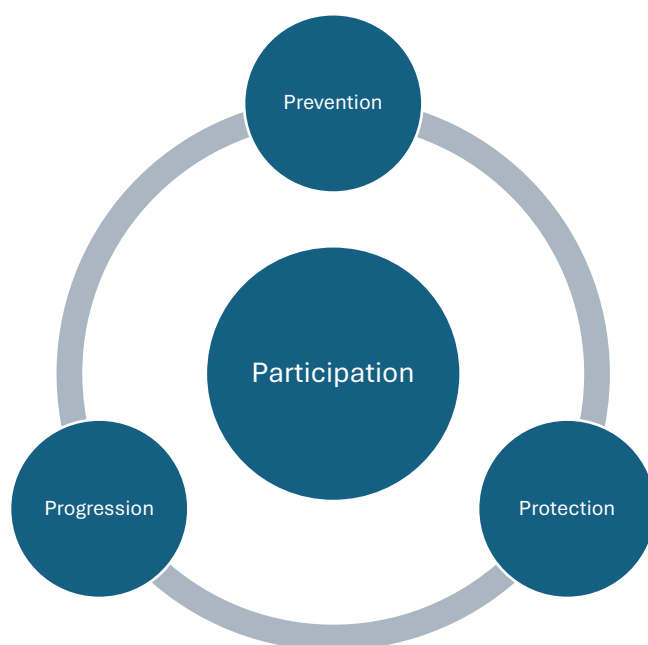


Figure 15: A young people-informed model of continuous support from schools

## Prevention

- ✓ Improving sex education (including training of teachers) on what is sexual violence and what to do when they experience it.
- ✓ Start conversations on sexual violence with younger age groups
- ✓ Awareness-raising activities (e.g. social media)
- ✓ Engaging young people on their experiences and understanding of sexual violence in different contexts

## Protection

- ✓ Providing safe and anonymous spaces for reporting
- ✓ Show that schools are taking sexual violence seriously.
- ✓ Providing more specific information on using helplines
- ✓ Addressing concerns and reports of students on inappropriate teachers

## Progression

- ✓ Providing support to victims to reduce shame and negative consequences (e.g. mental health services, helplines)
- ✓ Providing updates on the consequences for the young people who caused harm
- ✓ Showing positive stories/updates of those who reported about their experience
- ✓ Ensuring positive and non-victim-blaming responses to those who report or disclose

## Conclusion

This chapter presents a comprehensive narrative of young people's perceptions of their schools' responses to sexual violence. It draws attention to their expectations, frustrations and recommendations for change. It positions them as active agents who want to take a critical role in co-developing solutions to sexual violence. Their insights call for schools to move beyond procedural compliance toward relational, transparent, and participatory approaches.

My study builds on existing literature on school responses by foregrounding the relational and emotional dimensions of young people's expectations and recommendations of school responses.

This study considers young people's voices and recommendations as part of a broader school context. Fulfilling many of their recommendations requires commitment and resources from schools while acknowledging the other complex issues they are grappling with. For instance, schools and teachers might be constrained in following the updated guidance on recommended ages to teach topics in RSE (The Education Hub, 2024). Scholars have

reported the need for increased training and resources to equip teachers to teach RSE, so expecting them to teach sensitive topics at a younger age might be a tall order (Bragg *et al.*, 2022). Still, the young people's recommendations can be applied in other ways outside of the RSE policy. Fulfilling their suggestion on public announcements can engage students at an earlier age as part of a whole-school approach.

The chapter also contributes to discussions on justice and accountability by showing how young people interpret institutional action or inaction as a measure of seriousness. It highlights the value of communicating with young people in discussions on what justice means to them beyond criminal justice outcomes like exclusions (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023).

Overall, this chapter affirms the value of young people's views in shaping a shared vision for safe and supportive learning spaces, achieved through collaboration between students and adults. My study calls for schools and adults to be more responsive through collaboration and reflection.

# Chapter 9 Conclusion

## Introduction

This chapter synthesises my study's findings and original contributions. It discusses its impact and proposes research, policy, and practice recommendations. It concludes with reflections on the research process and my PhD journey.

## 9.1 Synthesis of main findings and answers to research questions

This section synthesises the main findings of this study in response to the research questions and the young people's identified priority issues. It highlights how young people's perspectives challenge dominant framings of sexual violence, agency, and institutional responses. These findings set the foundation for the recommendations that follow.

### How do young people understand sexual violence? (RQ1)

Multiple co-existing framings shape the young people's understanding of sexual violence. Their baseline associations often reflected legalistic terms such as rape, assault, punishment and crime. It suggests that these terms provide a familiar frame for them, reflecting the influence of education, policy, and media discourses. However, these rigid framings may also constrain how they represent their ambiguous and complex experiences.

Using the concept of discomfort as a prompt and an alternate lens enabled the young people to articulate broader experiences. They also used affective language such as weird, awkward, and disrespectful to describe experiences that cause them emotional and physical unease. These terms reflect their awareness of the impact of behaviours that often fall below safeguarding thresholds yet concern them. The findings show how they have a nuanced understanding of the impact of sexual violence, encompassing both overt trauma and more subtle, everyday experiences of discomfort. Recognising discomfort and other affective outcomes as a form of impact expands current understanding of sexual violence and opens space for emotional and affective experiences. Their understanding of sexual violence also reveals its interconnectedness with other forms of violence and abuse such as emotional and verbal behaviours in dating and intimate relationships.

Among the most crucial findings is that the young people used interconnected languages of harm and discomfort. The language of discomfort allowed them to express subtle, ambiguous experiences, while the language of harm helped them name physically severe behaviours using terms like rape and assault. This dual vocabulary underscores the need to support young people in communicating in ways that feel safe to them while also normalising the use of terms that indicate serious harm. My study shows how the young people's collaborative

sense-making involved a scaffolded process of associating, defining, naming and describing behaviours and impact. These findings highlight the significance of supporting them to define their experiences in their own words and validating their evolving understanding.

### **How do young people exercise their agency in dealing with and preventing sexual violence? (RQ2)**

Young people's agency in navigating sexual violence is relational and temporal. Their decisions were shaped by relationships, with peers, partners, and adults, and by anticipated emotional and social consequences. The relational considerations of their agency were revealed in their reflections on the potential impact of their actions on their relationships and reputations. Their agency evolved over time. As they gained knowledge and support, their capacity to reflect and act shifted. This temporal dimension highlights the importance of relational and institutional support.

Structural constraints such as gendered expectations, victim-blaming and shame-based narratives narrowed their space for action. Shame emerged as a persistent barrier to disclosure, particularly for boys, who navigate tensions in speaking up due to norms on masculinity and emotional regulation. The young people challenged these norms like questioning the concept of a "real man". The findings highlight how they exercised agency not only individually but also collectively. The young people expressed solidarity through shared messages like "You are not alone" and "It's not your fault", promoting empathy and care.

Their reflections reveal the complexities of articulating discomfort in relationships and personal interactions and in challenging the problematic behaviours of their peers. While some gendered patterns emerged, such as girls more often expressing solidarity and boys sometimes 'looking away', my study does not consider them as binary. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how young people negotiate and challenge problematic behaviour, as well as how gender and peer norms intersect with their capacity to act.

The young people demonstrated themselves as reflexive agents, negotiating their choices amid structural constraints and limited options. Their insights show that agency is shaped by relationships, emotional support, and the ability to articulate discomfort. My study reveals how young people understand and navigate the complexities of speaking out about sexual violence, whether in peer relationships or with adults in positions of trust. They highlight the emotional and social barriers to disclosure. They also emphasised the need for collective resistance to shamed and victim-blaming, rather than placing the burden of self-defense on individuals. When supported and validated, young people are more likely to speak about

uncertain experiences and seek help. This underscores the significance of a relational approach in supporting young people's agency.

### **How do young people perceive the prevention of and responses to sexual violence? (RQ3)**

Young people's perceptions of school responses to sexual violence reveal tensions between policy, practice, and their lived experiences. The young people called for transparency, proactive communication, and visible support systems to build trust and assurance. They consistently value a relational approach to support involving consistent, caring communication that makes them feel listened to and valued. Many viewed RSE as a critical tool for navigating uncertainty and recognising harm. They wanted a practical, nuanced education that promotes dialogue rather than relying on didactic messages.

The findings show the challenges of navigating concerns with both teachers and peers. When addressing situations with peers, the young people often focused on punitive responses. Sanctions were seen as validating harm but also revealed a hierarchy of seriousness that could minimise everyday violations. Some felt that "nothing got done," reflecting their limited knowledge of school policies and a narrow view of responses, mostly considering punitive responses as valid. Others noted that victims could be punished more, through exclusion, bullying, or isolation. These tensions made it difficult for schools to meet young people's expectations, especially when terms like 'perpetrator' or 'alleged offender' were used in ways that felt stigmatising or inappropriate when applied to young people.

Despite these challenges, the young people co-developed practical recommendations for a whole-school approach. This demonstrates a vision of schools as collaborative spaces where adults and young people work together to create safer environments. They emphasised the value of relational support, consistent communication, and educational messaging that explicitly challenges shame and vicim-blaming.

#### **Young people's priority issues**

Beyond the research questions, the issues the young people themselves identified as relevant, shaped this study. These reflect how they want sexual violence to be understood and addressed.

- **Understanding sexual violence:** Young people's framing went beyond defining the term and behaviours involved. They valued both legalistic and emotional lenses to

explore the spectrum of behaviours and impacts they encounter. The findings in this topic were discussed in the previous section on Research Question 1.

- **Boys' experiences of sexual violence:** The young people highlight the underexplored issue of male victimisation. They described how gender norms and shame intersect with peer pressure that constrain boys' agency in identifying harm or seeking help. Still, this study shows the significance of open dialogue to challenge gender-neutral framing and reinforce the gendered disparity in the frequency of girls' experiences while not invalidating boys' victimisation.
- **Defending oneself:** This topic was explored by challenging victim-blaming and shame narratives wherein the young people showed a nuanced understanding of reasons for not articulating discomfort or speaking up against discomfort. This study also highlights that instead of focusing on individual acts of self-defence, the young people emphasised the need for collective resistance to victim-blaming and shame and promoted messages of solidarity.
- **Shame:** Consistent with previous research, my study shows how shame is a persistent barrier to young people's disclosure and help-seeking. It extends this literature by demonstrating its relational and institutional dimensions that reinforce victim-blaming narratives in interactions and institutional messaging or silence. The young people disrupt these shame-based narratives by promoting collective support and calling for educational messages to challenge shame explicitly.
- **Outcomes of sexual violence:** This topic was discussed through perceptions of emotional and relational impact. Their reflections show a broader view of impact, especially on everyday emotional boundary violations.
- **School responses to sexual violence:** The findings of this priority issue have been discussed in the synthesis for Research Question 3 in the previous section. Young people's identification of this issue informed this study's specific focus on education settings as a relevant context that shapes young people's experiences of and understanding of sexual violence.

### **Navigating uncertainty in researching sexual violence with young people**

'Embrace the uncertainty.' This advice from one of my supervisors stayed with me throughout my PhD journey. As someone who values clarity and structure, I found myself challenged by the ambiguity and messiness inherent in researching sexual violence with young people. Still, this uncertainty became a defining feature, both methodologically and thematically, of my study.

Young people's understanding of sexual violence constantly shifted alongside my own knowledge. Together, we navigated blurred boundaries of which behaviours counted as uncomfortable or harmful, which are often context-dependent and emotionally complex. The young people's reflections explored the specific behaviours and their potential impact in determining which acts are acceptable or unacceptable. This uncertainty extended to their agency in how they navigated tensions in relationships and norms. Their capacity to reflect and act evolved and highlighted a distinct form of agency that is temporal and relational, grounded in empathy and solidarity.

Throughout my PhD, the concept of safe uncertainty (Setty & Hunt, 2025) resonated deeply with me. It affirms that adult researchers like me do not need to have all the answers, but we must be open to holding space for complexity. My participatory approach embraces this ethos, allowing young people to define, question, and reframe sexual violence on their own terms and with one another.

Collectively, these findings underscore the significance of validating young people's language, relational dynamics, and evolving agency in addressing sexual violence. They highlight the need for more inclusive and relational responses in education, policy and practice.

## **9.2 Contributions and implications of this study**

This study contributes to knowledge on sexual violence and agency by offering a young people-informed reframing of both concepts. This study builds on and extends these discussions by foregrounding young people's own language, affective responses and collaborative sense-making. It offers conceptual, theoretical, and empirical insights that challenge dominant adult-centric framings.

### **9.2.1 Contributions to knowledge**

#### **Young people's understanding and participatory sense-making of sexual violence**

My study critiques the dominance of adult-centric priorities in defining sexual violence, particularly those informed by legal and policy discourses. It argues that the focus on definitions represents adult-centric priorities that seek to identify fixed parameters around a subject matter. Basing sexual violence prevention initiatives on rigid definitions of sexual violence from policy documents overlooks the diversity of young people's perspectives that can inform and enrich the development of these efforts. This extends on the work of scholars (Wallace-Henry, 2015; Whittington, 2019a) on the influence of legal framing from education and public discourses on young people's baseline understanding. My study adds a distinct

lens by highlighting how they do not adopt these passively, instead they actively negotiate them through participatory dialogue. Alongside, they use personal affective language in their sense-making in describing behaviours and impact. My study extends their work by demonstrating how young people themselves redefine these constructs through collaborative sense-making.

My study adds to the existing knowledge by demonstrating how the young people make sense of their experiences and understanding of sexual violence with fluidity, ambiguity, and uncertainty. It advances conceptual understandings of sexual violence in extant literature, policy and practice. It offers insights into what they understand as sexual violence, how they rationalise their understanding through our dialogues, and why they might hold these views. In doing so, I privilege their views, language, and concepts. This reframing challenges assumptions that clarity and consensus are the only essential elements in addressing sexual violence and calls for fluidity and flexibility. My study contributes to extant literature by showing how young people use their own words to navigate ambiguity, reflecting the limitation of rigid frames.

### **Validating young people's language and conceptual framings**

My study contributes to a growing body of work in critical childhood studies and childism (Wall, 2022) that positions children and young people as knowledge producers capable of challenging dominant epistemologies. In this sense, the view of sexual violence considering ambiguity and uncertainty can inform how adults' experiences may also be explored, building on the work of feminist scholars on intimate intrusions and adults (Vera-Gray, 2016; McGlynn, 2024). My study contributes a different perspective on validating the language that young people use to make sense of their experiences, like weird, disrespectful and persistent, that differs from how scholars might frame it, such as using the term intrusions.

### **Expanding what counts as sexual violence**

My findings demonstrate the interconnectedness of coercively controlling behaviours manifested through threats and pressure in sexually victimising individuals in intimate relationships. It builds on the work of Donovan, Butterby and Barnes (2023) in expanding the view of what 'counts' as sexual violence, particularly in LGBT+ contexts. My study extends this by offering empirical depth from young people, showing how disciplinary silos and terms like sexual violence, sexual harassment, and domestic violence do not align with their lived experiences and understanding. Forcing them to slot their experiences into these known terms indicates a preoccupation with adult-centric views and systems. This contribution highlights the overlapping nature of different forms of violence and abuse and sexual behaviours. My

study adds empirical depth by demonstrating how young people resist and reconfigure these categories.

### **Scaffolded participatory sense-making as a methodological and conceptual tool**

My study offers a young people-informed understanding of sexual violence by discussing the value of different participatory sense-making strategies, such as naming behaviour and impact, defining sexual violence, and communicating about its impact. It provides additional evidence to a limited body of research on young people-centred conceptualisation of sexual violence by demonstrating the value of a participatory approach in enabling a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their sense-making.

This contribution complements the growing body of participatory research with young people on sexual violence (Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024; Warrington *et al.*, 2024) but it is different in its focus on young people's language, conceptual framings, and collaborative and scaffolded sense-making of the topic.

By introducing discomfort as a prompt, I enabled them to explore other views of sexual violence beyond the legal framing. This approach proved to be effective in enabling them to express using affective and emotion-based concepts. My study extends previous work with young people that discuss how young people used emotion-based concepts (Taylor *et al.*, 2021; Sweeting *et al.*, 2022) by showing the participatory process of how discomfort as a prompt encouraged the young people in my study to use affective and personal language alongside legalistic language. It reveals the value of proactively engaging young people to explore different frames than the familiar ones, which may be shaped by dominant framings that do not reflect their language or experiences. It demonstrates how conceptual scaffolding can support young people in challenging dominant narratives.

### **Situating young people's perspectives in knowledge production**

By privileging young people's views, language, and concepts, my study contributes to broader debates on whose knowledge counts in research, policy, and practice. It shows how their understanding of sexual violence is shaped by fluidity and emotional dimensions, aspects often excluded from dominant frameworks.

This contribution is situated within sexual violence and childhood studies literature yet is unique in its empirical grounding and emphasis on co-developed language. It offers a model for how adult researchers can engage young people as conceptual collaborators, enhancing theory and practice.

### **Discomfort as a conceptual and communicative tool**

My study proposes discomfort as a complementary construct in engaging young people to discuss broader experiences of sexual violence beyond criminal acts. It demonstrates that sexual violence as a concept is insufficient in capturing young people's diverse experiences.

This study builds on the literature on affect and discomfort (Ahmed, 2017; Chadwick, 2021) but extends them by exploring how discomfort can be used to prompt alternate perspectives on sexual violence and how it is a representative construct for emotional experiences of unease and ambiguity. My study also extends the work of Moore and McArthur (2024) which highlights the disparity between adults and young people's language when communicating about safety by showing that young people communicate using interconnected languages of harm and discomfort related to sexual violence.

### **Discomfort as a signal in disclosure and prevention**

This study envisions the language of discomfort as part of a broader framework for prevention. It can be one of many signals that can help young people, adults, and institutions to be more sensitive to different forms of communication and understandings of harm. My findings support extensive literature on disclosure by proposing discomfort as a signal of uncertainty. It means being sensitive and validating young people's physical and emotional responses to situations and behaviours if they feel something is wrong. These findings connect to recurrent themes in the literature on child sexual abuse disclosure wherein young people expressed their feelings about something not feeling right. Some scholars assert that they did not have the language to describe their experience.

Contrary to these claims, my study showed that some young people do have the language to articulate their experience. However, the terms they use and the focus on affective responses may not be validated by adults or institutions. Research on disclosures of child sexual abuse has shown that young people's earlier attempts to tell may have been dismissed by adults since the language they used did not signify the severity of the situation (Allnock and Miller, 2013). Being aware of the language of discomfort can be used by adults to be attuned when young people communicate in various ways that something is amiss.

This insight contributes to the literature on epistemic violence (Hlavka, 2019), testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007), and adultism (Wall, 2025), when young people's knowledge and language may be invalidated or dismissed, reinforcing their silencing and marginalisation. It reinforces my earlier contributions on childism, highlighting the need to centre young people's voices in conceptual frameworks.

Guidance often focuses on encouraging children and young people to disclose and report violence and abuse. However, there is little attention on supporting them to communicate

about broader safety to identify behaviours causing them unease that may be precursors to violence and abuse (Moore and McArthur, 2024).

My study argues that empowering young people to raise concerns related to sexual violence, such as uncomfortable situations, allows them to seek help and support, which can prevent abuse and provide timely intervention. Additionally, supporting them in speaking about varied experiences and concerns helps them gain control and agency over their experience. It fosters a trusting and supportive environment, prioritising their protection and participation in preventing harm (Moore and McArthur, 2024).

My study builds on the existing violence and abuse research with children and young people. It validates their different ways of identifying harmful behaviours and communicating about them (CSA Centre, 2025). My findings connect to the extant literature on boundary violations, intrusions, and gender micro-aggressions that seek to capture experiences and behaviours related to sexual violence beyond the available legal definitions or criminal offences (Gartner and Sterzing, 2016; Vera-Gray, 2016; McGlynn, 2024).

Instead of offering a new term or concept, my study focuses on how young people might communicate about these behaviours. It shifts the focus from introducing new laws or types of criminal offence (McGlynn, 2024) or conceptual constructs in academic literature (Gartner and Sterzing, 2016). It complements the recommendations of the CSA Centre (2025) guide for adults in communicating with children about sexual abuse. It presents the perspectives of young people on how they might communicate with adults and how they could be more attuned to these.

### **A young people-informed model of communication**

My study puts forward a young people-informed model of communicating about sexual violence to show the language young people use to describe the behaviour, the experience of the behaviour, and naming the behaviour. This model integrates the language of harm about the known terms related to sexual violence and the language of discomfort. The latter involves young people-informed terms using casual language to capture their description of behaviours and experiences that do not fit with known terms like criminal acts. This builds on the work on gender micro-aggressions and intrusions (Gartner and Sterzing, 2016), yet is distinct in the emphasis on young people's own language instead of adult-initiated constructs.

While my study adopts a critical view of primarily criminal justice-oriented concepts, it does not negate their value. The literature on justice interests shows how views of justice vary among survivors. Many might find justice through criminal proceedings. This study seeks to expand and complement this dominant view with alternative perspectives. The findings show that

some young people value using these legalistic terms in making sense of their experience. Alternative constructs like discomfort and affective language allow them to communicate if the legalistic language does not work for them to articulate their experience.

### **Young people's relational and temporal agency**

My study contributes to the existing knowledge of young people's agency by framing it as relational and temporal. At the relational level, my study reinforces the extensive literature's findings on disclosure barriers, such as fear of being disbelieved, shamed, or judged (Allnock and Miller, 2013; Ofsted, 2021; CSA Centre, 2025). It adds to this body of knowledge by presenting their expressed needs and expectations to address these barriers. They include listening to them with empathy, care, and without judgment; establishing relationships of trust and reliability; showing openness to learn about their experiences; not having preconceptions about them if they display behavioural issues; and avoiding messages that convey shame, victim-blaming, and judgment.

The relational aspect involves interactions between young people, wherein the ambiguity of situations related to consent can make it difficult for some to articulate refusal or consent and eventually seek help. My findings show that ambiguity refers to the grey areas in consent, such as whether the encounter is unwanted. The uncertainty of response pertains to the risk of potential consequences such as teasing, bullying, rejection due to sexual identity, and loss of relationship. My study shows how the young people tried to address these worries through messages of support and solidarity, reflective collective action and agency. It builds on the existing literature by showing the value of collective peer support and reassurance through peer-led advocacy efforts. At the institutional level, my study highlights young people's acknowledgement of uncertainty in school responses and their efforts to navigate it by seeking more information from them.

