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# Teachers' responses to harmful sexual behaviour in primary school – findings from a digital survey among primary school teachers

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## ABSTRACT

Existing research points to a gap in knowledge regarding what teachers in primary schools know about harmful sexual behaviour, and about how they react and deal with this behaviour in the school setting. This article sets out to better understand this gap based on results from a digital survey carried out among teachers in primary schools in South-Eastern Norway. Data were collected from 15 primary schools with a total of 159 respondents from a selection of 376 teachers, which makes up a response rate of 42.3%. Findings from the survey show that teachers report lack of knowledge about children who display problematic and harmful sexual behaviour, and that they struggle to find an appropriate response towards the behaviour when observed in school. The article identifies both individual and systemic responses in schools that may impede early intervention towards harmful sexual behaviour.

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## KEYWORDS

Teachers' understanding and responses; problematic and harmful sexual behaviour; children and adolescents; Norway

## 1. Introduction

This article presents findings from a survey conducted among primary school teachers in South-Eastern Norway. The data collected identifies teachers' self-reported level of knowledge of harmful sexual behaviour (HSB), which agencies they perceive are relevant to cooperate with, and their responses to children who display HSB. The results are discussed against existing research and knowledge about children who display HSB with focus on early intervention and a whole-school approach to safeguarding.

The presented study contains some radical implications for teachers' perceived role and responsibility in preventing HSB, where a potential paradigm shift is introduced through the transformative approach to education. Teachers have the opportunity to shape children's development and future immensely, as well as being able to protect them from harm and trauma. Consequently, as a way forward this article points to certain theoretical approaches and competencies that teachers can apply in the classroom in order to transform the HSB prevention and intervention efforts in schools.

### 1.1. Definitions

There is an ongoing international debate about definitions relating to children and young people who present with sexual behaviours that cause concern to or harm others. Ey and McInnes (2018, p. 102) point to that "there is no established universal definition of what constitutes problematic sexual behavior in children". Many authors argue that labels such as "juvenile offender" or "juvenile

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perpetrator” increase stigma and prejudice against an already vulnerable group (Allerdyce & Yates, 2018; Hackett, 2014). An alternative definition that has gained momentum in the UK in recent years is “Children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour”, abbreviated to HSB.<sup>1</sup> The rationale being that when describing children at an early developmental stage, often under the age of criminal responsibility, the focus should be on the behaviour and not the person (Hackett, 2014). The rationale harmonises with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, in that it aims at protecting the human dignity of a vulnerable group.

Hackett et al. (2016, p.12) define HSB as: “Sexual behaviours of children and young people under the age of 18 years old that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful toward self or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult (derived from Hackett, 2014)”. As both abusive and problematic sexual behaviours are developmentally inappropriate and may cause developmental damage, a useful umbrella term is “harmful sexual behaviours” (Hackett, 2014, p. 17). HSB often includes elements of coercion, manipulation, threats or violence (as cited in Hackett’s (2010) continuum of sexual behaviours).

The leading academic and clinical expertise in Norway (such as V27, Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies [NKVTS] and Regional Centres on Violence, Traumatic Stress and Suicide Prevention [RVTS] among others) have advocated for the HSB terminology in Norwegian [*Barn og unge med problematisk og skadelig seksuell atferd* – translated “Children and young people with problematic and harmful sexual behaviour”], and it is now the preferred term in the academic literature in Norway. The term is abbreviated SSA [HSB], and covers the range of children and young people from the age group 0 to 18 years of age.

The HSB literature often refers to the category “children who display HSB” when describing prepubescent children typically in primary school (Hackett, 2014). There is usually a line drawn between the age of 12 and 13 years that marks the shift to adolescence (Hackett, 2014; Ingnes & Kleive, 2011), although transition into puberty varies greatly among children worldwide. This study draws mostly upon the literature on prepubescent children, and therefore applies the definition “children who display HSB”.

## 1.2. The Norwegian context

Norway is a democratic country in Scandinavia with a population of around 5,3 million with a high degree of gender equality, and maintains an extensive welfare model that provides universal health care and free education. The Norwegian government has ratified the UN Convention of the Child, and the principle of “the best interest of the child” is guiding all government’s decisions regarding children in the society. Children in Norway usually attend primary school from the age of 5 to 13 years.

The Norwegian education system, and primary schools in particular, have a clear and defined policy of offering education for all children. Education laws are deeply rooted within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and are aimed at protecting children’s human and participatory rights, as well as their well-being. Teachers’ mandate with regards to safeguarding children has been underlined by the Norwegian government’s plan for increased efforts towards fighting violence and abuse (Barne- og Likestillingsdepartementet, 2017).