My findings suggest that frameworks on agency should account for the different factors that can constrain or expand young people's agency, as discussed in Chapter 7. In doing so, young people demonstrated themselves as reflexive agents (Beckett, 2019) who recognise how gender norms and peer pressure can constrain their options in navigating pressure and threats.

My study offers an understanding of young people's agency as resistance. The findings in Chapter 7 reveal that many young people wanted to resist gender norms, like questioning the concept of a 'real man' and challenging the prevalence of shame and victim-blaming narratives. It builds on emerging scholarship that seeks to disrupt the binary between victimhood and agency (Vera-Gray, 2018; Raghavan, 2024). The young people's views shed light on understanding Raghavan's (2024) proposal on reconceptualising women's agency and

victimhood related to sexual violence. It entails accepting their action as valid given the constraints, even if it may differ from societal expectations, demonstrating ambiguous agency (Bordonaro and Payne, 2012) and situated agency (Vera-Gray, 2017).

It differs from prior work like Warrington et al (2024) that highlight young people's resistance as pushing back against adult expectations for navigating harm and explored young people's expressions and views of resistance based on their lived experiences of violence and exploitation. Meanwhile, my study foregrounds their collective resistance in co-creating messages of solidarity and empathy to challenge shame and isolation. This contribution is distinct in emphasising young people's collective agency as peer-led resistance to gender norms, shame, and victim-blaming. My study differs by embedding a childism lens to situate young people's insights in disrupting and transforming dominant norms. It also emphasises their relational and temporal agency, shaped by their social interactions and reflections on potential consequences.

My findings on young people's agency reinforce existing knowledge on sexual violence prevention using a socio-ecological framework by demonstrating the interconnectedness of individual (identifying behaviour as 'wrong'), relational (providing sensitive and validating responses), and institutional (cultural change to challenge shame, blame, and disbelief) factors in prevention and responses to sexual violence.

These conceptual, theoretical, and empirical contributions are deeply connected with my study's methodological approach. The use of participatory, open-ended, and creative methods enabled the co-production of knowledge and the transformation of dominant understanding. The methodological choices supported the young people in articulating their language and exercising choice and control in the research process. The following section outlines how these methodological innovations contribute to enhancing research practice with children and young people on violence and abuse issues.

## 9.2.2 Methodological contributions to participatory research on violence and abuse with children and young people

### Participatory approaches for conceptual reframing

Situated within an extensive body of literature that uses creative, participatory, and open-ended methods for engaging young people on violence and abuse issues (Westmarland and Bows, 2019; Warrington, 2020; Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024), my study contributes a specific focus on how participatory methods can support young people in reframing definitions and articulating their language to make sense of their experiences. While open-ended and creative methods have been widely adopted in childhood and youth research (Bradbury-Jones, Isham and Taylor, 2018; Freire *et al.*, 2022), this study makes a distinct contribution by showing how these methods can validate young people's terms and vocabulary. This study contributes to the field by illustrating how these methods facilitate young people's meaningful participation but also to challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative conceptual framings.

### The Lego model of participation

I introduce the 'Lego model of participation' as a methodological and conceptual innovation for developing and conducting participatory research with children and young people. This model offers a flexible and culturally grounded framework that differs from hierarchical models of participation. Drawn from the Lego metaphor, the model is composed of three interconnected building blocks: Lead, Listen, Learn. These are adaptable components that can be applied in different ways depending on contexts and relationships.

Each block is grounded in Filipino relational values: Lead - *paggalang* (respect), Listen - *pakikiramdam* (sensitivity to others), and Learn - *pagpapakumbaba* (humility). This model reflects an epistemology of the South (Santos, 2016) and offers a decolonial contribution to participatory research in Western contexts. This model embeds these values into the research process and advocates for applying participation as an ethos and ongoing commitment.

- **Leading:** My project demonstrates the value of involving young people in choosing the research agenda and topics and practising agility and flexibility in adjusting the research design. Its open-ended approach differs from co-research and peer research designs, as the young people, although not identifying as researchers, influenced decisions about content and methods. This study demonstrates a unique model of collaboration that respects young people's preferred forms of participation while valuing their contributions as co-producers of knowledge.
- **Listening:** I built relationships with young people using relational approaches, drawing on my cultural values as a Filipino. These include warmth, openness and care. While

applying these values may not be standardised, they offer transferable practices that can be adapted through reflexive and culturally-responsive engagement.

- **Learning:** young people-led group discussions proved to be an effective model for them to learn from one another. My cumulative co-learner approach in learning with them to co-develop conceptual and process insights.

The Lego Model contributes to participatory research by offering a values-based alternative to dominant frameworks like Hart's ladder of participation. It questions notions that participation must be categorised and instead encourages researchers to reflect on the ethical principles that underpin their work. It provides a practical and theoretically grounded tool for researchers in enabling young people's meaningful participation.

My study extends ongoing discourses about children and young people's meaningful participation in research. It demonstrates participation as an ethos and commitment embedded throughout the project. My participatory approach shows a model for engaging them with an ethics of care and reflexivity that prioritises relationship-building. This approach helps in navigating adult-child power dynamics in research. My study extends the emerging body of work on protective participation (Moore, 2024; Warrington, 2023).

### **Iterative collaborative workshops and participatory activities**

My study introduces an innovative methodological approach using cumulative and iterative collaborative workshops. Workshops differ from focus groups in approach since they are activity-based, with a rapport-building icebreaker at the start and a feedback session at the end. The iterative feedback component of my approach is a unique methodological aspect in adjusting the project to meet the young people's needs, strengthening the co-production aspect. My study presents participatory tools and activities, building on previous research on participatory group work on sensitive topics (Whittington, 2019a; Warrington, 2020). It showcases the value of using these participatory approaches to engage young people in dialogues on sensitive issues in safe, open spaces.

### **Participatory sense-making in violence and abuse research**

My study adds to existing knowledge in the field of violence and abuse research by demonstrating approaches to scaffolding information related to sexual violence. I was mindful of my critiques about adult-centric constructs dominating understandings of sexual violence. Thus, I adopted participatory sense-making strategies that encouraged the young people to challenge, redefine, and communicate about sexual violence based on their language and understanding. These led to discussions wherein they corrected my initial interpretations. In doing so, I have demonstrated my role as the adult researcher in providing conceptual entry

points to help them articulate their thoughts and facilitate conversations beyond the dominant understanding they expressed in the initial workshops. It illustrates an approach to knowledge co-production in violence and abuse research where the adult researcher and young people cumulatively and collaboratively built a shared understanding of the topic.

Additionally, this study's collaborative, participatory approach demonstrates the value of using open-ended methods to determine young people's language and knowledge of sensitive issues such as sexual violence. This approach can be used in mixed-method studies to complement quantitative studies on the scale of sexual violence or the factors that shape young people's experiences, attitudes, and understandings.

### **Trauma-informed approach to engaging young people**

My study follows a reflexive, ethical and trauma-informed approach to engaging young people, mindful of their varied lived experiences that may relate to sexual violence. It embeds principles of a trauma-informed approach to research with young people (Beckett and Warrington, 2024):

- Safety (co-creating safety with the young people and gatekeepers)
- Trustworthiness (shared decision-making, ongoing consent and iterative feedback loops; establishing relationships of trust, openness, and comfort)
- Choice (supporting their priority topics and preferred forms of participation, respecting decision to opt-out of some activities or workshops)
- Collaboration (group-based participatory approach promoting peer learning and knowledge co-production)
- Reflexive practice (continuous reflections on managing power dynamics among young people and with me as the adult researcher; embedding ethics of care and ensuring young people's well-being in the research; adapting approach based on their people's feedback)

Recent studies have featured the involvement of victim-survivors, which is vital since they are typically sidelined or silenced due to concerns of re-traumatisation (Cody, Bovarnick and Soares, 2024; Warrington *et al.*, 2024). This study enhances existing knowledge generated in these studies by involving young people with no known experience of sexual violence. By focusing on everyday experiences of sexual violence, my study acknowledges that they may not identify themselves as victim-survivors of sexual violence. However, they still encounter the impacts of different forms of sexual violence.

### **Researcher well-being and reflexivity**

My study builds on the emerging body of work on researcher well-being when working with children and young people on sensitive topics. My reflective account in Chapter 5 builds on prior studies that encourage researchers to be transparent about the messiness and uncertainties of engaging young people. It demonstrates the value of vulnerability and honesty in presenting our research experience, which could serve as learning points for other researchers. My study shows a reflexive account of the difficulties and delights that are part of participatory research. Thus, my thesis contains personal, affective, and relational aspects to document my research journey, extending knowledge on reporting about participatory research with young people.

### **9.2.3 Practical contributions to enhancing whole-school approaches to sexual violence**

My study presents young people's views and recommendations on school responses as a practical contribution. It demonstrates that their prevailing views of their schools' insufficient action on sexual violence reflect the impact of structural and systematic constraints. Schools face immense pressure and competing demands and priorities, which affect resource allocation and policy implementation. My study reinforces the findings from prior research on the need for additional capacity-building of teachers to teach RSE and respond to HSB (Bragg *et al.*, 2022; Economics, 2024).

#### **Intergenerational dialogue in school contexts**

My findings show how young people and adults can work together in addressing sexual violence. It highlights that they perceive their schools to have a significant role in supporting their knowledge and capacity to deal with sexual violence and promoting their participation and protection. This study highlights the integration of young people and adult insights, recognising the value and validity of both groups' inputs and the significance of working together in co-developing solutions for preventing sexual violence in schools.

My study underscores the significance of communication, dialogue, and transparency between young people and school staff. The information that young people want from schools includes showing sexual violence is a priority, positive stories of young people who reported, and sources of support. These expectations of information are underpinned by their desire for transparency and reassurance from schools amid the information asymmetry, leaving them with little information, choice, and control after they disclose or report (Ofsted, 2021; Setty, Hunt and Ringrose, 2025). They also want practical information from RSE to understand what sexual violence is and how they can deal with it. My research entails validating the language and definitions they used to describe their experience, opening spaces for dialogue between

adults and young people, and promoting a shared understanding of the behaviours and situations that concern them.

### **Balancing punitive and welfare responses to addressing sexual violence**

Prevention work and engagement of young people must not focus on a legalistic approach. My study demonstrates the impact of the prevailing punitive responses on their perceptions of a valid response and diminishing their recognition of the other components of the whole-school approach. Additionally, when referring to adults or young people, the term perpetrator is incompatible with instances involving behaviours causing discomfort or everyday subtle behaviours. There are limited terms available to make sense of their experience beyond victims and offenders, which does not match the fluidity of their experiences.

My study supports proposals on re-imagining young people-centred, trauma-informed and victim-centred justice in schools amid the dominant punitive culture (Lloyd and Bradbury, 2023). The findings demonstrate that the young people, with gendered differences due to context and perception of peer dynamics, were driven by a strong sense of social justice, empathy, and activism on behalf of those they know have been affected by sexual violence. These insights underscore the affective element underpinning their perceptions of their expectations of their schools. It adds to the body of work on justice interests by suggesting care and support as broader values that matter to young people than reparation.

Regarding relationship and sex education approaches, my study demonstrates the potential of using active and participatory learning approaches to facilitate young people's discussions. My study's findings align with recent research with young people (e.g. Renold *et al.*, 2023; Setty, 2024) on the value of peer learning instead of lecture-style and didactic pedagogical approaches. They appreciate discussing the whys of behaviours more, recognising the complexities in their experiences, rather than binary statements of right or wrong behaviours (Setty, 2024). Similarly, the young people's feedback on the workshops demonstrated that they appreciated the collaborative co-learning approach, which enabled them to learn from each other and contribute their insights in a safe and open learning environment.

### **9.3 Impact**

My study has documented evidence of participatory impact on the young people involved through their feedback on the sessions (Banks, Herrington and Carter, 2017). As discussed in Chapter 5, some reported a better understanding and awareness of the issue of sexual violence, including the perspectives of other young people with differing identities. Affective and relational outcomes indicate participatory impact, such as feelings of safety, being heard and listened to, and being comfortable. These outcomes are crucial in my project, which dealt

with sensitive topics. Many of them said they did not have previous experiences discussing the subject openly. Their experiences in joining the project influenced changes in their attitudes toward being more confident and comfortable sharing their opinions about the topic with other young people.

During the workshops, the young people were actively involved in developing materials and messages for awareness-raising. This participatory impact is demonstrated in the opportunity for the young people to initiate and lead impact-oriented activities during the process. To clarify, these are not follow-on work from the project but were embedded within the workshops themselves.

Specifically, two groups from the youth club co-developed outputs. One group co-created an action plan for an awareness-raising social media campaign involving videos (Appendix 9). Due to practical and logistical concerns, we have not yet implemented the plan. Another group co-developed a poster with key messages addressing sexual violence and abuse in dating and relationships (Appendix 9). In both groups, the young people focused on core action-oriented messages for other young people such as 'speak out', 'you are not alone', and 'you can tell your friends'. I presented the co-developed poster at an academic event of my research group at Durham University.

These outputs indicate a participatory impact on consciousness-raising and activism (Banks, Herrington and Carter, 2017). They also demonstrate how the young people translated their conceptual understanding into concrete outputs aimed at supporting their peers, a crucial indicator of this study's practical relevance and potential for wider impact in supporting young people's activism.

My research project has documented some evidence of collaborative impact as evidenced by external people and organisations using the findings (Banks, Herrington and Carter, 2017). The examples below demonstrate the immediate practical applications of my research.

Insights from my research informed the development of a training workshop for the youth workers of the youth club where I conducted my research. This engagement offers methodological insights on activities to enable comfortable and open dialogues with young people on sensitive topics and conceptual insights on the potential topics that concern them. Following the training workshop, the youth workers conducted a series of workshops for several groups of young people beyond those I initially engaged in my research. Therefore, it illustrates the reach of impact of my project findings in equipping youth workers with skills and knowledge in conducting participatory workshops with young people. This example also shows

the potential impact of raising the awareness of other groups of young people on the related issue of sexual violence and healthy relationships.

Another example of collaborative impact is how emerging findings from my research informed aspects of a creative co-creation project on peer sexual abuse in schools. In collaboration with the creative practitioners, as the academic evaluator, I provided conceptual and methodological insights to guide the thematic discussions with the young people that shaped the development of the script and animation.

The conceptual insights include seeing the impact of everyday forms of sexual violence in schools and validating young people's language of discomfort. These insights seek to facilitate attitude and behaviour change in help-seeking and challenging problematic behaviours. Methodological insights involve incorporating an iterative feedback mechanism in the workshops to enhance young people's engagement in co-creation. My findings have also informed the development of learning programmes using the animation as a stimulus such as a lesson, assembly, and continuing professional development training for teachers in the participating school, extending my project impact to over a hundred students and teachers.

## **9.4. Recommendations**

This section synthesises the recommendations emerging from this study, including those explicitly outlined in the findings chapters and additional cross-cutting recommendations. While Chapter 8 foregrounded the young people's proposals for change for their schools, the recommendations here are directed towards research, policy, and practice audiences.

### **9.4.1 Research**

#### **Participatory sense-making with young people on sexual violence and related constructs**

My study shows the potential of using different participatory sense-making methods to develop a young people-informed view of sexual violence. It encourages researchers to adopt participatory and creative research methods in engaging young people on sensitive topics. They can try out varied participatory sense-making methods similar to or different to those I employed in my study. My project provides recommendations in Chapter 5 on the building blocks of developing and conducting participatory research with young people that other researchers could consider.

My study supports [Lloyd and Bradbury's \(2023\)](#) recommendation of re-imagining justice from young people's perspectives. My findings reveal that the punitive-oriented views that many young people hold affect their expectations of sanctions and shape their perceptions of other

young people as perpetrators. My research proposes the integration of justice interests in engaging young people in discussions.

Additionally, as I discussed in Chapter 2, prior studies delved into the misconceptions and beliefs of adult actors in the criminal justice system, such as jurors and lawyers, about child sexual abuse and 'ideal' victims (see Cromer and Goldsmith, 2010; Eelma and Murumaa-Mengel, 2022; St. George, Denne and Stolzenberg, 2022). However, little is known about young people's perspectives and beliefs, how these might affect their perception of their experiences, and the impact of different behaviours. Future research can explore this topic.

### **Involving young people with diverse identities and from other geographical areas**

There persists a significant gap in research where other groups of young people are scarcely heard in sexual violence research. I recognise the plurality and diversity of children, young people, and childhoods; thus, applying an intersectional lens is crucial. Further research is needed to engage diverse groups of young people with different ethnicities, sexual orientations, disability, classes, and religions. It is also crucial to engage young people with lived experiences of sexual violence, including those who experienced harm or caused harm.

More research on young people is urgently needed in countries rarely represented in academic literature. Most studies on sexual violence have been done in a small number of high-income countries like the UK, the US, and Australia, yet less is known about the initiatives in low- and middle-income countries (Ligiero *et al.*, 2019; Simon, Luetzow and Conte, 2020).

As a Filipino researcher, I aspire to conduct a similar study in the Philippines and connect with researchers from other countries to include the voices and perspectives of young people from different parts of the world. Representing the perspectives of broader and diverse groups of young people can contribute to enhancing young people-informed conceptualisations of sexual violence, responses, and its prevention. For instance, different groups of young people may use other words to describe their subjective experiences, adopt varied responses when experiencing sexual violence, and determine the impact in distinct ways. Further research is needed to understand the views of other young people on sexual violence and to determine if discomfort would still be an effective construct in engaging them in discussions. It would also be worthwhile to explore young people's sense-making on different issues, such as agency, shame, resilience, and justice related to sexual violence. Developing a young people-informed understanding of these constructs can complement existing adult-centric understanding.

Future research can expand on my study findings towards representing the multiplicity and diversity of young people's perspectives and experiences on sexual violence and its prevention. These can enhance prevention interventions in different contexts, cultures, and geographic locations.

### **Intergenerational perspectives on school responses to sexual violence**

My study highlights the lesser-heard perspectives of young people in school responses. However, they only represent one perspective in the school system. Future research can focus on integrating the perspectives of different actors, such as teachers, school leaders, and school staff, along with young people's views. Intergenerational research with these actors can help develop a better understanding of their needs and the challenges and constraints they experience related to sexual violence. It can also develop collaborative and feasible solutions.

Additionally, more research is needed to determine young people's views on the good practices of their schools on whole-school approaches, RSE, and sexual violence prevention. My study showed how asking them about areas for enhancement can reveal gaps and recommendations, but it can overlook the current practices of schools and school staff, which should also be commended. It can balance out the highly critical views that some young people hold.

### **Disclosure, help-seeking, and reporting of sexual violence**

Further research would be beneficial to explore young people's different ways of telling (CSA Centre, 2025), notably the indirect ways and everyday language they might use. My research builds on the recommendations of recent studies on validating young people's affective sense when speaking about potential safety concerns with adults (Moore and McArthur, 2024) and supporting adults in communicating with young people about sexual abuse (CSA Centre, 2025). This emerging body of research focuses on developing adults' sensitivity, awareness, and openness to young people's ways of talking about sexual violence that may differ from adult expectations.

My study recommends additional research into understanding the individual, relational and institutional barriers and facilitators to young people's disclosure, reporting, and help-seeking about sexual violence. It entails delving into their uncertainty about receiving a positive and supportive response, learning how to reassure them and developing their trust even before they disclose. My study provides specific recommendations for addressing these concerns in the school system in Chapter 8.

## **Navigating the ‘culture of confusion’ related to sexual behaviours and sexual violence**

My study recommends that more research is needed to explore young people's views on the impact of gender and peer norms, the influence of social media, pornography and digital cultures in how they draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviours. My study shows that young people have nuanced views and exert agency in navigating these different pressures and influences. Further research can build on my findings by highlighting young people as reflexive agents amid ever-changing contexts. It did not delve into the influence of social media influencers on young men's attitudes and behaviours, young people's experiences of sexual violence online, and the impact of pornography on their views of sexual behaviours and sexual violence. I acknowledge that these topics have received heightened interest in research and public discourse. My study proposes that future research could include the component of young people's confusion and the complexity of their experiences in framing the discourses. It can avoid inadvertently vilifying them for their actions and attitudes or framing them as passive recipients of information from social media and online sources.

It considers the need for intergenerational research with young people and adults to identify how their views might differ on the ‘new normal’ of young people’s sexual landscapes (Agnew and McAlinden, 2023). Future research can develop a shared understanding between them and explore how adults might feel about practising 'safe uncertainty' in engaging young people in discussions on these sensitive topics (Setty and Hunt, 2025).

### **Areas for future research**

- Expanded understanding of violence: Researchers may explore how young people link different forms of violence and abuse in their sense-making. This calls for methodologies and research that do not silo sexual violence from other forms of harm and that attend to relational and emotional dimensions.
- Support preferences and service perceptions: Further research is needed to understand which support services young people prefer, how they perceive these within school systems, and what information they need to access them effectively.
- Consent and ambiguity: Research could consider examining how young people navigate ambiguous sexual situations and how educational tools can support consent communication and boundary negotiation.

- Shame and institutional norms: Researchers are encouraged to explore further how shame and victim-blaming are perpetuated through relational and institutional interactions, and how young people co-develop strategies to resist these norms.

#### **9.4.2. Policy**

My study findings have vital policy implications in the English context, suggesting that local and national strategies on sexual violence prevention must include children and young people's participation more systematically. These include the ongoing review and updating of the Relationship and Sex Education policy in England.

#### **Relationship and sex education guidance**

- Review the guidance's legalistic, risk-averse, and decontextualised framing (Setty and Dobson, 2023) and assess the implications on young people's understanding of sexual violence and teachers' education strategies, including topics on rights, autonomy and sexual citizenship.
- Engage young people on the topics that they would want to be covered and their suggested age range based on their lived experiences
- Embed flexibility in the guidance: allow space for schools and teachers to teach some topics earlier if there is an expressed need and with sufficient preparation of teachers
- Capacity-building of teachers: focusing on the content and method; conducting a needs assessment, supporting them in dealing with grey areas of young people's sexual behaviours and experiences and holding space for uncertainty (Setty and Hunt, 2025)
- Strengthening the integration of RSE in whole-school approaches: review strategies to ensure consistency in conveying the principles and messages of RSE in other aspects of the school system beyond class-based RSE sessions. For instance, how can the principles and topics of respect, empathy, and communication in consent be conveyed to students outside of classroom sessions?
- Schools are encouraged to adopt a rights-based, learner-centred approach to RSE that values young people's knowledge, supports mutual learning, and equips them to navigate uncertainty
- It is recommended that RSE include critical discussions on gender norms and provide safe, inclusive spaces for mixed-gender dialogue, while respecting young people's preferences and identities.

## **Keeping Safe in Education guidance**

- Review the use of perpetrator/offender when referring to young people: Consider the recommendations of organisations to use ‘young people who caused harm’ alternatively to reduce the stigma associated with the term
- Clarify the guidance on dealing with low-level concerns involving young people and adults when connected to sexual violence and sexual behaviours
- Review guidance to emphasise principles of whole-school approaches such as inclusivity, trauma-informed, rights-based, and promoting students’ agency (Setty and Hunt, 2023) and shift the focus from primarily behaviour management responses to sexual citizenship (Setty, Ringrose and Hunt, 2024)
- Review and include a section on communicating with students, such as how schools can inform them about different options in responding to HSB
- Develop a summary of the key components of the guidance in a young people-friendly accessible version

## **General policy recommendations for education policy bodies, safeguarding boards and government departments**

- Reframing sexual violence definitions: This study suggests that policy frameworks embed young people’s language and concepts of sexual violence, co-producing contextually grounded definitions that reflect their lived realities.
- Inclusive and proactive public messaging: Public campaigns must actively challenge sexist and homophobic teasing and promote affirming messages,
- Safeguarding transparency: Policies may encourage schools to provide age-appropriate information about available responses when harm is reported, in line with Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance.
- Restorative approaches to young people-perpetrated harm: National guidance could support a shift from disciplinary to restorative and rehabilitative responses to harmful sexual behaviour, enabling reflection and accountability.

### **9.4.3 Practice**

#### **Young people**

- Promote peer-led and collaborative spaces for dialogue: foster solidarity and empathy to talk about lived experiences in safe spaces, process concerns and encourage help-seeking from a trusted adult (Moore and McArthur, 2024)

- Support advocacy and activism: co-creating awareness-raising resources and co-developing interventions to counter shame, victim-blaming, and isolation.
- Develop young people's confidence to talk about experiences and behaviours that concern them related to sexual violence: Promote the languages of discomfort and harm, supported by sex education and informal learning opportunities so that they can speak about 'lesser' concerns and clear instances of abuse to their peer and trusted adults. It entails encouraging young people to trust their feelings and bodily responses when they have safety concerns and reassuring them that adults will respect their views when they seek guidance, acknowledgement and support (Moore and McArthur, 2024)

### **Education and non-education settings**

- Enhance communication with young people
  - Normalise the use of terms related to sexual violence like rape, assault, and harassment in sex education and public messaging
  - Validate young people's diverse experiences and acknowledge the occurrence of sexual violence
  - Encourage and proactively facilitate spaces for young people to raise concerns using the language they prefer and develop school staff's capacity to respond sensitively. Schools may consider facilitating reflective dialogues between students and staff about interactions, balancing validation of young people's views with critical thinking and empathy.
  - Communicate about the school's efforts on sexual violence, provide information on positive stories of students who reported, and ensure young people are aware of different options for support
  - Use public announcements to convey information about sexual violence
- Whole-of-school approach: Review good practices (see examples in Meiksin *et al.*, 2020; Ofsted, 2021; Bragg *et al.*, 2022) to determine which components are feasible to implement amid the available resources and competing priorities that schools face
- Adopt the young people-informed model of consistent care in co-developing a whole-school approach with young people: schools are encouraged to ensure the consistency and integration of interventions across a timeline before experiencing sexual violence (prevention), once they report or seek help (protection), and aftercare and support to the victim-survivor (progression)
- Teacher training and staff support: This study suggests that schools support teachers in interpreting behavioural changes as potential indicators of distress, avoiding assumptions based on identity and responding with empathy. Schools must ensure

staff receive training and emotional support to respond to disclosures confidently, including managing vicarious trauma

- Embed participatory approaches: schools and practitioners are encouraged to examine their existing interventions on sexual violence prevention to include sustained participatory components. These include engaging young people in co-developing solutions. For instance, teachers and organisations working with young people may adapt the workshop model to facilitate dialogues on sexual violence and its prevention. The previous section on impact provides initial evidence of the usefulness of my approach.
- Training for teachers and practitioners: focusing on sensitivity and being attuned to young people's varied ways of telling and integrating relationship-based practice. The young people drew on values such as trust, care, fairness, transparency, and support that they expect to see and receive from teachers and trusted adults
- Reflect on beliefs and attitudes: reflective practice to identify and question beliefs held about young people, gender norms, and sexual violence that may shape views of ideal victimhood and corresponding responses. Dialogue with young people and other practitioners can develop continuing reflective relational practice
- Practice 'safe uncertainty' (Setty and Hunt, 2025) when engaging with young people: Practicing openness to dialogue, recognition of the confusion and complexities in young people's experiences and a commitment to supporting their agency, well-being, critical reflections and decision-making
- Engaging boys and young men: Prevention programmes would benefit from actively involve boys and young men in discussions on gender norms and alternative masculinities.
- Challenging shame and isolation: This study suggests that different settings can consider providing safe spaces that explicitly address shame, validate experiences, and involve young people in co-developing interventions.

Collectively, these recommendations contribute to advancing research, policy, and practice that is attuned to young people's lived realities and relational contexts. They are relevant across educational, community, and institutional settings. The recommendations presented are intended as guiding suggestions informed by this study's findings. Their implementation may vary depending on the capacities, contexts, and priorities of different individuals and institutions.

## Concluding thoughts

My research has strengths and limitations, as evidenced in my earlier methodological reflections on the innovative participatory approach in Chapter 5. It was a learning-by-doing experience that developed my agility and creativity in the research process.

As I discussed, the study findings are context-specific to the small sample size of the young people participating in the workshops. The findings are not representative of the broader group of young people. I am conscious that they represent a specific point of view of British White young people in Northeast England. The group's composition included some diversity in sexual orientation and disability, yet racially minoritised young people were not represented.

While mindful of some limitations, my project's primary strength lies in my participatory approach and ethos. I consistently strive to engage young people ethically and meaningfully throughout the research. I centred their voices and participation throughout my analysis and constantly advocated for recognising their insights as valuable. My study's empirical findings feature a nuanced understanding of sexual violence and its prevention facilitated by the collaborative, participatory approach. This approach enhances the validity of the findings since they are products of the knowledge co-production process. The young people's priority issues, their language, and their recommendations informed them.

This research contributes to ongoing conversations about involving young people in sexual violence prevention and participatory research on violence and abuse. My study highlights that the issue of sexual violence prevention remains an urgent area for future research and practice. The broader impact of this study is that it connects to re-imagining the concepts of children's and young people's participation in research and practice. I consistently argue that they have a vital role in sexual violence prevention. I encourage others to continue exploring innovations to facilitate their participation and value them as partners in prevention.

I liken my PhD experience to embarking on a journey without a map. It has resulted in doubt, worry, excitement and fulfilment. It echoes my supervisor's advice to 'embrace the uncertainty'. That is easier said than done with the pressure of fulfilling the expectations of a doctoral research project. Still, embracing uncertainty led my project in exciting directions I did not expect as I followed the young people's lead in the workshops. It also meant that I learned to be patient in the research process when the analysis took longer than expected, and I could not make sense of the findings. In the end, the journey with the young people, with the support of my PhD supervisors, has been one of the most fulfilling ones I have undertaken.

This study has been both an academic endeavour and a passion project. I gained valuable knowledge and skills in participatory research and the issue of sexual violence prevention.

Throughout the project, I stayed committed to my advocacy of amplifying young people's voices and enabling their participation to make them feel heard and valued. Drawing on their feedback, I am confident I achieved my goal. Therefore, I think it is fitting that my thesis ends by reiterating their views on the benefits of their involvement in the project:

*'I like it because it makes me feel acknowledged about the topic.'*

*'I liked how it was a safe space to talk.'*

Overall, my study underscores that young people are clamouring for safe spaces to discuss and act on sexual violence. We must listen to them and provide them with the spaces they deserve.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1 – Informed consent form

## Informed Consent Form: Step Up, Speak Out

I have read the information poster and listened to Janelle's discussion on what it means for me to join the research project. I understand that checking the boxes below and signing my name confirms my consent. The research is about understanding young people's views of sexual violence and how to stop it.

	<input type="checkbox"/>	Joining is voluntary. I can decide how and when I want to join. I can decide to not take part in the research or any activity. My choices will be respected.
	<input type="checkbox"/>	What I say in the group will be kept confidential and private within the group unless information needs to be shared for my safety. I will not share what other young people said in our activities outside of the group. The data from the research will be protected following different laws and guidelines.
	<input type="checkbox"/>	My name will not be used without my permission on any reports or materials about the project. I may choose to use a pen name.
	<input type="checkbox"/>	Photos of the group activity materials will be taken but not of the people. Audio recordings of our discussions will be made. The recordings will only be used for the research analysis and they will be kept in a safe place.
	<input type="checkbox"/>	The findings of the research will be published in a thesis and articles and shared at conferences and other venues. Our choices will be respected on how we want our group and individual outputs to be represented or published in these materials.

I AGREE to be part of this research project

I DO NOT agree to be part of this research project

My parents/guardians DO NOT AGREE for me to take part in the research project.

Name and signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Informed consent form

**I have read the information sheet which explains what it means for me to be part of the participatory action research project.**

I understand that checking the boxes below indicates my consent:

- Everything I say in the group will be **anonymous and kept strictly confidential** (unless information needs to be passed on as a child protection matter).
- I will **protect the confidentiality of other young people participating in the project**. I will not share anything said in the activities to people outside the project.
- My name and any other identifiable information about me **will not be used without my permission** on any reports and other materials published or shared from the project. I may opt to use a **pen name** as an alternative.
- I can **stop my involvement** in the group or any activity for any reason and at any time.
- I can **decide not to take part in the study** at all, or choose which activities I want to join, depending on what I feel comfortable with.
- Photos** will be taken on the activities and outputs of our activities.
- Audio documentation** will be done for the project activities. Documentation materials will only be used for data analysis and processing purposes only. The files will not be shown to anyone outside the project.
- I may decide to not be included in the audio, photo, or any other documentation and my choice will be respected.
- The **work from this research will be published** in the form of a thesis, academic article, report and disseminated at seminars, training events and conferences etc. My choice will be respected on how my involvement will be represented in these matters.

- I **AGREE** to be part of the research project.
- I **AGREE** that I can be named and my picture used in reports and any other materials that are published from this project.
- I **AGREE** to take part in the research project but I **DO NOT** want to be named or my picture used in the reports and any other materials that are published from this project.
- I **DO NOT AGREE** to take part in the research project.

## Appendix 2 – Parental opt-out form and information sheet

### PARENTAL OPT-OUT CONSENT FORM

To be completed by a parent or guardian who **DOES NOT AGREE** to their child taking part in the study entitled, Step Up, Speak Out: participatory research project on sexual violence prevention.

Please check the boxes if you agree

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the research.

I **DO NOT** wish my child to participate in the research.

Your Name .....

Child's name.....

.....  
Signature of Parent/Guardian

.....  
Date

## **Information Sheet for Parents and Guardians**

My name is Janelle Rabe, and I am a student at Durham University. I am conducting the research project, Step Up, Speak Out, to learn from and work with young people as research partners. It is important for you to know more about the project, how you and young people can help, and how the project may help them.

### **Why am I doing this research? How will young people be involved?**

Sexual violence affects the lives of young people daily. Still, the voices of young people are rarely heard in these issues. I am interested in learning directly from young people on their thoughts on sexual violence and how to stop it from happening. It is important to listen to young people because they have grounded insights about the different forms of sexual violence that young people like them encounter and their ideas for solutions to help address sexual violence.

Young people will be joining 6-10 participatory workshops where we will reflect together on different topics such as gender norms, sexual violence, and how to stop it. I will be facilitating the discussions and letting young people decide on the topics that matter most to them. We will also work on an action project together that will use the findings from the research and contribute to impact.

### **How will we keep young people safe?**

I know that the topic of sexual violence and sexuality in general may cause feelings of discomfort or emotional distress. We will work together in promoting safe spaces for everyone to participate in whichever way is most comfortable for them. As much as possible, we will not talk about their personal experiences of sexual violence and instead refer to hypothetical situations.

If young people feel uncomfortable for any reason, I will refer them to people in their organisation or school who will help deal with their concerns confidentially and in a sensitive, professional and supportive manner. They may also opt to confide in another person aside from my referral and their decision will be respected. However, if we hear information that suggest you or someone else

could be harmed, we will pass this information to someone else who can help keep you safe.

### **What can young people gain from joining the research?**

Young people may gain improved knowledge and skills in research, teamwork, leadership, and project development among many others. It is also a unique opportunity to talk about, be listened to, and act on sensitive issues such as sexual violence in a safe and supportive space. Their participation can also help their personal and professional development. It may be a boost for their CV for further education or work to have joined a research project. Finally, it is a chance to make an impact on the lives of their peers by helping promote safe spaces from violence.

### **If young people decide to join, can they change their mind later?**

Joining is entirely voluntary. Young people decide if they want to take part or not. Even if they say yes, they can change their mind and stop at any time. They can also tell me if they want to have a break. They do not have to tell me or the group anything unless they want to. They also don't have to give any reason if they say 'no' or 'stop'.

### **Will their participation be kept confidential?**

All information that is collected will be kept strictly confidential and we will ask others who are in the group to respect this as well. No comment from them will be connected to their name. Instead, we will talk about what the group discussed in general. The data from the research will be protected following the General Data Protection Regulation Law and other relevant laws.

### **How will the findings from the research be used?**

The findings and documentation of the research will be published in a thesis and academic articles and shared at conferences and other venues. Young people's inputs will be acknowledged by their chosen pen name (first name only) in publications and other ways of disseminating the research. Their choices will be respected on how they want to be represented in these venues.

If you have any questions about the project, you may contact me at [anne.j.rabe@durham.ac.uk](mailto:anne.j.rabe@durham.ac.uk) or 07365920566.

## Appendix 3 – Recruitment materials

# Step Up, Speak Out

Participatory action research project on how to stop sexual violence from happening



Join 10 students per group in 8 interactive workshops. Together we will ask questions and find answers about sexual violence and how to stop it.



You will decide and lead the discussions on the topics and activities you want to do. We will also work together on an action project on how we can help young people feel safer.



We will not talk about your experiences directly. I will refer you to someone if you feel distressed or discomfort. We will work together to make sure we can speak openly and safely about these sensitive topics.



Joining is voluntary. You can decide how and when you want to join. You can decide to not take part in the research or any activity.

Hello! I'm Janelle, a PhD student from Durham University. I'm excited to work with and learn from you!



Any questions? Interested in joining?  
Message me at



07361141354



[annej.rabe@durham.ac.uk](mailto:annej.rabe@durham.ac.uk)





## Appendix 4 – Selected session plans, activities and feedback forms

### Youth club workshop summary

Workshop	No. of young people	Date	Topic	Activities
1	9 YP (5 girls, 4 boys)	November 2022	Project overview Gender roles	Project presentation Word association activity Gender box activity
2	12 YP (7 girls, 5 boys)	December 2022	Different forms of everyday sexual violence	Informed consent discussion Co-creating safe spaces agreement Ranking and sorting of priority topics Brainstorming in small groups
3	8 YP (4 girls, 4 boys)	January 2023	Responses to sexual violence	Vignettes
4	6 YP (4 girls, 2 boys)	February 2023	Understanding of sexual violence	Concept mapping Ranking and sorting Game

			Healthy and unhealthy relationships	
5	6 YP (5 girls, 1 boy)	February 2023	Emotional violence in relationships	Ranking of vignettes
6	7 YP (5 girls, 2 boys)	March 2023		Planning of action project
7	7 YP (5 girls, 2 boys)	March 2023		Planning of video project
8	6 YP (5 girls, 1 boy)	May 2023		Feedbacking session
9	8 YP (7 girls, 1 boy)	October 2023		Reflexive discussion workshop of themes and findings
10	7 YP (6 girls, 1 boy)	October 2023		Reflexive discussion workshop of themes and findings
11	5 YP (4 girls, 1 boy)	November 2023		Reflexive discussion workshop of themes and findings
12	10 YP (6 girls, 4 boys)	November 2023		Poster co-designing workshop
13	3 YP (2 girls, 1 boy)	November 2024		Reflexive discussion workshop of

				themes and findings
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### FE group workshop summary

Workshop	No. of young people	Schedule	Topic	Activities
1	9 YP (7 girls, 2 non-binary)	February 2023	Views on sex education about sexual violence	Project presentation and informed consent discussion Word association activity Ranking and sorting of priority topics Co-creating safe spaces agreement
2	9 YP (7 girls, 2 non-binary)	February 2023	Sex education and school responses to sexual violence	River of life
3	10 YP (7 girls, 3 non-binary)	March 2023	Shame and sexual violence	Body map
4	9 YP (7 girls, 2 non-binary)	March 2023	Impacts of sexual violence	Ranking of vignettes
5	8 YP (6 girls, 2 non-binary)	March 2023	Gaps and recommendations on sex education and school	Reflexive discussion workshop: ranking

			responses to sexual violence	and sorting of priority findings and recommendations
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## Youth club workshop 1

### Workshop guide for Durham Area Youth

*Practical note: Young people will be asked to sit in a circle with me so that we have a friendly and casual atmosphere for our meeting.*

#### I. Energizer

All move who...

Another easy old favourite. Stand, or sit on chairs, in a circle, with one person (yourself first) in the middle. Say 'All move who...' and then add, for example: wearing blue, have long hair etc

#### II. Introduction activity: Color your feelings

Prompt: If you can choose any color to describe how you feel today or right now, what would it be and why? I will answer last and introduce myself briefly.

It's important for us to get a sense of how we feel before we talk more because we will be talking about sensitive issues like sexual violence -- the topic of my project. At any point if you feel uncomfortable or you don't feel like joining, you are free to tell me or step out of the room. I want everyone to feel safe and comfortable in our session today and you are free to say what you think.

**Obtaining verbal consent: I plan to take notes of our discussions and photos of the post-its and flipcharts. I will not take any photos of anyone. Is that okay with everyone?**

#### III. Short project brief

##### **Why is it important for me to work with young people?**

I believe that young people like you have many important things to say. I remember several years ago when I was talking to children and young people in the Philippines, and they felt frustrated that no one wanted to listen to them or ask them what they think because they don't know enough, they are too young, or adults just know better. **Who can relate to this?** It's always motivated me that someday, I will make sure to listen and showcase the voices and ideas of young people, especially on difficult topics. I have that chance now with my project.

Does anyone know anything about the Philippines? It's a country in Asia which is about 18-20 hours by plane from the UK. Our usual temperature is 27-30 degrees. So, you can imagine what a big shock it was for me to adjust to the cold weather here. Rice is life and we eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. **Is there anything you want to know about the Philippines? What do you think about living here in Durham?**

I want young people's opinions and ideas to shape how we design and do the project. As members of the Youth Forum, I need your help to make sure the activities will be helpful and enjoyable for the young people who will join the project. After we talk, please let me know if you are interested in meeting me again to help me plan the activities and workshops for other young people of Durham Area Youth.

**What is the project about: How can young people stop sexual violence from happening?**

**Word association game:** Before I explain my project more, let's have a short activity, in 2 minutes, write on the post-it's any words that first come to your mind when you hear the term 'sexual violence'?

- What are the similarities and differences of your answers?
- Does the term sexual violence click with young people? What terms or topics would connect better with young people?

It is important for me to know what you think about sexual violence since what I know about it is based on what I've read and from the words of other adults. I want to know and use the language and words that you will relate to more.

Young people face different forms of sexual harm and violence (or whichever term the young people suggest) from people you know or don't know, and in places where you spend time. In the project, we will talk, ask questions, and look for answers together on the topics and activities chosen by young people related to sexual violence and how to stop it from happening. We will also work together on a project decided by young people to act on what we find out in the project. It can be a social media campaign, a song, a short film, exhibit or anything they think is

best. **What are examples of young people-led projects of Durham Area Youth? What did you learn and enjoy from those projects?**

*What can young people do to stop sexual violence from happening?*

*Why is the topic important to me?*

**Who am I looking for**

- Willing to join a series of 10 workshops. Young people can come when they can and invite their friends to join.
- 10 members (14-17 years old). This is the age group when young people are exploring romantic and sexual relationships, so it is important to know what young people think about stopping sexual violence from happening and recognizing healthy or unhealthy relationships and sexual behaviours.

**What do you think about the project? Do you have any questions or suggestions? Who is interested in talking to me again about the project and helping me plan the activities?**

*Practical note: Depending on the time and flow of discussions, we can end at this point and have the closing activity. The next section can be done with the young people who agree to meet with me again as advisory group members.*

**Closing activity: Color your feelings again**

Prompt: If you can choose any color to describe how you feel after our session today, what would it be and why?

**Backup prompts/questions:**

- What's a healthy relationship? What are signs of an unhealthy relationship?
- What can we do to stop sexual violence from happening?
- How can we help our friends if they are going through a difficult situation because of a negative encounter/experience of harassment?
- A world without violence
- How can we keep each other safe?