In Norway, the age of criminal responsibility is 15 years, the age of consent to sexual activity is 16 years, and the age of being fully recognised as an adult is 18 years. This means that the children whom this article is meant to cover, are under all of the following thresholds for consent and responsibilities in Norway. As designated caretakers by the state, Norwegian primary school teachers are in other words crucial protectors of children’s well-being. They are also key stakeholders in keeping children safe from harm, even when it is another child who is doing harm.

## 1.3 Scope of the problem

Children and youth who display HSB make up a large portion of the population who sexually assault children in sexual abuse statistics. Numbers vary, but approximately 30–50% of all sexual abuse

against children are committed by other children or adolescents, and numbers are rising (Långström, 2000; Barbaree & Marshall, 2006; Innes & Kleive, 2011; The National Criminal Investigation Service in Norway Kripas, 2017). According to two recent reports launched by The Norwegian Ombudsman for Children (2018a; 2018b) violence, sexual violation and sexual abuse against children and young people are both an underestimated, as well as an increasing, societal problem in Norway.

HSB literature on prepubescent children often stresses the importance of context when exploring presentation of HSB at a young age (Larsson & Svedin, 2002; Ryan et al., 1988). Apart from the home, children 5–13 years spend most of their days in schools. Schools are important contexts when HSB is presenting at a young age, but have often been neglected in HSB research and literature (Carson & AIM, 2017). Based on the statistics above, it is very likely that professionals who are working with children encounter children who display HSB. Due to the amount of time teachers in primary schools spend with children every day, they have a particularly high probability of encountering such behaviour.

Teachers have a unique position in the classroom with regards to teaching and safeguarding, and schools are therefore recognised as crucial arenas in primary prevention of HSB (Charnaud & Turner, 2015, p. 1345; Hackett et al., 2016, p. 24). Further, Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies [NKVTS] addressed the importance of sex education in schools in a report published in 2017. The report stresses the need for systematic teaching of sexual health on all levels of the education system as a measure to prevent sexual abuse and HSB among children (Askeland et al., 2017). Such recommendations concur with the broader international debate on teachers' and schools' role in prevention of sexual abuse (Carmody, 2009; Flood et al., 2009; Goldschmidt-Gjerløw, 2019; Letourneau et al., 2017; McKibbin et al., 2016; Sprott et al., 2005).

Although teachers' role in prevention is widely recognised, existing empirical research about teachers' understanding and responses to HSB in primary schools reveal some challenges. Teachers across the globe report a lack of training and competence in identifying healthy, problematic and harmful sexual behaviour in children and young people. Cooperation with other agencies in HSB cases vary greatly, and teachers report a general insecurity about procedures and roles when encountering HSB among pupils (Charnaud & Turner, 2015; Ey et al., 2017; Ey & McInnes, 2018; Firmin, 2019; Lloyd, 2019; McInnes & Ey, 2019; Vorland et al., 2018). Further, international expertise points to a void of research into teachers' and school responses towards HSB (Carson, 2006; Charnaud & Turner, 2015; Lloyd, 2019; Ey & McInnes, 2018; Firmin, 2019; Hackett & Taylor, 2008).

Little is known about primary school teachers' understanding and responses towards HSB in the Norwegian context, and Vorland et al.'s (2018) report "Interdisciplinary cooperation around children and adolescents with problematic or harmful sexual behaviour" is so far the only official study in Norway that has explored the issue from teachers' viewpoint. Consequently, this article seeks to be a contribution to fill the international void by exploring teachers' responses from a Norwegian perspective, and to discover whether teachers self-reported experiences concur with, or differ from, the few international studies carried out in this area.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Epistemological framework

The epistemological foundation of the survey is the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010). The aim of a transformative approach in research is to bring about positive social change, and the paradigm is deeply rooted within the perspective of human rights and social justice. Education is based on the same ideology, as Kemmis et al. (2014) state that education is in its very nature socially bound, and that it has a double purpose in "developing individual students and, simultaneously, developing a world worth living in" (p. 205). Implicit in this statement is that education strives to transform the world to a better place through the individual student as well as through the collective practice taking place in schools. Thus, the theoretical underpinnings of this research stem from Kemmis et al.'s (2014) ideas of education as intersubjective spaces for change. Kemmis et al. (2014) define

school sites as spaces where various factors influence each other interdependently. Teachers are essential stakeholders in the school sites because they are responsible for actual execution of any transformation in their respective intersubjective spaces. Hence, Giroux's (2010) and Freire's (1970) perspectives on teachers' unique position in the classroom, and their ability to create social change, are applied to illustrate the important role of teachers.

## 2.2. Participants

The survey was conducted from January to July 2019, among teachers in 15 primary schools in the South-Eastern part of Norway. Three hundred and seventy-six teachers received the survey altogether, and a total of 159 teachers ( $n = 159$ ) responded, making the response rate at 42.3%. The largest group (34.8%,  $n = 55$ ) of the respondents were in the 40–49 years age group, and 77.8% ( $n = 123$ ) of the respondents were women. 79.6% ( $n = 125$ ) of the respondents are primary school teachers by education.