**IV. Asking young people's views on the research process and activities**

*Facilitator note: Using flipchart papers, markers and post-its, young people will provide their inputs individually to the prompts and questions then we will discuss the answers as a group.*

**A. What should I know about working with young people as partners in the project?**

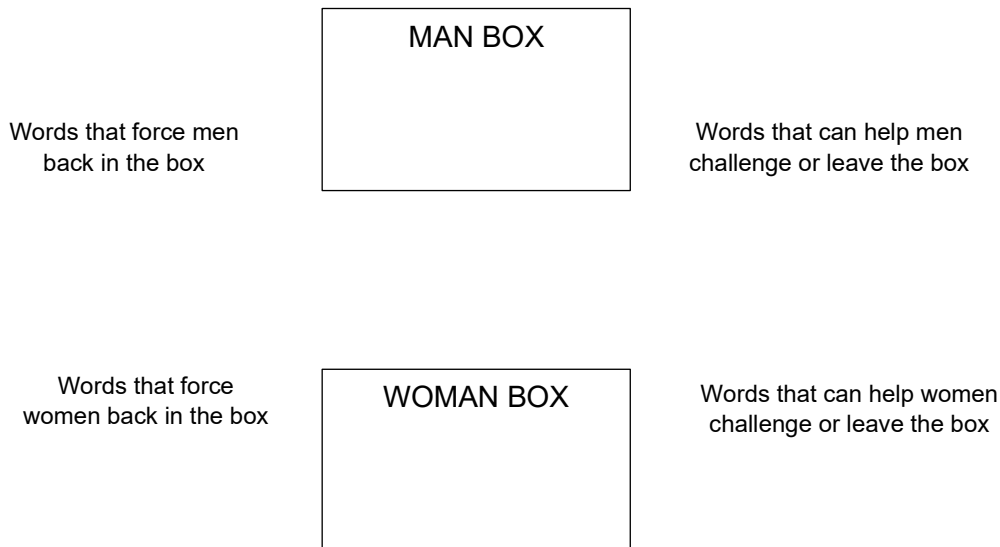
1. What can young people get out of joining the project?
2. How can we keep young people interested in the project?
  - Number of sessions, frequency, schedule
3. How can we make the activities enjoyable and relevant to young people?
  - Types of activities: creative and arts-based; free-flowing discussions; using videos or photos as prompts
  - Do young people want training on research?
  - Single-sex or mixed sex activities? Individual or group activities?

**V. Young people's views on example activities**

Depending on the flow of discussions, I will present the different activities and ask for their inputs about the relevance of the activities and the vignettes. Time permitting, we can have a trial run of one of the three activities that they choose or that I suggest depending on the vibe of the group.

1. What did you think about the activity?
2. What did you think about the examples/situations?
3. How can we improve the activity and the examples?

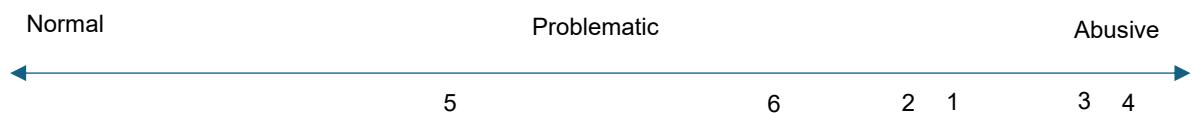
## Activity A: Gender box



The aim of this activity is for young people to reflect about the gendered expectations of men and women especially in relationships, the potential consequences of not conforming to these expectations, and what can be done to help young people in challenging these norms.

Young people will write words, behaviours, descriptions, and actions that “real men” are expected to display, especially in sexual and intimate relationships. A box will be drawn around these words which is called ‘the Man Box’, signifying that gender roles and expectations force men to always stay in the box. They will then be asked to place post-its on one side of the box what are the things that make it difficult for men to step out of the box and the potential negative consequences of doing so. They can put negative words or labels that may be said about them. On the other side of the box, they will be asked to place post-its on of what can help men to step out of the box and challenge expectations of masculinity. What words or actions would be helpful for them to know or hear? The same exercise will be done for women. There will also be a short discussion about the experiences of young people who do not conform to these binary genders.

## Activity B: Drawing the line



The aim of this activity is for young people to reflect about different situations and whether they think the situation is normal, problematic, and harmful. They will write the number corresponding to the situation in the continuum on an individual basis. As a group, we will discuss their views about the situations and why they decided to put it in a specific part of the continuum and how they define actions as normal, problematic, or abusive.

1. A boy from school commented on a girl's photo on Facebook, saying: "You look hot. I would not mind putting my tongue into your mouth"
2. A girl in your class is being teased by classmates calling her "pervert tomboy", "disgusting lesbian" and "ugly pig", and making fun of her "big tits".
3. Diana's sports teacher constantly whistles and winks at her when she runs by him. He tells her to smile and that she needs to learn how to accept compliments.
4. Eve wants to have sex, but Lynell isn't ready. Eva says if he doesn't want her, she'll tell everyone he's gay and look for someone else who's a "real man".
5. While having dinner with their friends, Dillan says jokingly to Dee, "Are you sure you're going to have dessert? That stuff will go right to your butt".
6. Luca gets constant attention from a group of girls at school. They blow kisses at him in the corridor and block his way so that he must squeeze past them to get to class.

## **Safety in my Life**

### **Instructions**

- 1) Explain that this activity is about sharing and compiling ideas for what people can do in order to stay safe. Participants will work initially in single sex groups: these will create lists of their own, which will then be shared and discussed with others.
- 2) Form small groups, with not more than four or five people in each. These should be single-sex groups.
- 3) Ask each group to go to one of the prepared working spaces. Ask the groups to share ideas on the subject of 'staying safe': they should think about and share things they do to avoid violence and stay safe. The groups should also discuss threats to their safety that they face on a regular basis. Give them wabout 20 minutes for the

sharing exercise and tell them they should list their actions and threats on the flip chart paper.

4) Get the groups back together and ask each one to report back. Hang the flipcharts so they can be seen by everyone, and place lists from groups of the same sex next to each other.

### **Debriefing and evaluation**

Ask for participants' first impressions of the activity and the results. A good way to begin this discussion is to ask if anyone is surprised by any of actions or items on the different lists, in particular by any striking differences or similarities between the women's group/s and the men's.

- What do you think about the differences in actions for protection by men and by women? Where do these differences come from?
- Are the lists of threats representative of the actual dangers boys and girls, men and women face in their daily lives? Why, or why not?
- Which dangers might be missing from the lists? Why do you think that such dangers did not feature in your discussions?
- Can you identify the dangers in your local context?
- What information do we receive about violence and safety from violence?
- Where does such information come from? Is it credible? Do young people take it seriously?
- Whose job is it, or should it be, to inform young people and children about violence and precautions for staying safe? How could you or your organisation contribute to making a change in this respect?
- What are the main challenges to gender-based violence in your community / country?
- Which human rights are violated in cases of gender-based violence?

### **Activity C: What happens next?**

The aim of this activity is for young people to reflect on the potential ways that bystanders can help, how and who can help, and the potential barriers and facilitators for helping actions. Through write-ups or drawings, in small groups, they will continue the story prompt about a situation of sexual violence from the perspective of different characters. They can also include additional characters and details about the story. As

a group, we will discuss about the similarities and differences of their completed stories and their inputs on how friends, peers, and adults can help and why it may be difficult in some situations.

Option A: Ayesha was on the way to a class. A group of boys were hiding under the stairwell and filmed up her skirt as she walked up to the second floor. One of the boys put the film online. The next day in school, students were looking and laughing at her. ***What happens next?***

Option B: Kostas, Mary and their friends are watching a movie at their house. Once someone's drink was finished or the bowl of chips was emptied, Kostas asked Mary to go to the kitchen and fill them up. When this happened for the third time, Mary told him: "I'm not your servant". Kostas got angry and dragged her to the kitchen. ***What happens next?***

## **VI. Young people's views about the topic**

Brainstorming activity: What issues and topics related to sexual violence and its prevention should we focus on in the workshops?

Additional prompts if needed:

- What topics related to healthy and unhealthy behaviours, and relationships, sex, sexual violence, and its prevention do young people want to talk about or have questions?
- What situations are considered sexually violent or abusive? Who are involved? Where does it happen?
- What should be done to help and protect young people? Who are involved?

## Youth club workshop 2

### Energizer activity: Balls up

**Objective:** To understand the importance of groupwork and safety

**Activity:** Balls will be thrown one at a time to the participants. Then they must pass the ball to someone else. As a group they must work together to make sure that none of the balls will fall to the ground.

### Discussion:

- What did you think of the activity?
- What did you feel when someone was throwing a ball at you?
- What did you feel when there were many balls in the group?

**Deepening:** The balls represent all of us as individuals. It is our responsibility to keep everyone safe. Communication is important when we are giving ideas and thoughts.

**Application:** What have you learned from the activity? How can we connect it to our project?

### Co-creating safe spaces and working agreement

Individual activity: How can we work together in co-creating a safe space for our workshops? How should we behave towards each other?

Does anyone want to help in writing the answers on the flipchart?

*Challenge the idea, not the person; respect differences and the person; active listening; be sensitive to different experiences and situations; keep everything confidential in the group and don't share to others; I will talk to you in case there is anything that needs to be share to others for your protection.*

We are talking about difficult topics that we normally don't talk about in school or with other adults or even friends. We want this to be an open and safe space for us to talk freely and respectfully.

## **Project briefing**

One of the ways that we can promote safe spaces is understanding more about the project and how we are going to work together. Research is about asking questions and finding answers together. It's like we are going on a journey together.

Why do we do research?

- We have questions that we want answers to
- We are concerned about something in our lives and communities
- We want to use the answers for solutions or changes

## **Why is it important for me to work with young people?**

My main question is: What can we do to stop sexual violence from happening?

Does the term sexual violence click with young people? What terms or topics would connect better with young people?

Young people face different forms of sexual harm and violence (or whichever term the young people suggest) from people you know or don't know, and in places where you spend time. In the project, we will talk, ask questions, and look for answers together on the topics and activities chosen by young people related to sexual violence and how to stop it from happening. We will also work together on a project decided by young people to act on what we find out in the project. It can be a social media campaign, a song, a short film, exhibit, poem, or anything you think is best.

## **Expectation setting and informed consent**

Individual activity: name, age

Why are you interested in joining the project?

What do you expect to benefit/gain from joining?

What questions do you have about the project or the topic?

I want the project to be helpful and useful to you so that we'll talk about topics that matter to you and do activities you like doing.

***Facilitate signing of the informed consent form.***

I will ask for your consent for each workshop. The signing of the informed consent today shows that you understand what it means to join the project, how you will benefit from it, what are the risks, and how we will work together.

*Pause button or signal if someone wants to take a break at any point of the activity.  
A calm box will be made available in all activities that young people may fiddle with  
and  
comfort them during sensitive discussions.*

### **Reflections from previous session**

What did you think of the last session? What did you like about it? What did you learn?

Is it okay for me to put up the flipcharts from last time?

### **Activity choices – separate group by age**

#### **1. Brainstorming on problems, issues, and activities – project planning**

Who joined the Redhills project and the poem about problems that young people faced? Who can tell us more about it?

**What problems do young people face related to sex, relationships, and sexual violence?**

**What are activities you've done here at Durham Area Youth that you want to do again on the topic of sexual violence and how to stop it?**

**What questions about sexual violence and how to stop it are important to explore?**

#### **2. Mapping activity: Spaces and Places (connecting risk map to body map)**

Where are the places and spaces that young people spend time in (including places you pass by and transportation)? Online spaces?

- What are the words, behaviours, or actions related to sex, gender, and relationships that can make young people feel unsafe or uncomfortable in these places?

- Which among the places do young people consider as most unsafe? Why?
  - o People? Lack of support to get help when needed? Physical structure/layout?
  - o What are some of the characteristics of settings considered to be 'safe' for young people
- What do young people do to avoid violence and stay safe in these settings?
- What can people do in these settings to make young people feel safer in these places?
- Who has the responsibility to create safe spaces?

### **3. Continue gender box activity**

- What can help men and women step out of the box?
- How do the expectations of men and women affect their intimate and romantic relationships and how they relate with each other?
- Why is it difficult to step out of the gender box?
- What can young men and women do to challenge gender norms especially in relationships and interacting with each other?

#### **Backup prompts**

- What's a healthy relationship? What are signs of an unhealthy relationship?
- What can we do to stop sexual violence from happening?
- How can we help our friends if they are going through a difficult situation because of a negative encounter/experience of harassment?
- A world without violence
- How can we keep each other safe
- What should be done to make things better? What should be changed?

#### **Closing and debriefing activity**

1. What is one thing you've learnt or that surprised you in this session?
2. What is something that you might take away and try to practice or be more aware of in your lives?
3. What did you think of the activities and the structure of the session?

## **FE group session 2 – River of life**

### **Re-imagining education and school responses to sexual violence among young people**

#### **GROUP 1: “The education on sexual violence and consent that we want”**

##### **PAST – What happened, and did you observe before?**

- What do you think about how education on sexual violence was taught? (e.g. How was it received by the students? What are the positive aspects? What are the gaps?)
- What topics were taught? What topics and messages should have been taught or communicated inside and outside the classroom?
- How were students engaged or consulted about the education process?

##### **PRESENT – How is it affecting students and young people in the present?**

- What do young people want to know about sexual violence and consent?
- How and where are young people accessing information regarding sexual violence and consent?
- How is the quality of sex education on sexual violence and consent affecting students and young people in the present?

##### **FUTURE – What needs to change?**

- How should education on sexual violence be improved to meet students’ needs? How can students be more involved?
- What messages do you want teachers and other school decision-makers to know about improving sex education related to sexual violence and consent?
- What actions do you want them to take related to education on sexual violence and its prevention?

#### **GROUP 2: “The schools that we want to support us against sexual violence”**

##### **PAST – What happened, and did you observe before?**

- What are schools doing about sexual violence aside from the sex education classes? What do you think about them?

- What were the barriers and facilitators for students to report, disclose, or seek help?
- How did schools when responding to sexual violence? (e.g. challenges, gaps, observations)? How is sexual violence recognized as an important issue by schools?

### **PRESENT – How is it affecting students and young people in the present?**

- How do students feel about disclosing or reporting about sexual violence to schools or other people? How can students help fellow students? What support would they need?
- What are the types/forms of sexual violence commonly experienced by students in schools? What support do they need from schools in recognizing them as abusive and in seeking help?
- How do students

### **FUTURE – What needs to change?**

- What should schools do better about preventing and responding to sexual violence? How can students be more involved?
- What should schools do to assure students that sexual violence is taken seriously?
- What messages do you want school decision makers to know in responding better to sexual violence in schools?

### **FE group workshop 3**

#### **Body Map Activity: Recognizing and challenging shame**

##### **Group 1: Recognizing shame**

**Head** – What messages about being victims of sexual violence promote shame?

What do victims tell themselves about their experience?

**Arms** - What are negative labels or narratives associated with victims of sexual violence that promote shame? How is shame experienced differently by girls, boys, and LGBTQ+ young people?

**Body**- What are the negative consequences of shame and self-blame on young people? What are the negative feelings they have?

**Legs** – How does shame stop young people from speaking about their experience? What negative reactions do victims from others do they expect or are afraid of?

**Group 2: Challenging shame and building resilience**

**Head** – What positive messages would be helpful reduce shame? Who would be helpful to hear it from?

**Hands** - What should be done to challenge victim blaming and feelings of shame of young people and sexual violence? Who have the most important roles in this?

**Body** – What support or information would be helpful for young people who feel shame after experiencing sexual violence? Who can help them?

**Legs** – How can young people be encouraged in speaking about their experience of violence/abuse and reducing shame? Who would they trust?

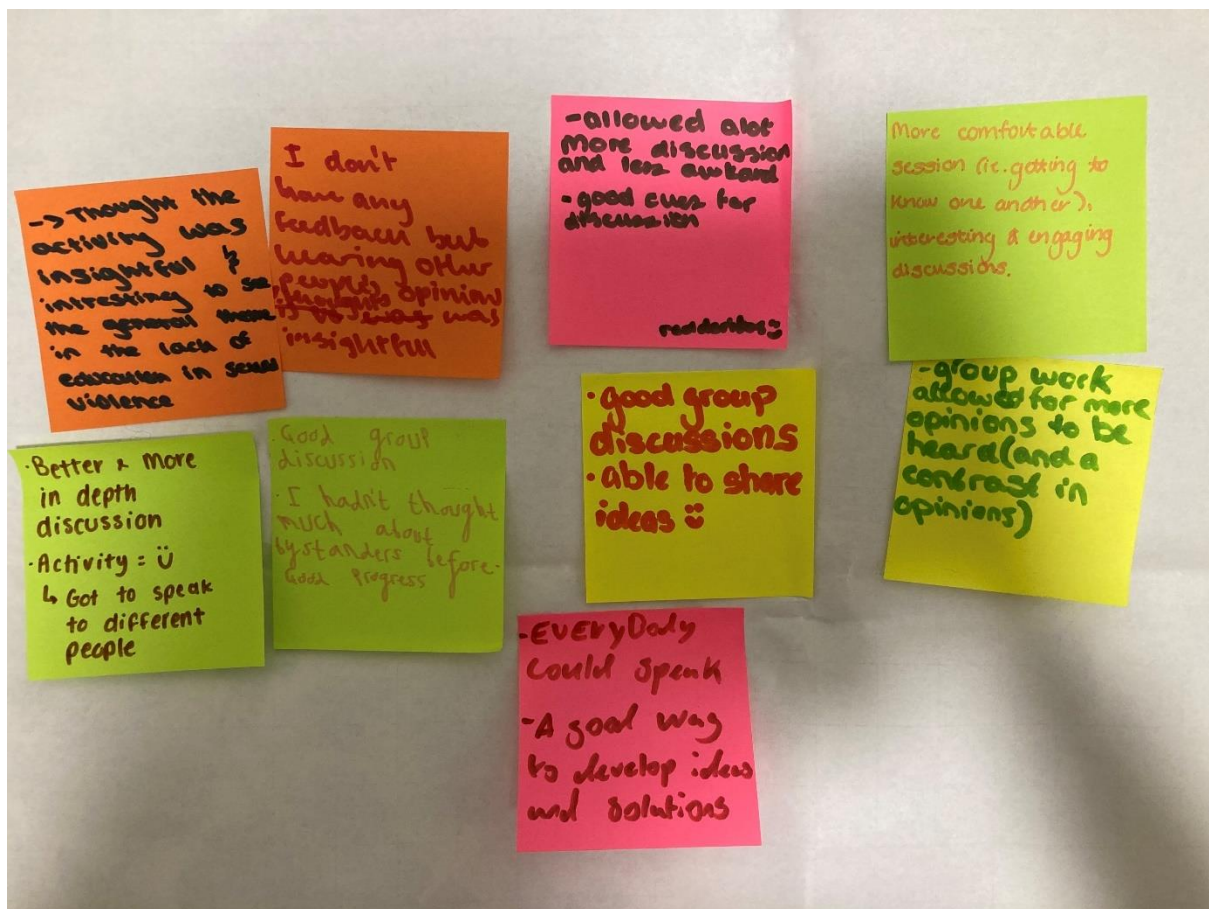
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### **Feedback form**

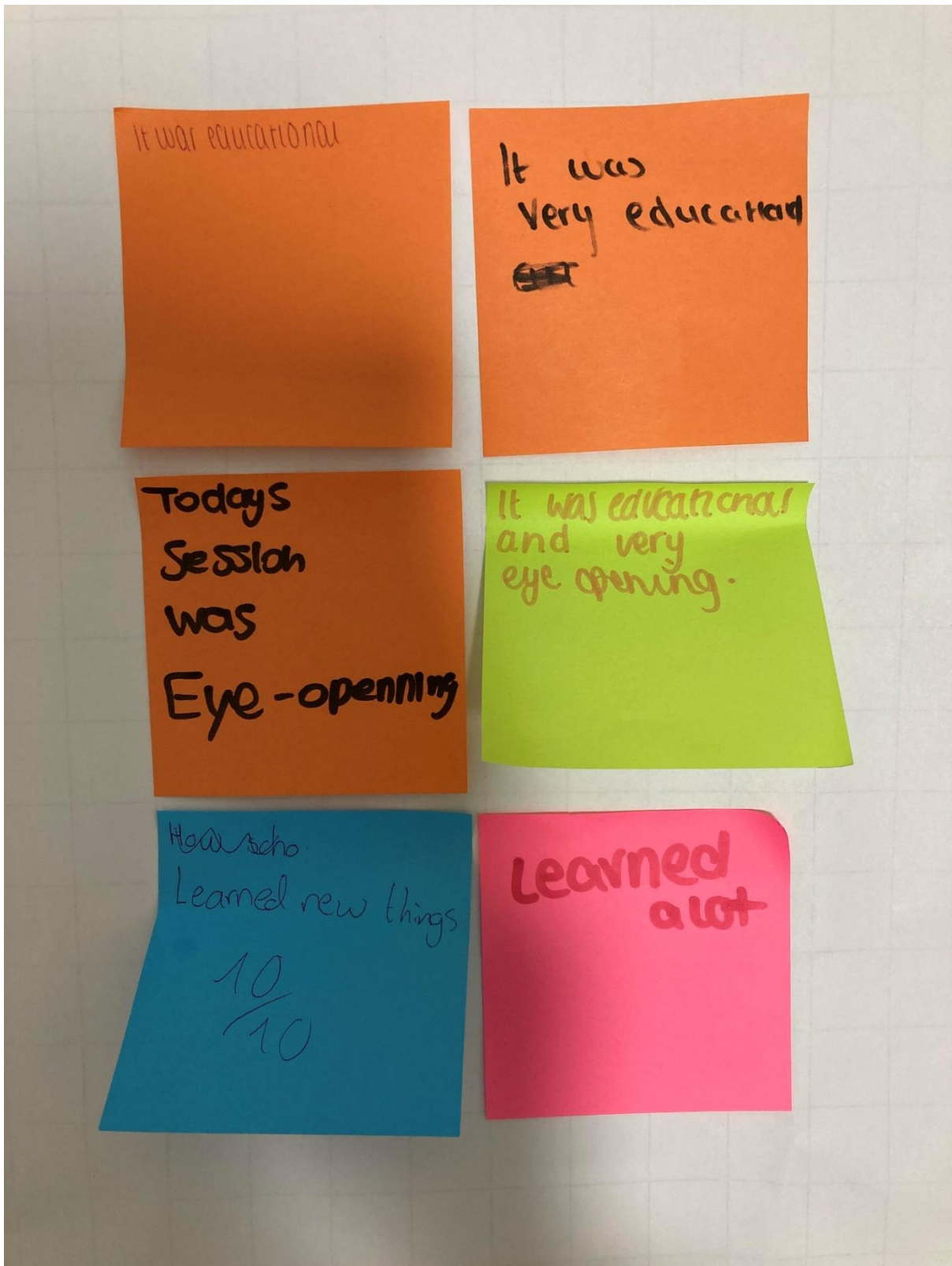
1. How were the workshops useful to you? What did you learn?
2. What did you like the most about the workshops?
3. What did you like about how Janelle facilitated the sessions?
4. What can be improved on how Janelle facilitated the sessions?

5. What are your recommendations for conducting workshops or activities on sexual violence with young people? *(note: in case similar workshops will be implemented in schools or youth groups)*

## FE group workshop 2



Youth club workshop 5



Feedback form

1. How were the workshops useful to you? What did you learn?

**Voiced my ideas + opinions**

2. What did you like the most about the workshops?

**Learning new things  
Listening to other ideas + opinions**

3. What did you like about how Janelle facilitated the sessions?

**Liked the group work  
and ice breakers at the start  
to become more comfortable**

4. What can be improved on how Janelle facilitated the sessions?

**More discussion + communication  
rather than writing our ideas  
to become more comfortable**

5. What are your recommendations for conducting workshops or activities on sexual violence with young people? *(note: in case similar workshops will be implemented in schools or youth groups)*

**Small group work means  
opinions + ideas can be voiced +  
heard by others.**

### Feedback form

1. How were the workshops useful to you? What did you learn?

I learned about sexual harassment, and where it can take place and how people deal with it.

2. What did you like the most about the workshops?

I liked how it was a safe space to talk.

3. What did you like about how Janelle facilitated the sessions?

I think it was done extremely well since a safe space was created making us all feel safe to share our views.

4. What can be improved on how Janelle facilitated the sessions?

more worksheets  
fancy pens

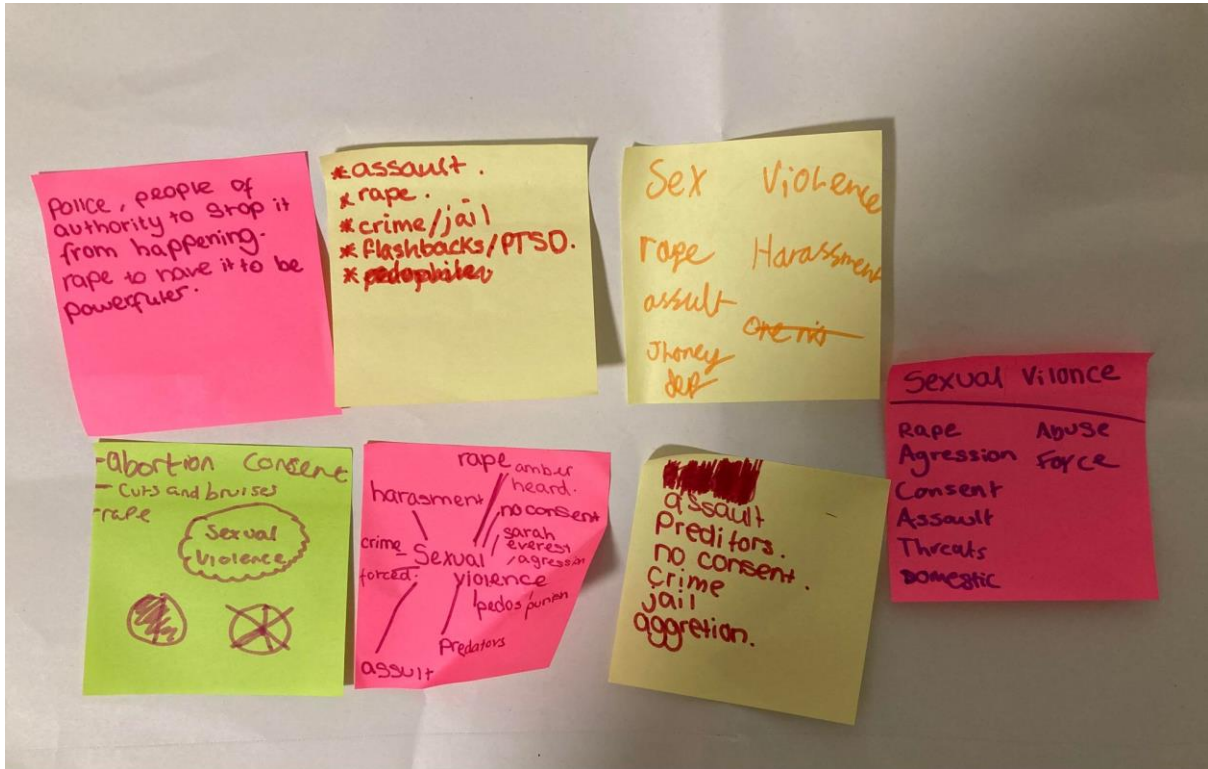
5. What are your recommendations for conducting workshops or activities on sexual violence with young people? (note: in case similar workshops will be implemented in schools or youth groups)

more worksheet helps us understand.

# Appendix 5 – Selected workshop session photos

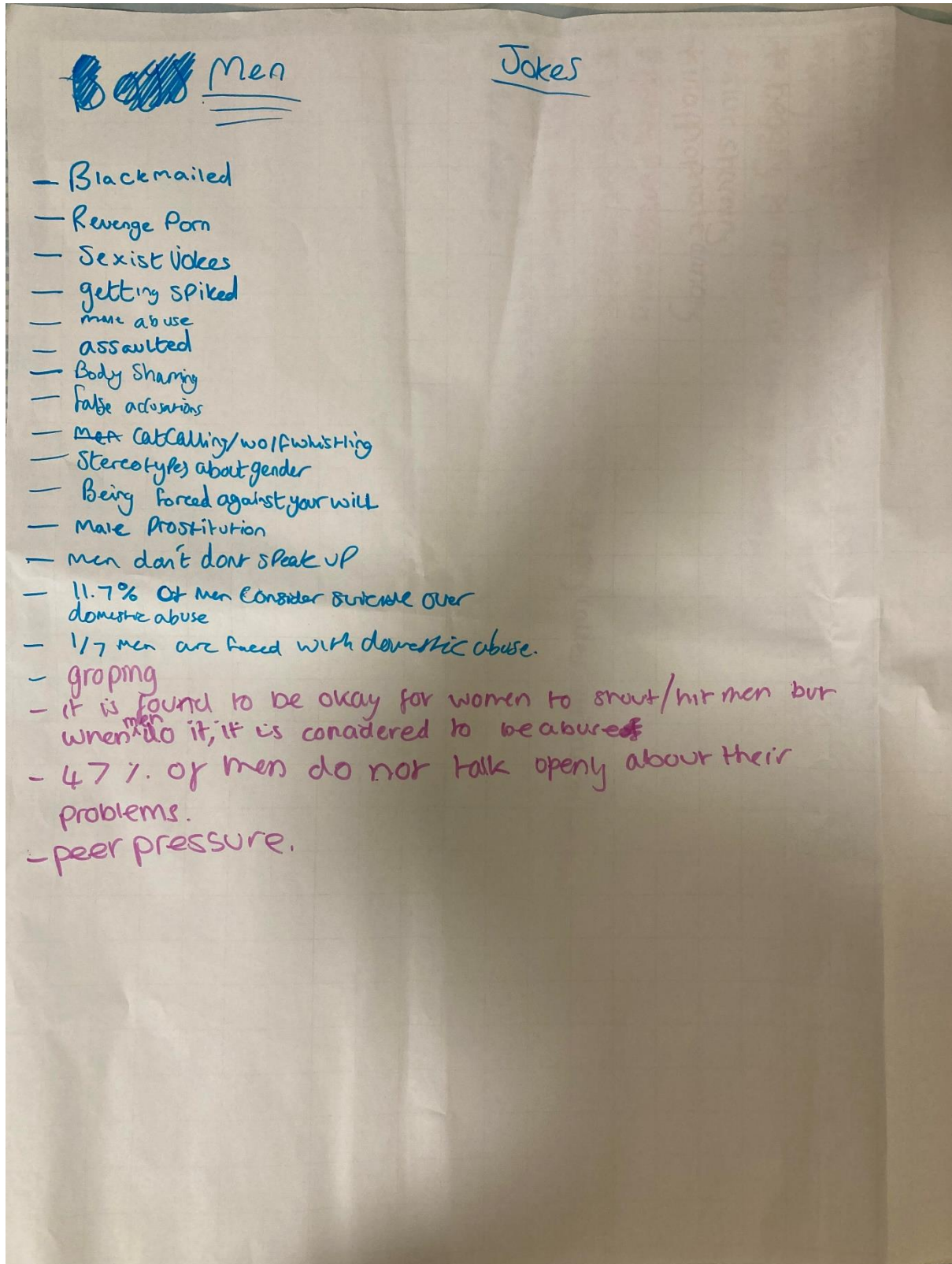
## Youth club workshop 1

### Word association activity



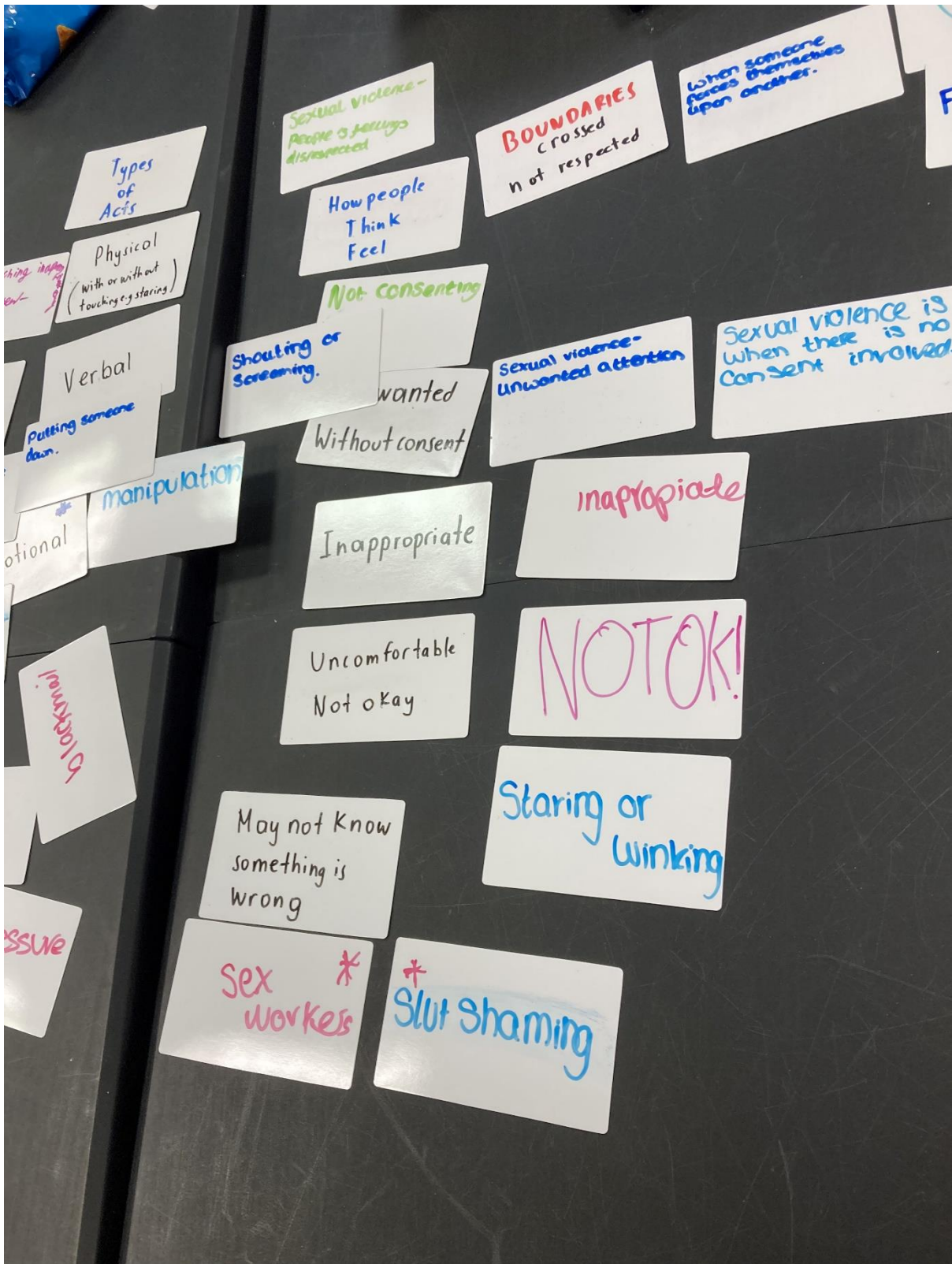


## Youth club workshop 2 – listing activity

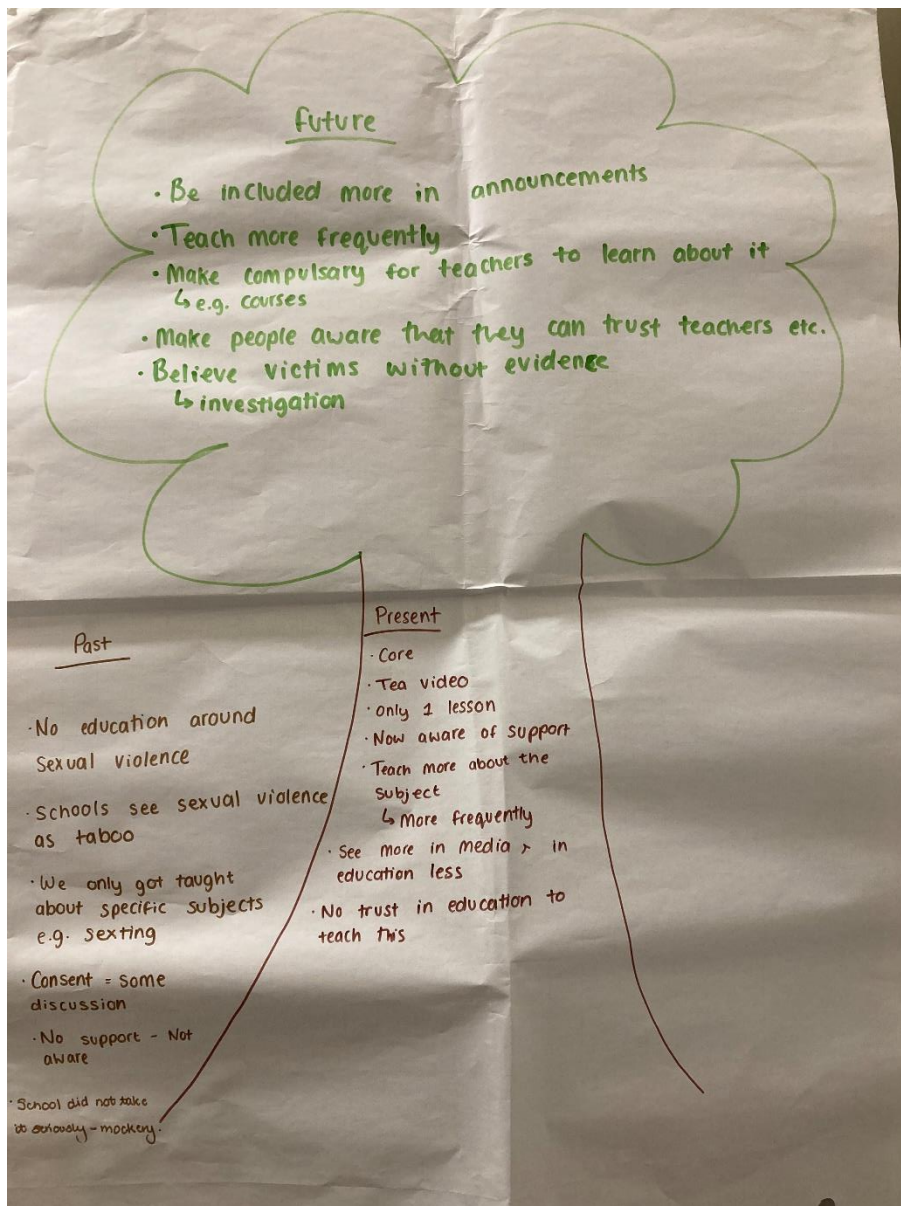




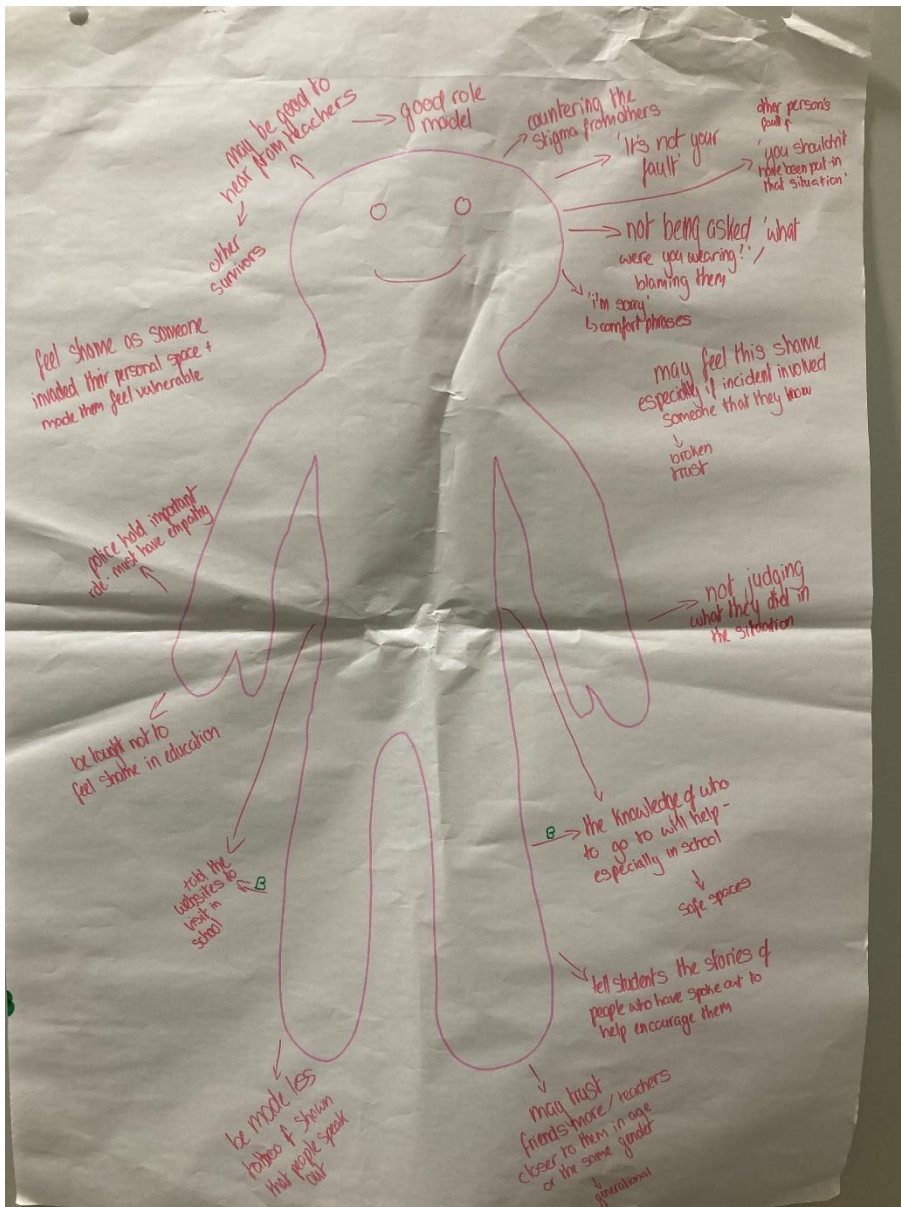
## Youth club workshop 4 – Concept Mapping



## FE group workshop 2 – River of life activity



# FE group session 3 – Body Mapping



## Appendix 6 – Vignettes

- A. Diana's sports teacher constantly whistles and winks at her when she runs by him. She doesn't look at him. He tells her to smile and that she needs to learn how to accept compliments.
- B. Blake is sitting next to Janine on the couch and keeps touching her hair. She removed his hand and said to stop it. He laughed then tickled her.
- C. Marc is mad that Jay's girlfriend cheated on him, and he said, "If my girlfriend dared to do this, I would beat her to a pulp."
- D. While kissing, Tom starts to touch Betty's breasts. She's not sure if she wants him to go further but goes along with it because she thinks she'll lose him.
- E. Eva wants to have sex, but David isn't ready. Eva said she'll tell everyone he's gay and will get her needs met by a 'real man'.
- F. Jason has never hit Pat but when he's angry he often scares her by punching walls or throwing things.
- G. Mark decides to break up with his boyfriend. His boyfriend doesn't want to end the relationship and threatens to "out" Mark if he goes through with it.
- H. Charles sat very close to his nephew and put his arm around their waist. He then placed his hand on the child's knee and started moving his hand up.
- I. A group of boys uploaded Ayesha's sexy photos from their group chat. The online comments called her a slut.

### Youth club workshop 3

1. Andrew was with a group of friends. Carl showed him some pornography on his phone. When Andrew said he wasn't interested in looking at it, Carl said he must be gay.
2. Diana's sports teacher constantly whistles and winks at her when she runs by him. She doesn't look at him. He tells her to smile and that she needs to learn how to accept compliments.
3. Luca gets constant attention from a group of girls at school. They blow kisses at him, slap his butt in the corridor and block his way so that he must squeeze past them to get to class.
4. Blake is sitting next to Janine on the couch and keeps touching her hair. She removed his hand and said to stop it. He laughed then tickled her.
5. Marc is mad that Jay's girlfriend cheated on him, and he said, "If my girlfriend dared to do this, I would beat her to a pulp."
6. Pablo, Irene's boyfriend, calls her fat in front of their friends and that he is ashamed to go out with her. Irene said that he doesn't allow her to eat what she wants.

*Is Marc* What would young people likely do?  
A Do or Say Nothing      B Unsure      C Do or Say Something

1. Andrew was with a group of friends. Carl showed him some pornography on his phone. When Andrew said he wasn't interested in looking at it, Carl said he must be gay. **A A**
2. Diana's sports teacher constantly whistles and winks at her when she runs by him. She doesn't look at him. He tells her to smile and that she needs to learn how to accept compliments. **A**
3. Luca gets constant attention from a group of girls at school. They blow kisses at him, slap his butt in the corridor and block his way so that he must squeeze past them to get to class. **C**
4. Blake is sitting next to Janine on the couch and keeps touching her hair. She removed his hand and said to stop it. He laughed then tickled her. **C**
5. Marc is mad that Jay's girlfriend cheated on him, and he said, "If my girlfriend dared to do this, I would beat her to a pulp." **C**
6. Pablo, Irene's boyfriend, calls her fat in front of their friends and that he is ashamed to go out with her. Irene said that he doesn't allow her to eat what she wants. **C**

Youth club workshop 5

		Most common	Most harmful
A	Jason calls Clara stupid in front of their friends and apologizes after or will say they were just joking.		
B	Mark decides to break up with his boyfriend. His boyfriend doesn't want to end the relationship and threatens to "out" Mark if he goes through with it.		
C	A group of boys filmed Daniel touching himself in the bathroom without him knowing and posted it online. People from school laughed at him and isolated him.		
D	While kissing, Tom starts to touch Betty's breasts. She's not sure if she wants him to go further but goes along with		
		Most common	Most harmful
A	Jason calls Clara stupid in front of their friends and apologizes after or will say they were just joking.	2	45
B	Mark decides to break up with his boyfriend. His boyfriend doesn't want to end the relationship and threatens to "out" Mark if he goes through with it.	1	3
C	A group of boys filmed Daniel touching himself in the bathroom without him knowing and posted it online. People from school laughed at him and isolated him.	6	1
D	While kissing, Tom starts to touch Betty's breasts. She's not sure if she wants him to go further but goes along with it because she thinks she'll lose him.	4	2
E	Leonard gives his boyfriend gifts and treats him on dates but demands something in return for his generosity like nudes.	5	<del>5</del> 4
F	Claire ignores her partner for days or withholds affection as a way of punishing him when she doesn't get her way	3	6

FE group workshop 5

1 – most harmful 6 – least harmful	Rank (1-6)
1. Diana’s sports teacher constantly whistles and winks at her. She doesn’t look at him. He tells her to smile and that she needs to learn how to accept compliments.	
2. Eva wants to have sex, but David isn't ready. Eva said she'll tell everyone he's gay and will get her needs met by a 'real man'.	
3. Jason has never hit Pat but when he's angry he often scares her by punching walls or throwing things.	
4. Mark decides to break up with his boyfriend. His boyfriend doesn’t want to end the relationship and threatens to “out” Mark if he goes through with it.	
5. A group of boys uploaded Ayesha’s sexy photos from their group chat. The online comments called her a slut.	
6. Charles sat very close to his nephew and put his arm around their waist. He then placed his hand on the child’s knee and started moving his hand up.	

- 1) 5, 4, 4, 4
- 2) 4, 5, 5, 5
- 3) 5, 5, 6, 6
- 4) 6, 6, 3, 4
- 5) 1, 2, 2, 2
- 6) 1, 1, 2, 1

Q2)

Thought about long & short term affects

- Put myself in their position.

difficult to rank - tried to think about affects in long term

long term affect + what would feel

Q2b)

Emotional physical

- some may affect people more significantly + physical + mental harm

- Physically harmful can affect future relationships + affect mental health

- some are physically

- All can be argued to be as harmful as each other

Q2c)

Have more underlying sympathy for girls - "vulnerable"

- gender doesn't matter but girls are not given as much attention - almost expected.

- put sympathy for a girl. - seen as weaker and more vulnerable.

- more sympathy for females as they are seen as more vulnerable

Q4)

- friends, parents, teachers, counsellors / therapists

Teachers Friends Mental health Services (CAMHS) Police + Report Lines

- friends, parents, teachers, therapists, counsellors.

Media influences some experiences

Q3)

mental illness Distrust in future relationships

- mental illness "therapy"? - distrust. - physical harm.

- Mental or physical harm - therapy may help - fear

- poor mental health - Low self-esteem - Miss trust - find hard to form another relationship

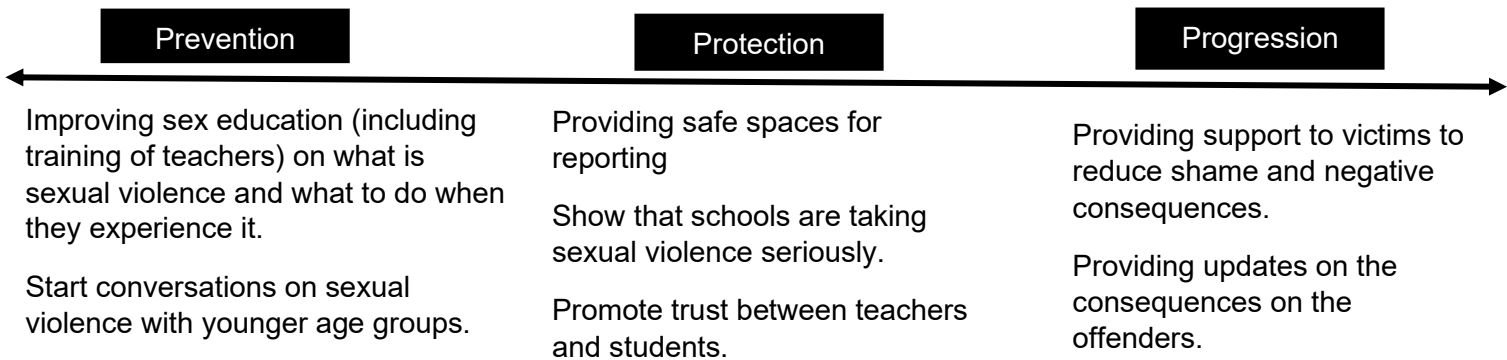
- Support in school - Support from friends

## Appendix 7 – Summary sheet - FE group recommendations

Summary worksheet (after inputs from Workshop 1 & 2)

	Gaps and Observations	Recommendations
<b>Relationships and sex education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Very little, inadequate. Not frequent enough.</li> <li>- Consent lessons focused on “just say no”.</li> <li>- Not mature enough and watered down.</li> <li>- Only one session on consent.</li> <li>- There is not much education or talk on what happens after an incident and where to seek help.</li> <li>- Only specific topics were taught such as sexting and only a few discussions on consent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Focus on prevention.</li> <li>- Start conversations with younger age group.</li> <li>- Include sessions on:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o what is not acceptable behaviour and discussion on boundaries.</li> <li>o what is considered as sexual violence such as everyday acts of banter and touching.</li> <li>o what to do when sexual violence happens to a young person.</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Use right language and don't avoid terms such as rape, sex.</li> <li>- Education on what to do when sexual violence happens to a young person.</li> <li>- Make students feel included in the lessons.</li> </ul>
<b>Teachers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Some teachers don't seem to be interested in the topic and doing it just to show they've done it.</li> <li>- Teachers seem awkward and don't know what to say and how to say it.</li> <li>- Tutors seem to not be trained specifically to teach it.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involve professionals rather than teachers.</li> <li>- More training for teachers and make it compulsory for them.</li> <li>- Need to promote trust with students that they can be trusted to teach it or to disclose.</li> <li>- Show that they want to support students with what they are going through and</li> </ul>

		providing resources about unhealthy relationships.
<b>School responses</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Victims seem to be punished more than the offender.</li> <li>- Sexual violence is still stigmatized and not taken seriously.</li> <li>- Misuse of victims' stories to promote fear.</li> <li>- Not enough help to victims. They just get referred to the police or social services.</li> <li>- Inadequate response to nudes, "just don't take or send nudes".</li> <li>- Schools seem to prioritize their reputation more than the victim.</li> <li>- Students are not aware how to seek support after experiencing sexual violence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Respond to cases even when done out of school – duty of care and safeguarding extends outside school premises.</li> <li>- Provide safe spaces for reporting like anonymous lines.</li> <li>- Provide clear support like counseling and information on helplines for students who experienced sexual violence.</li> <li>- Provide legal information and resources.</li> <li>- Provide updates on the consequences to offenders.</li> <li>- Include information on sexual violence more frequently in school announcements.</li> </ul>



FE group - Summary worksheet for reflective workshop 5

	<b>Gaps and Observations</b>	<b>Recommendations</b>
<b>Relationships and sex education</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Very little, inadequate. Not frequent enough.</li> <li>2. Consent lessons focused on “just say no”.</li> <li>3. Not mature enough and watered down.</li> <li>4. Only one session on consent.</li> <li>5. There is not much education or talk on what happens after an incident and where to seek help.</li> <li>6. Only specific topics were taught such as sexting and only a few discussions on consent.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Focus on prevention.</li> <li>2. Start conversations with younger age group.</li> <li>3. Include sessions on:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. what is not acceptable behaviour and discussion on boundaries.</li> <li>b. what is considered as sexual violence such as everyday acts of banter and touching.</li> <li>c. what to do when sexual violence happens to a young person.</li> <li>d. Consent in different contexts</li> <li>e. Challenging shame</li> </ol> </li> <li>4. Use right language and don't avoid terms such as rape, sex.</li> <li>5. Education on what to do when sexual violence happens to a young person.</li> <li>6. Make students feel included in the lessons.</li> <li>7. More frequent sessions on sexual violence</li> </ol>
<b>Teachers</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Some teachers don't seem to be interested in the topic and doing it just to show they've done it.</li> <li>2. Teachers seem awkward and don't know what to say and how to say it.</li> <li>3. Tutors seem to not be trained specifically to teach it.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Involve professionals rather than teachers.</li> <li>- More training for teachers and make it compulsory for them.</li> <li>- Need to promote trust with students that they can be trusted to teach it or to disclose.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Show that they want to support students with what they are going through and providing resources about unhealthy relationships.</li> </ul>
<p><b>School responses</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Victims seem to be punished more than the offender.</li> <li>2. Sexual violence is still stigmatized and not taken seriously.</li> <li>3. Misuse of victims' stories to promote fear.</li> <li>4. Not enough help to victims. They just get referred to the police or social services.</li> <li>5. Inadequate response to nudes, "just don't take or send nudes".</li> <li>6. Schools seem to prioritize their reputation more than the victim.</li> <li>7. Students are not aware how to seek support after experiencing sexual violence.</li> <li>8. Victim-blaming questions such as "what were you wearing?"</li> <li>9. Limited response on "weird" teachers who make students feel uncomfortable</li> <li>10. Doesn't respond to relationship violence</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Respond to cases even when done out of school – duty of care and safeguarding extends outside school premises.</li> <li>2. Provide safe spaces for reporting like anonymous lines.</li> <li>3. Provide clear support like counseling and information on helplines for students who experienced sexual violence.</li> <li>4. Provide legal information and resources.</li> <li>5. Provide updates on the consequences to offenders.</li> <li>6. Include information on sexual violence more frequently in school announcements.</li> <li>7. Positive messages: "it's not your fault"</li> <li>8. Share stories of students who reported and received a positive response to encourage others to report too</li> <li>9. Proactively ask and listen to students about their experiences with teachers</li> </ol>

## School Response

- ↓
- 1- Victim is reassured as to not deter others from speaking up offer = more + serious consequences !!!

Response Recommendations

ALL EQUALLY IMPORTANT !!!!!

Student > Reputation (of school)

## Relationship & sex

- ↓
- 3. Less watered down - very significant = trust, openness
  - treat more serious - NO SHOW!
  - But better training to allow for openness + proper education.

Recommendations

- ↓
- Starting convos at younger age allows for a progression with age (more serious scenarios and language)
- More Inclusion of LGBTQ+ Relations
  - Recognise age group Gap.

## Teachers

- ↓
- 2/3 - If teachers are awkward / uninterested the students will also be = inadequate uncomfortable with subject in the future.

Recommendations

- ↓
- Professional training for every teacher.
  - ↳ can be comforting, united, knowledge on how to correctly respond + Report the situation.
  - everyone has a different comfort teacher.
  - ADAPT - INTERNET

## Appendix 8 – Reflexive session worksheets

### Reflexive workshop worksheet 1 (youth club)

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary

Which best describes your sexual orientation?

- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Gay/Lesbian
- Heterosexual/Straight
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Prefer not to answer

Do you have a disability?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

**Activity 1: Not all acts are sexual violence, but they still make young people concerned**

*Which of the acts on the list do you consider as sexual violence? How would you group together the other acts? What would you call the group?*

Sexual Violence	Group name:	Group name:	Group name:

*Definitions of sexual violence*

1. Sexual violence is rape, assault by penetration, sexual assault or causing someone to engage in sexual activity without consent.
  
2. Any kind of sexual activity or act (including online) that was unwanted or involved one or more of the following - pressure, manipulation, bullying, intimidation, threats, deception, and force
  
3. When a child or young person is forced or persuaded to take part in sexual activities. This may involve physical contact or non-contact activities and can happen online or offline.

A. Which one of these definitions would be relatable for young people?

\_\_\_\_\_

B. Sexual violence for you is \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

From the list which acts would you put in these categories?

Most experienced by young people	Considered as most harmful

**Activity 2: Does something feel wrong or not?**

*If it happens to young people like you, which of the acts in the list will young people know or not know when something feels wrong?*

Will know something feels wrong	Unsure	Will not know something feels wrong

**Activity 3: Asking help or telling someone**

*If it happens to young people like you, which of the acts in the list will young people most likely ask for help or tell someone about it?*

Will tell someone or ask for help	Unsure	Will not tell someone or ask for help

**Activity 4: Helping someone else**

*If it happens to young people like you, which of the acts in the list will young people most likely help someone if they know or see it was happening to them?*

Will help someone else	Unsure	Will not help someone else

**Activity 5: What factors do young people think are important in knowing when a person is acting in an unhealthy or abusive manner?**

**Rank 1-5 (1 being most important and 5/6 as least important)**

	Depends on the friendship with the person or how well you know them
	Depends on other people's reactions like if they are also laughing
	Depends on the response of the person if they stop when asked to stop
	Depends how often they do it
	Depends on the person's intention for doing it
	Others:

## List of Acts

- (A) Comments on appearance and clothes
- (B) Attacking or assaulting someone sexually
- (C) Catcalling/ Wolf whistling
- (D) Sexist jokes
- (E) Inappropriate touching without consent
- (F) Getting too close in someone's personal space
- (G) Winking/ Raising eyebrows
- (H) Inappropriate or unwanted text messages
- (I) Inappropriate or unwanted pictures
- (J) Revenge porn/ Sharing someone's sexual photos or videos to others
- (K) Blackmail
- (L) Making someone feel inferior/ Putting someone down
- (M) Hurtful words
- (N) Slutshaming
- (O) Rape
- (P) Forcing themselves on someone
- (Q) Doing sexual things without consent even in a relationship
- (R) Getting someone drugged so they can do inappropriate things
- (S) Begging for nudes
- (T) Doing sexual things to someone when they're asleep
- (U) Forced against their will
- (V) Staring



Category label	Acts
Sexual violence	attacking or assaulting someone sexually, inappropriate touching without consent, revenge porn/sharing photos, rape, forcing someone, forced against will, forcing themselves on someone, doing things without consent even in a relationship, getting someone drugged so they can do inappropriate things, doing sexual things to someone when they are asleep
Harassment:	inappropriate or unwanted text, inappropriate or unwanted photos, blackmail, begging for nudes, catcalling, inappropriate touching without consent, revenge porn, blackmail, making someone feel inferior, slutshaming, begging for nudes
Inappropriate	sexist jokes, getting too close in someone's personal space, inappropriate or unwanted messages, making someone feel inferior, staring
Weird	getting close to someone, winking raising eyebrows, inappropriate or unwanted text messages, staring, revenge porn/sharing photos, hurtful words, slutshaming,
Uncomfortable	catcalling, inappropriate texts, blackmail, slutshaming, begging for nudes, getting too close to someone, making someone feel inferior, staring

	Comments on appearance, winking, hurtful words, sexist jokes
Rudeness	comments on appearance or clothes, getting too close to someone's personal space, winking, raising eyebrows, making someone feel inferior, hurtful words, staring, inappropriate or unwanted text messages
Unnecessary	comments on clothes, sexist jokes, making someone feel inferior, hurtful words, staring
Sexism	sexist jokes ('I thought there would be more in this category')

Sexual violence	Uncomfortable	Weird	Unnecessary	Rudeness	Inappropriate	Sexual harassment	Not consented	Sexism
(B) Attacking or assaulting someone -15F -15F -15F -15F -13M -17F -14F 14F 13F  (E) Inappropriate touching without consent -15F -15F -15F -14F 14F 13F  (J) Revenge	(C) Catcalling/wolf whistling -15F -15F -15F -17F  (H) Inappropriate or unwanted text messages -15F -15F  (K) Blackmail -15F -15F  (N) Slutshaming -15F -15F -15F  (S) Begging	(F) Getting too close in someone's personal space -15F -15F -15F -15F  (G) Winking/raising eyebrows -15F -15F  (I) Inappropriate or unwanted photos -15F -15F -15F  (V) Staring	(A) Comments on appearance and clothes -15F -15F -15F  (D) Sexist jokes -15F -15F  (L) Making someone feel inferior -15F -15F -15F -15F -15F  (M) Hurtful words -15F	(A) Comments on appearance and clothes -14F 14F 13F  (F) Getting too close in someone's personal space -14F  (L) 14F 13F  (G) Winking/raising eyebrows -14F  (L) Making someone	(D) Sexist jokes -14F 14F 13F F) Getting too close in someone's personal space -14F  (G) Winking/raising eyebrows -14F  (H) Inappropriate or unwanted messages	(C) Catcalling/wolf whistling -13M -17F 14F 13F  (E) Inappropriate touching without consent -13M 14F  (S) Begging for nudes -17F 14F  (H) Inappropriate or unwanted	(E) Inappropriate touching without consent -17F  (O) Rape -17F  (P) Forcing themselves on someone -17F  (Q) Doing sexual things without consent even in a relationship -17F	(D) Sexist jokes -13M Illegal (K) black mail

ge	for	-15F	(V)	e feel	-14F	ed text		
porn/sh	nudes		Staring	inferior	14F	messag	(T)	
aring	-15F	(H)	-15F	-14F	13F	es	Doing	
someo	-15F	Inapprop		13F		-13M	sexual	
ne's		riate or			L)	-17F	things	
sexual	(G)	unwante		(M)	Making	14F	to	
photos	Winking/	d text		Hurtful	someon		someo	
-15F	raising	messag		words	e feel	(I)	ne	
-15F	eyebrow	es		-14F	inferior	Inappro	when	
-15F	s	-15F		13F	-14F	priate or	they're	
-17F	-15F					unwant	asleep	
	-17F	(J)		(V)	(V)	ed		
(O)		Revang		Staring	Staring	photos	-17F	
Rape	(L)	e		-14F	-14F	-13M		
-15F	Making	porn/sha		13F		-17F	(U)	
-15F	someon	ring			(N)	14F	Forced	
-15F	e feel	someon		(H)	Slutsha	13F	against	
-13M	inferior	e's		Inapprop	ming		their	
-17F	- 15F	sexual		riate or	13F	(K)	will	
-14F		photos		unwante		Blackm	-17F	
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	Staring			messag	Begging	-17F	(V)	
(U)	-15F	(M)		es	for	14F	Staring	
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against	(A)	words			13F			
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<p>priate things -15F -15F -15F -13M -17F -14F 13F</p> <p>(T) Doing sexual things to someo ne when they're asleep -15F - 15F -15F -14F 13F</p> <p>(K) Blackm ail -15F</p> <p>(N) Slutsha ming - 15F -17F</p>								
--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

(S) Beggin g for nudes -15F								
D) Sexist jokes -17F								

## Reflexive workshop sheet 2 (youth club)

1 – I don't agree at all; this statement doesn't match what we talked about.

5 – I totally agree; this statement really matches what we talked about.

### 1. Talking about sexual violence

Some young people find it easier to talk about sexual violence using terms related to discomfort like 'weird', 'uncomfortable,' or 'inappropriate' rather than serious terms like 'sexual harassment', 'assault' or 'rape'.

1	2	3	4	5

Why might they find it easier to use these terms?

### 2. Understanding young people's definitions of sexual violence

Some young people think it's important to understand pressure, manipulation, and consent when talking about sexual violence.

1	2	3	4	5

Why might these be important to young people?

### 3. Seeing how some actions affect others

Some young people don't always notice how things like name-calling, unwanted touching, or sexist jokes affect others.

1	2	3	4	5

Why do they not notice?

#### 4. Speaking up

Some young people find it difficult to tell someone when they feel uncomfortable or when someone crosses a line.

1	2	3	4	5

Why makes it difficult?

#### 5. Worries about what other people think

Some young people worry about how others will see them if they talk about or report something related to sexual violence

1	2	3	4	5

Why are they worried?

## 6. Thinking of relationships with other people

Some young people think about their relationship with the people involved before deciding how to act or help in situations related to sexual violence.

1	2	3	4	5

Why are these relationships important to young people?

## 7. Schools' priorities

Some young people feel that schools focus only on the most serious cases and don't pay attention to everyday behaviors that make young people uncomfortable.

1	2	3	4	5

## 8. Schools not doing the right thing

Some young people feel that schools are not doing it right in how they handle the people who cause harm, and they don't support the victims enough

1	2	3	4	5

## 9. Wanting trust and care from teachers

Some young people want to know they can trust their teachers and feel supported when they deal with sexual violence and uncomfortable situations.

1	2	3	4	5

Why might young people have these views of their schools?

## 10. 'You are not alone'

Some young people feel it's important to push back against the shame linked to sexual violence and help others realize they're not alone in what they're going through

<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

Why are these messages

important to young people?

**11. *'I liked how it was a safe space to talk'***

What did Janelle do that helped you feel safe and comfortable in the sessions?

**12. *'They make me educated about the situation'***

What did Janelle do that helped you learn about sexual violence in a way that's different from what you've seen at school?

**13. *'It made it easier when getting involved'***

What did Janelle do that made you feel included and listened to in the workshops?

**Appendix 9 – Co-created resources**

**Youth club Awareness video planning sheet**

Topic	Sexual violence
	↓ first video introduction of people and topic.
Key messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what sexual violence is</li> <li>• who does it</li> <li>• where it happens.</li> <li>• what's acceptable</li> <li>• how to help a friend, response</li> </ul>
Scene	<p>"welcome to day, and today we're talking about sexual violence and abuse" "this is when..."</p> <p>* trigger warning at the very start.</p>
Post caption	<p>questions, explaining what it is.</p> <p>"sexual violence explained"</p>
Posting schedule	1-2 times a week, when time.
Other comments/notes	nobody is alone, there is support. everyone should be educated on the topic, from young to old.

Youth club co-created poster presented at the Durham University Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse (CRiVA) 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary event

## “Speak Out, You are Not Alone” : Amplifying the Voices of Young People in North East England on Addressing Sexual Violence

Janelle Rabe, Doctoral Researcher, Department of Sociology  
Co-created poster with young people: Winnie\*, Lulu\*, Tom\* Dobby\*, GG\*, TJ\*, Ron\* Sarah\*, Mylah\*, Sav\*

### HOW DID WE WORK TOGETHER?



Engaged 29 young people (13-18 y.o) in a school and a youth club in North East England



Aimed to understand their perspectives on sexual violence, related issues, and their recommended responses



Collaborated in a series of 17 participatory workshops with young people deciding on the priority topics

### WHAT DID WE FIND OUT AND PRODUCE TOGETHER?



Young people expressed difficulties in identifying and responding to acceptable, ambiguous, and abusive behaviour



Identified the need for young people-informed language on terms associated with sexual violence instead of adult-centric concepts



Co-produced model of responses to young people affected by sexual violence throughout a timeline and embedded with core values

### WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE’S MESSAGES ON HEALTHY AND UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS?

#### CONSENT

You can change your mind even after saying yes  
Only do things both people say yes to  
Don't do anything you don't want



#### PUT YOURSELF FIRST

Don't try to make it work if it won't work  
It's okay to end things if the time comes  
Set boundaries with your partner



#### COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Talk if you are not happy  
Let your friends know what is happening  
If it feels toxic, talk to trusted adults



Scan me for more information about the project!

@janelle\_rabe

anne.j.rabe@durham.ac.uk

bit.ly/JanelleRabesite

Durham University  
Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse

UKRI  
Economic and Social Research Council

CONSENT

Put yourself first

Communication IS KEY

Talk to a trusted adult if you feel unsafe

You can change your mind at any time

don't try to make it worse if its not working

You can always change and move forward.

You can always say no if something changes.

Its OK to end things if the time comes

Talk if you're not happy

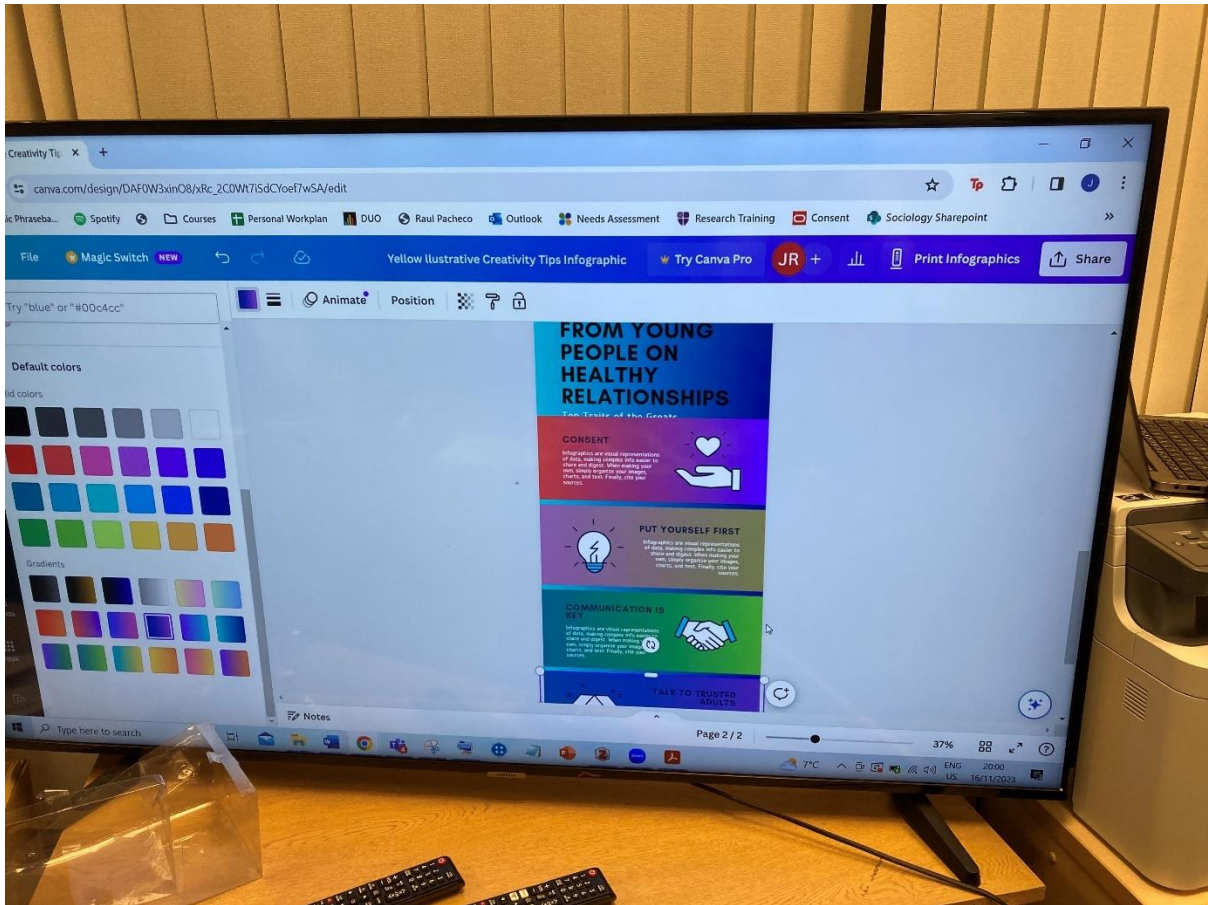
not everyone wants sex

Break up if you're not happy

Only do things both people say yes to. don't do anything you don't want

Love them and make sure they love you and then break up

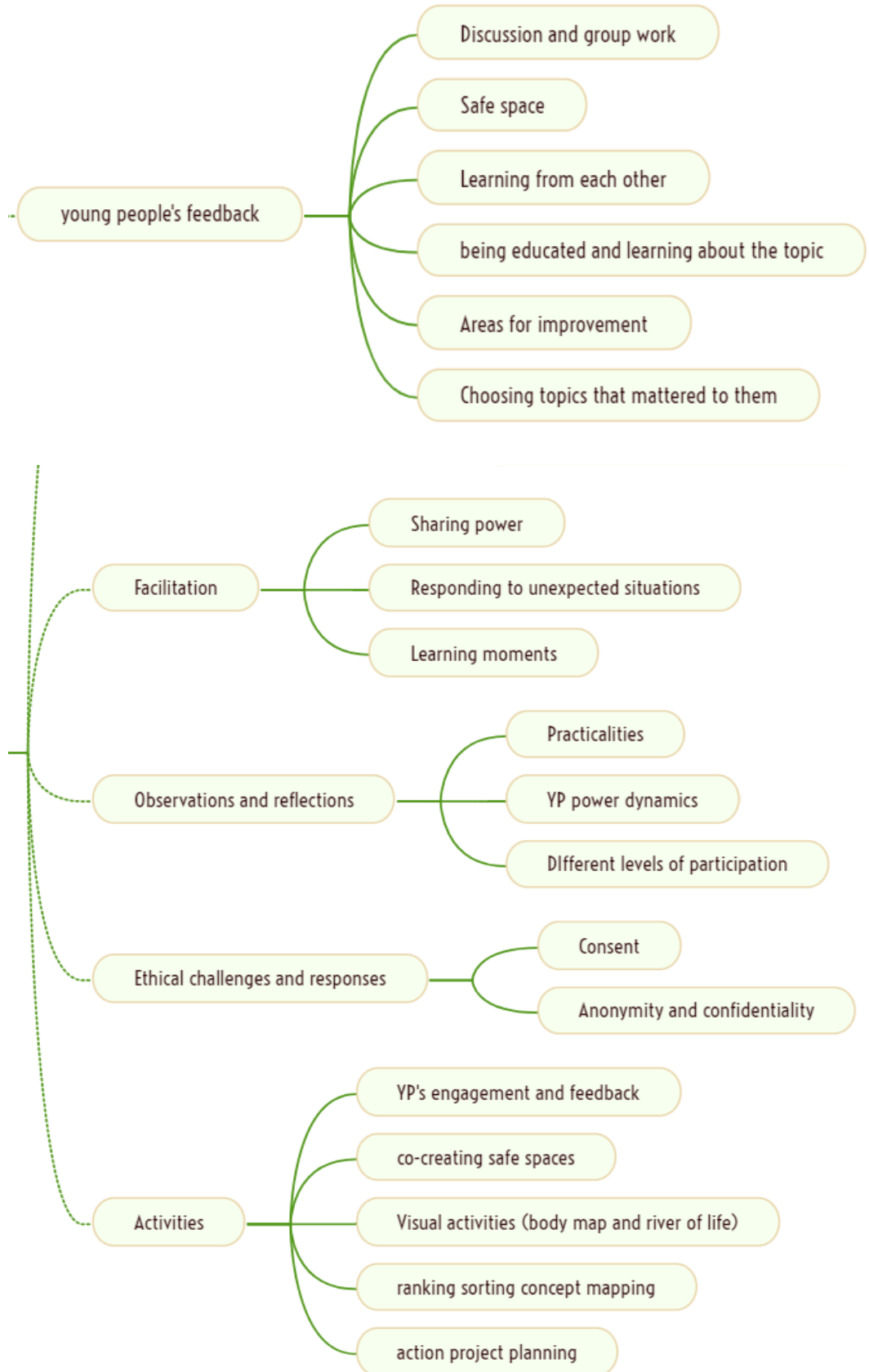
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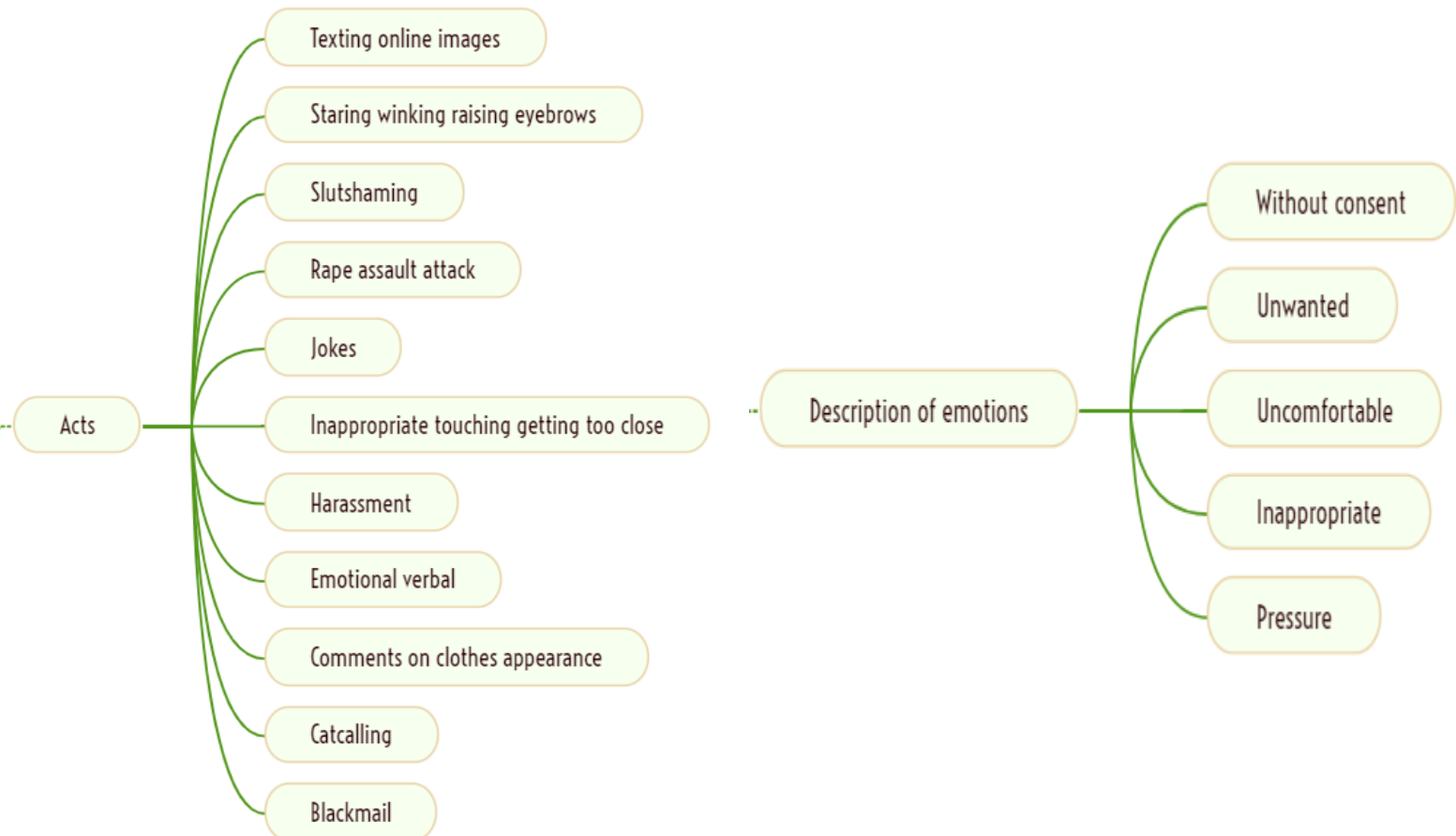
Colours and design chosen by the young people during the co-creation process

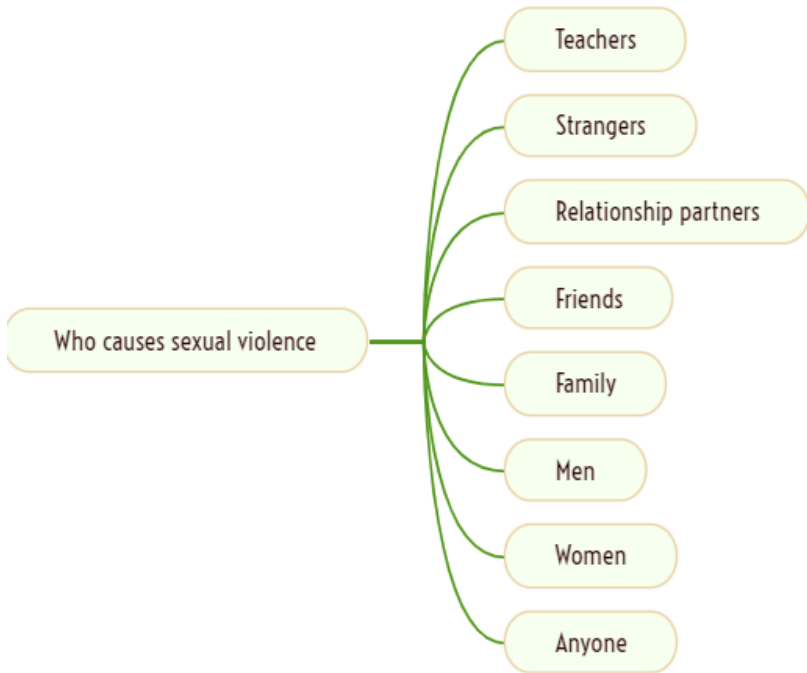
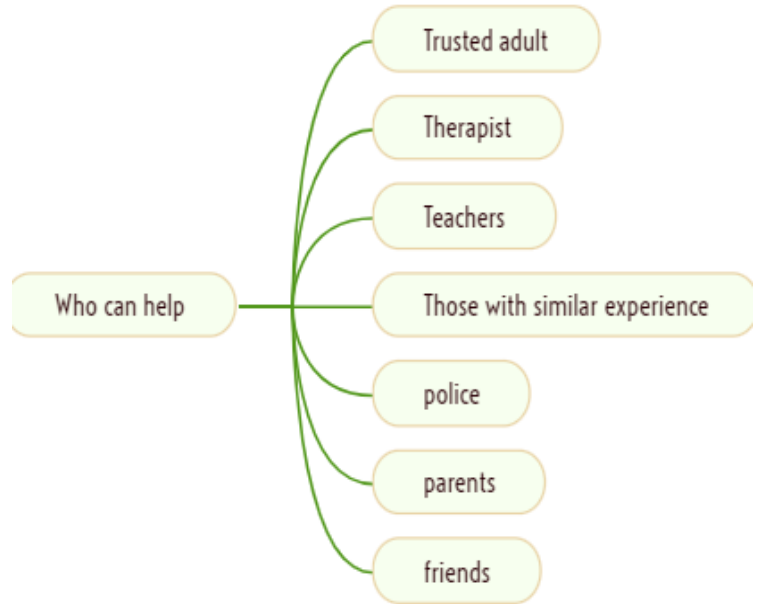
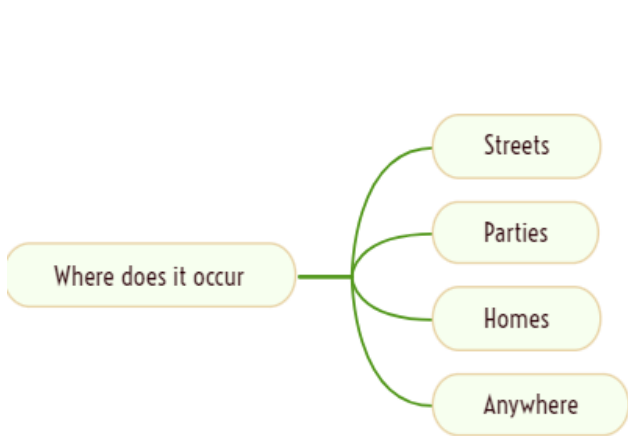
# Appendix 10 – Coding map

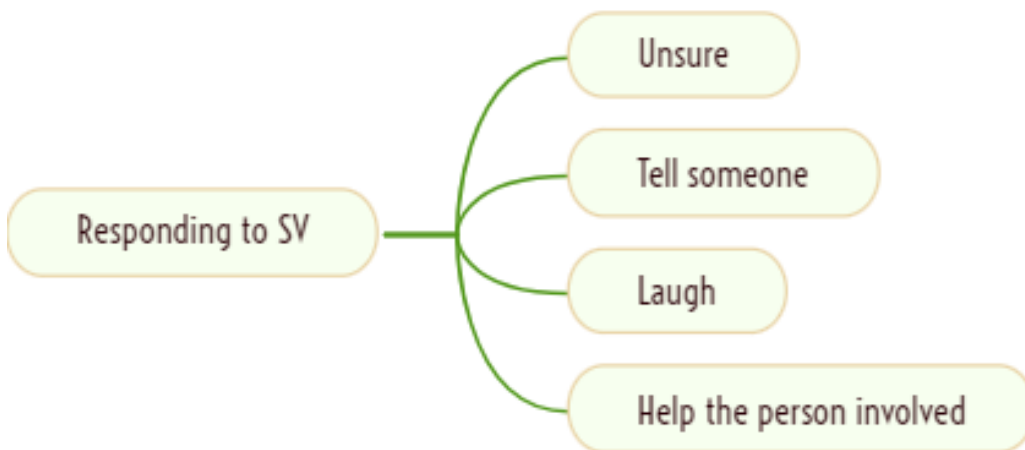
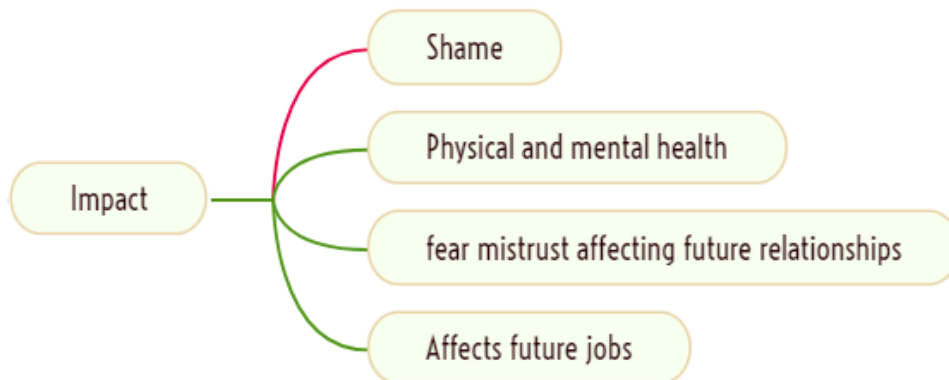
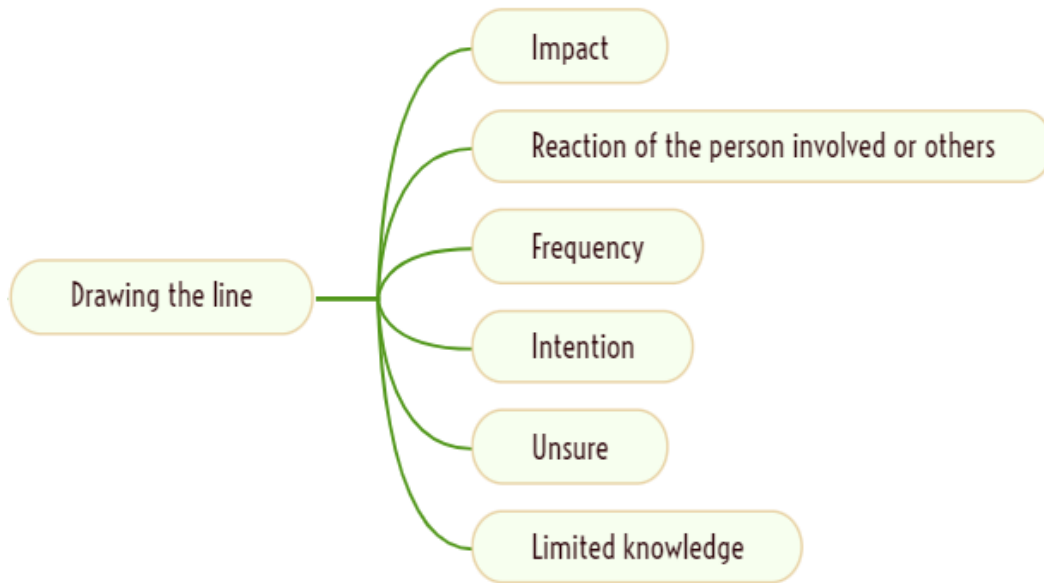
## Theme: Methodological and process insights



## Theme: Young people's perspectives on sexual violence

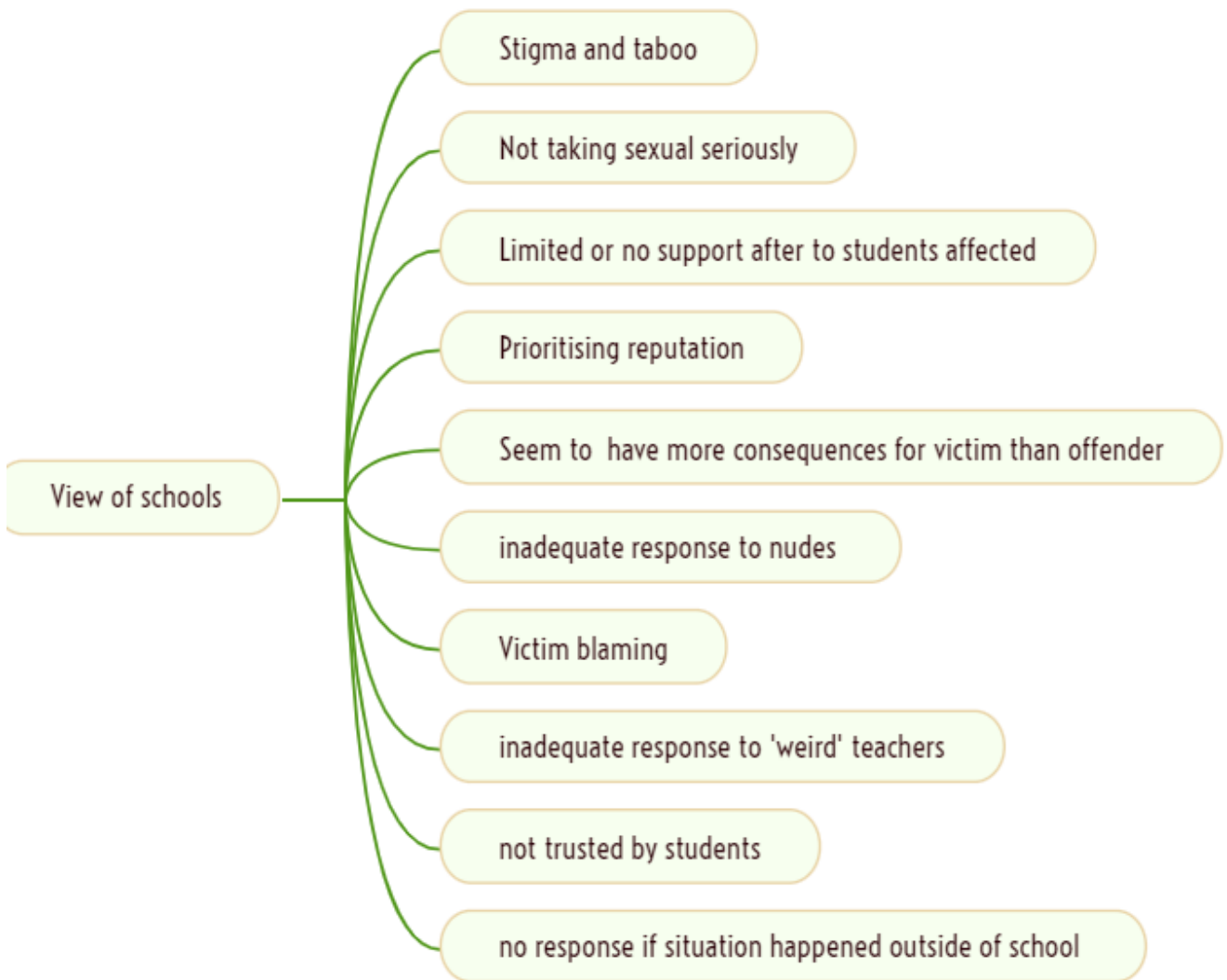


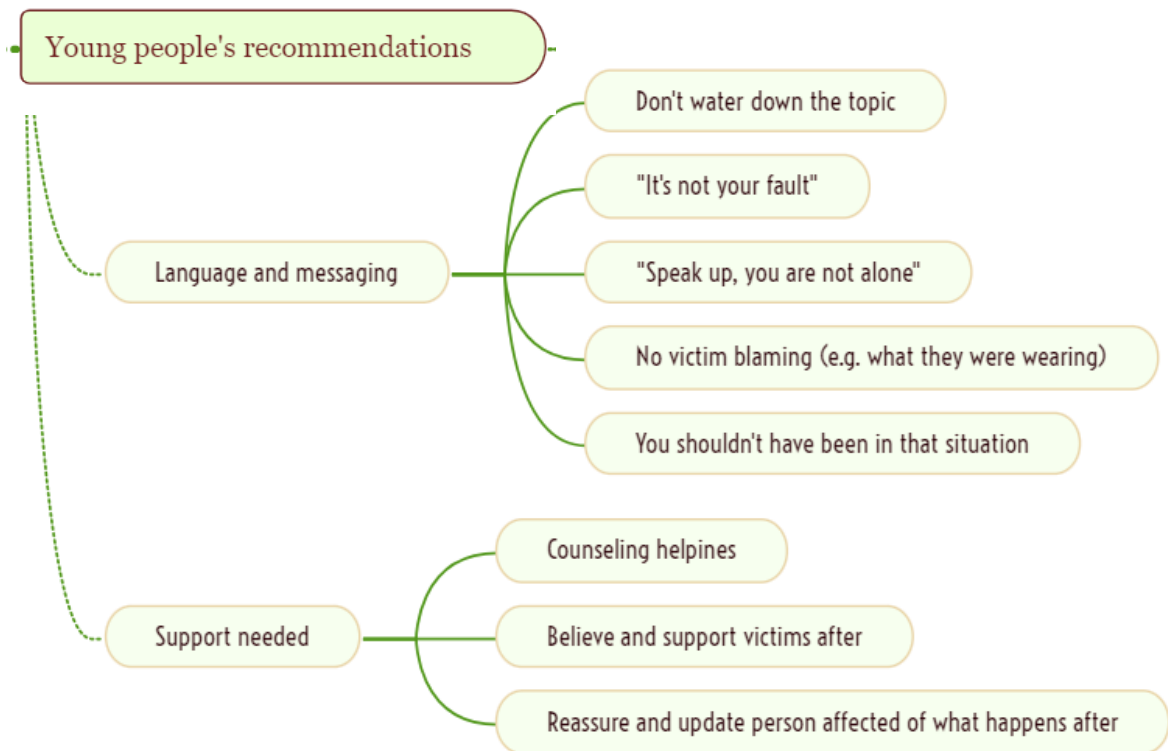
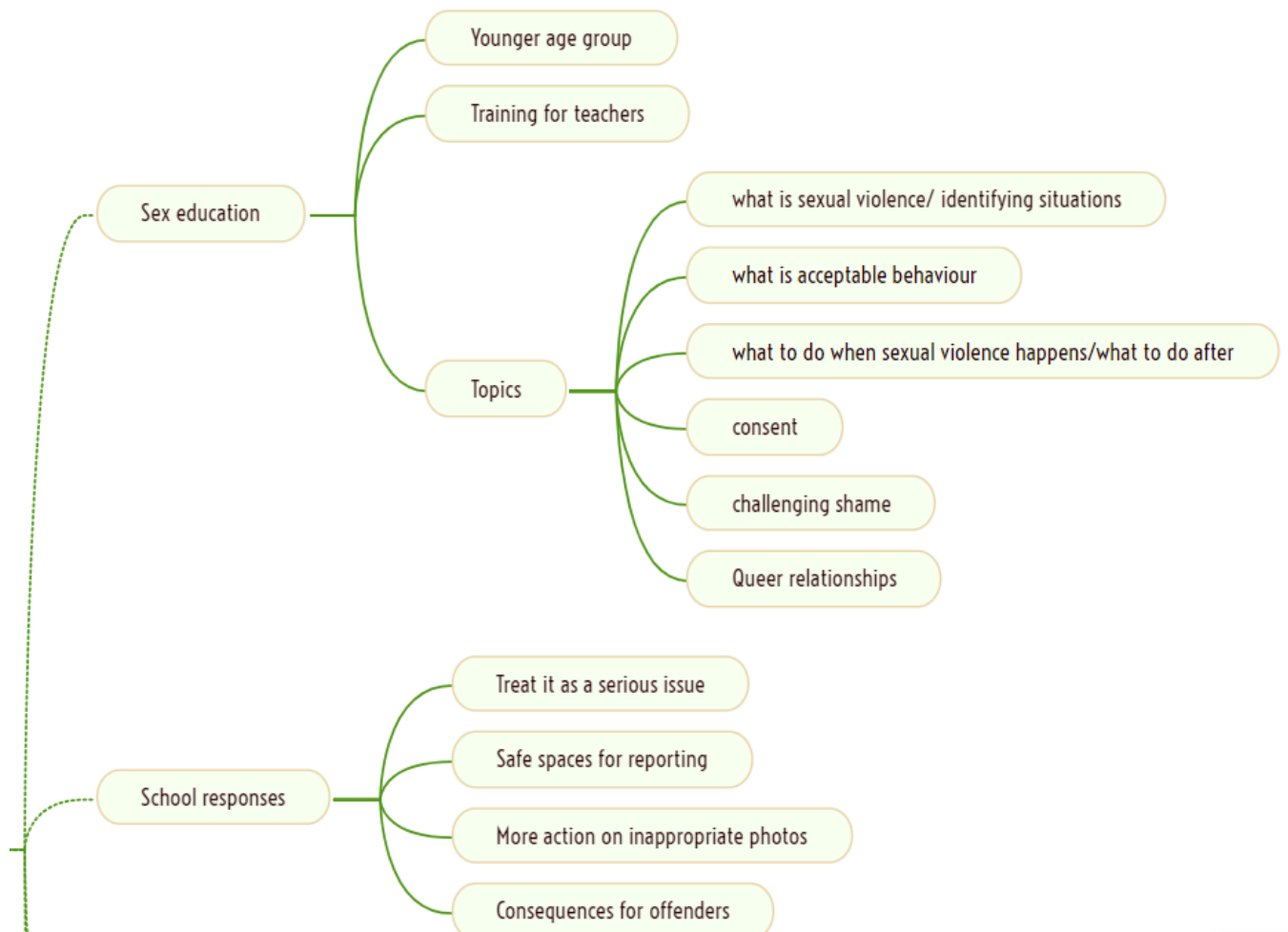




## Theme: Young people's views on school responses







## Coding based on young people's selected topics



## Appendix 11 – Amendments to ethics application form

### Purpose of application

Please select the option which best applies:

- New project
- Amendment to a project which has received ethical approval
- Full application following provisional ethical approval / pre-funding application
- Continuation of a project which has received ethical approval (request for renewal)
- Other (please specify)

Please enter the reference of your previous application/approval below. SOC-

2022-02-28T17\_15\_04-tftl38

Please briefly indicate changes since your previous application (where applicable)

I am requesting to extend the age coverage of young people involved to include 13 years old. I had anticipated (and included in my ethics application) working with young people from the ages of 14 to 18 in the study, but the youth group I am now working with includes a number of 13 year olds who would also like to take part. As discussed with my supervisors, it would be very unfortunate to exclude them as they are part of the established group. The work is done within the youth work context in tandem with a qualified youth worker who would like the 13 year olds to be included. I will also be including several groups of young people instead of the original application of involving one group of 8-10 young people.

*Where applicable, please highlight changes within this form and any accompanying documents.*

Please describe how potential participants will be  
a) identified, including how you will select them (your sampling strategy) and any criteria for selection e.g. inclusion / exclusion criteria;  
b) recruited, including who will contact them and method of contact.

**Highlighted changes from the approved ethics application:**

The theory of intersectionality will inform the purposive sampling strategy, supporting existing work showing its importance when studying sexual violence. Proactive efforts act to equitably involve young people of all genders and sexual orientations, particularly the lesser-heard voices of boys and LGBTQ+ children, from ethnic minority communities, lower socio-economic classes, and those with disabilities.

The group size of the initial core group will be 8-10 members. Additional young people may be involved throughout the research project depending on the decisions and agreement of the initial core group of young people. The same recruitment and informed consent process will be followed for all young people involved in the project. **Several groups of young people will be involved.**

Written letters of invitation to the research and project briefs will be sent to selected youth and child- focused organisations and schools in Northeast England. These include but are not limited to Youth Focus North East, Durham Youth Council, Durham Area Youth, Durham City Youth Project, Children North East, Your Voice Counts, Youth Clubs, Durham Johnston School, NE Youth, Durham Youth Clubs, Streetwise. Organisations outside Northeast England may also be engaged depending on the progress of the data collection.

Engagement with organisations and recruitment will be done sequentially, starting with my supervisors' recommendations and contacts' referrals. This approach aims to manage the number of recruited participants and avoid disappointing young people if there is a surplus of recruited participants. The Northeast England region was selected due to the ease of access to young people needed for a participatory research project. Furthermore, it has been beset by increasingly high rates of child poverty and child sexual abuse in recent years, making the perspectives of children in this region very valuable.

The researcher will engage in a collaborative partnership with selected youth-focused organizations in the project implementation. This entails sharing resources and insights between the researcher and the organisation's point persons. The young people will be recruited primarily from these selected partner organisations. The partner organisation's safeguarding and child protection protocols will be followed and implemented.

It seeks to give young people a feel of the type of activities that will be included in the project. Among the inclusion criteria are:

- 1) 13-18 years old
- 2) willingness to participate in a series of participatory workshops
- 3) awareness that the project will involve discussions on sensitive topics such as adolescent sexuality and sexual violence

Prior experience with sexual violence is not an exclusion criteria. Nevertheless, individual risk assessments will be made in coordination with the gatekeepers to determine the potential of harm and re-traumatisation, even if the study will not ask about direct experiences of sexual violence. Focusing on the age group of 13-18 recognises their developmental maturity, autonomy, and agency in middle

Please describe what the participants will be required to do. Please include:

- what is the activity (e.g interviews, questionnaires, other activity);
- where this will take place;
- how long are the sessions (for multiple sessions: how many sessions and total duration of participation in the study);
- any reward or remuneration for participants.

If the activity involves a sensitive topic or any risk to participants, please make clear what this is and how any risks will be mitigated.

Young people will be involved as research partners in the following key research stages:

1. Research preparation: The activities include rapport-building, group dynamics, setting of expectations and project objectives, safeguarding protocols, and collaborative working principles. The working principles involve the joint values that will be followed throughout the research process. Practicalities will be discussed such as the frequency of meetings, the members' preferred mode of communication, venue, and roles in the research. Regular feedbacking on a group and individual basis will be done to ensure the alignment between these expectations and to inform necessary adjustments (Warrington, 2020).

2. Critical reflection activities: Young people will go through sessions of critically reflecting on the topics of adolescent sexual agency, sexual violence, and its prevention. The researcher will develop a research toolbox of creative, participatory individual and group-based activities to solicit the group members perspectives on the issue.

3. Action: The aim of this phase is for young people to critically reflect on their roles and perceived outcomes in preventing sexual violence. The researcher will present a wide range of action-oriented methods with the relevance, uses in previous relevant studies, resources and time needed, and dissemination strategies. The young people will decide as a group on their preferred methods and the dissemination avenues and target audience. Attached is the indicative session guide for the

## Amended ethics application – to include 13 years old

Purpose of application
<p>Please select the option which best applies:</p> <p><input type="radio"/> New project</p> <p><input checked="" type="radio"/> Amendment to a project which has received ethical approval</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Full application following provisional ethical approval / pre-funding application</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Continuation of a project which has received ethical approval (request for renewal)</p> <p><input type="radio"/> Other (please specify)</p> <p>Please enter the reference of your previous application/approval below.</p> <p>SOC-2022-02-28T17_15_04-tftl38</p> <p>Please briefly indicate changes since your previous application (where applicable)</p> <p>I am requesting to extend the age coverage of young people involved to include 13 years old. I had anticipated (and included in my ethics application) working with young people from the ages of 14 to 18 in the study, but the youth group I am now working with includes a number of 13 year olds who would also like to take part. As discussed with my supervisors, it would be very unfortunate to exclude them as they are part of the established group. The work is done within the youth work context in tandem with a qualified youth worker who would like the 13 year olds to be included. I will also be including several groups of young people instead of the original application of involving one group of 8-10 young people.</p> <p><i>Where applicable, please highlight changes within this form and any accompanying documents.</i></p>
<p>It seeks to give young people a feel of the type of activities that will be included in the project. Among the inclusion criteria are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1) 13-18 years old</li><li>2) willingness to participate in a series of participatory workshops</li><li>3) awareness that the project will involve discussions on sensitive topics such as adolescent sexuality and sexual violence</li></ol> <p>Prior experience with sexual violence is not an exclusion criteria. Nevertheless, individual risk assessments will be made in coordination with the gatekeepers to determine the potential of harm and re-traumatisation, even if the study will not ask about direct experiences of sexual violence. Focusing on the age group of 13-18 recognises their developmental maturity, autonomy, and agency in middle adolescence which fits the study's aims.</p>

## **Appendix 12 – Safeguarding plan**

### **Safeguarding Plan**

This plan will consistently be validated and revised in partnership with the young people and gatekeepers involved in the project.

#### **Child-centred and trauma-informed approach<sup>1</sup>**

Young people's (YP) views will be respected, their views heard, and they can expect relationships based on trust with the researcher and other individuals involved in the study. Young people should be seen, listened to, have their views seriously, and involved in collaborative work and decision-making, especially in supporting their needs.

The trauma-informed approach involves recognizing the potential presence and impact of trauma and being prepared to respond if any activity may be triggering to the participants who could have direct or indirect experiences of sexual violence. The goal is to minimize the potential for re-traumatisation. Young people's well-being is the absolute priority. The researcher will coordinate directly with gatekeepers and young people to consider the potential impact of trauma and mobilise the appropriate resources and referrals as necessary.

#### **Values<sup>2</sup>**

1. Understanding and action: YP to be heard and understood and have that understanding acted upon
2. Stability: YP to be able to develop an ongoing stable relationship of trust

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<sup>1</sup> Children Act 1989 (as amended by section 53 of the Children Act 2004); Equality Act 2010; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)

<sup>2</sup>UK Department of Education, 2015. *Working together to safeguard children: Statutory guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*, London: UK Department of Education.

Warrington, C., 2018. *Children and Young People's Participation in Research to Address Sexual Violence*, Bedfordshire: Institute of Applied Social Research.

3. Respect: YP to be treated with the expectation that they are competent. Their experiential knowledge and expertise is valued.
4. Engagement: YP to be informed about and involved in decisions, concerns and plans
5. Explanation: YP to be informed of the outcome of plans and decisions and reasons when their views have not met with a positive response
6. Advocacy: YP to be provided with advocacy to assist them in putting forward their views
7. Inclusivity: Promotion of non-discrimination, equality, and removal of barriers to participation based on language, ethnicity, disability, religious beliefs, gender, sexuality and other factors.
8. Sharing power: Research seeks to shift the balance of power between children and adults, researcher and researched. YP are considered as partners and co-researchers.
9. Transparency: The researcher will be explicit from the beginning of the project regarding the degree of YP's involvement, influence, ownership, and power over decisions and outputs of the research.

Safeguarding children - the action we take to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm - is everyone's responsibility. Everyone who encounters children and families has a role to play<sup>3</sup>

### **Guiding principles**

1. Voluntary involvement: YP's participation in the study and the various activities are voluntary. They may decide to opt out or withdraw from an activity or the study.
2. Fully informed consent: YP will be supported to make informed decisions about their engagement through accessible information and opportunities to ask questions.
3. Maximising YP's sense of comfort and control: This entails ensuring that YP know what to expect from the activities and allowing them to control the direction of the research.

### **Managing the risk of retraumatisation or harm**

Arts-based and participatory activities will be used to avoid direct intrusive questions. Prompts and discussion will focus more on hypothetical situations or asking about young people like them rather than asking participants about their direct experiences. The researcher will assure participants of safe and open spaces to share their experiences if they wish and that follow-up support will be provided in case they feel distress afterwards.

The researcher will communicate directly with young people to explore the difference between identifiable information that may need to be passed on and non-identifiable information that would remain confidential. This includes the difference between personal examples of the young participant and people known to them and hypothetical or general examples. The researcher will communicate to the young people on the risks of unintended disclosure and the consequences. Nevertheless, this does not close the doors for disclosure if they feel it would be best for them. Referral and follow-up will be provided as necessary.

### **Managing emotional distress or discomfort**

The researcher will agree with YP on a pause button or signal if someone wants to take a break at any point of the activity. It is an assurance to the participants that the discussion may be paused for their well-being while also ensuring that no one feels they are being shut down. It also offers the potential to return to the discussion later when the feelings of discomfort have abated.

A calm box will be made available in all activities that young people may fiddle with and comfort them during sensitive discussions.

Follow-up support and a referral process to nurse, social worker, teacher, or helpline will be prepared and communicated to offer support to young people in case of situations of anxiety or distress during the project activities. The researcher will conduct individual check-ups with young people to ask how they are feeling about the project, especially after discussion sensitive topics.

## **Managing confidentiality within the bounds of child protection legislation**

YP will be assured by the researcher that unless they disclose something that involves a serious concern of harm for them or another individual, then their contributions will not be disclosed to other individuals. Local child protection procedures will be followed if there are significant concerns about an individual's well-being. Child protection issues will be responded to in line with the children protection framework of partner youth organisations. The researcher will advocate that the young person should be kept informed and involved in the decision-making processes that follow.

Arrangements will be in place which set out clearly the processes and the principles for sharing information between each other.

No professional should assume that someone else will pass on information which they think may be critical to keeping a child safe. If a professional has concerns about a child's welfare and believes they are suffering or likely to suffer harm, then they should share the information with local authority children's social care.

In group activities, participants will be supported to consider the limits that the researcher can guarantee confidentiality and how this may affect the participant's decision of the information to share in the specific setting.

## **Managing confidentiality and anonymity of data**

Regarding confidentiality in group settings, the Chatham House rules will be explained to young people. This means that they can talk to other people outside the group about what was said but they cannot reveal the name nor any identifiable information about the person who said it.

All data will be stored under the GDPR and Data Protection Act (2018). Young people have the right to withdraw the use of their data at any point. However, it may not be possible to remove the advice and suggestions they have contributed to the group up to that point. The researchers will work closely with the young person if there is

something specific that they wish to be excluded from the group narrative that is easily identified by Janelle (the principal researcher).