## 2.3. Procedure

The survey was distributed to the principals in each school. The principals forwarded the mail containing information about the project, as well as the link to the survey, to their respective teachers. The database for designing and conducting the online survey used is called "Nettskjema" and belongs to the University of Oslo. There was no log connected to the link, which means that anyone who received the mail could answer by clicking the link.

## 2.4. Measures

The survey was structured into 4 parts with 26 questions altogether. The 4 parts consisted of the following sections: (1) demographic questions, (2) questions about HSB experiences and responses, (3) school's practice and policy regarding HSB, and (4) questions about interdisciplinary cooperation. The demographic section covered age, gender, level of education and how many years of professional practice. The second section contained questions about teachers' experience with, training in, and responses to children who display HSB. Section three contained questions about whether the school has a common practice and policy in addressing challenging behaviour. The last section contained questions about interdisciplinary cooperation, and which agencies teachers have contact with and access to. The survey was a mix between open-ended and closed questions, and included a vignette. The purpose of the variations in questions was to acquire teachers' self-reported factual knowledge, as well as to allow for value judgements and attitudes related to the topic. The survey was piloted to 10 individuals with diverse, but relevant, backgrounds and professions, and was revised upon their feedback.

## 2.5. Data analysis

The survey was a hybrid between closed and open-ended questions. A thematic analysis was used when analysing data that came from the open-ended questions (as can be seen in Table 6). For the closed questions a statistical analysis was applied in order to identify trends and patterns in teachers' understandings and responses towards HSB.

## 2.6. Ethical considerations

There are several ethical considerations regarding the process of the survey that could have impacted the results and the response rate. The mail the informants received was the only information they had about the project before answering the survey. The link itself proved difficult to find because it came underneath a long paragraph of information about the project. More information concerning the

request for informants and consent was included in the mail, but only as an attachment. As described by Buchanan and Hvizdak (2009), informed consent in web designed surveys is passive in nature, and was in this survey just implied when participants completed the forms.

Several mails were sent to principals regarding a reminder to the teachers to answer the survey. Two weeks after the initial mail was sent out, another mail was sent with an update of numbers of respondents and a reminder to the teachers that survey was still open. Due to a continuing low response rate, I approached the schools directly requesting to present the background for the survey and ask teachers to participate in it. 14 out of 15 schools accepted the request and received a presentation. There was a visible increase in response rate after the presentations were carried out. However, even after physical presentations in schools the response rate of the survey remained notably low. This phenomenon has been reported by Börkan (2010) who points to a general low response rate in internet studies. Likewise, studies about teachers' understanding and responses toward children who display HSB report challenges in recruiting informants, and that it may have to do with the sensitivity of the topic (Charnaud & Turner, 2015; Ey et al., 2017; Ey & McInnes, 2018; Larsson & Svedin, 2002).

The survey has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

## 2.7. Limitations

An obvious limitation of the study is that it is a small scale survey from one geographical area within Norway, and the results cannot be considered representative of teachers' views in Norway. Caution should be taken in the analysis of results and the implications for practice. Where possible, I have viewed the results against existing international research in order to triangulate the validity of the results (Creswell, 2003, 2014).

There might be a possibility that teachers answered the survey without reading the attachment that was enclosed in the mail containing information about the study, as well as the definition of harmful sexual behaviour. Hence, that could contribute to the participants' lack of understanding of the concept and the reported confusion.

Regarding the actual rigour of the survey, there are some important remarks to be made. The survey intends to function as a starting point for discussion, rather than to claim to subscribe entirely to a quantitative procedure. The survey is for example not statistically proof, as many of the respondents have omitted to answer many of the questions, and quantitative techniques regarding data analysis have not been applied in full (as illustrated in Table 2). However, the survey may function as one snapshot of some teachers' self-reported knowledge and attitudes regarding HSB, which can be problematised and discussed in light of other existing research, as is the aim of this article.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Teachers' self-reported level of knowledge of HSB

#### 3.1.1. Self-reported knowledge, information and training about HSB

Table 1.

**Table 1.** Self reported knowledge, information and training about HSB.

Questions	Yes	No	I don't know	No response
Have you received any knowledge about the topic of children who display HSB?	21.5% (n = 34)	72.8% (n = 115)	5.7% (n = 9)	1.59% (n = 1)
Have you ever in your professional career received any information or training about children who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour?	26.8% (n = 41)	66% (n = 101)	7.2% (n = 11)	3.8% (n = 6)
Have you received, in the course of your education, any information or training about children who display problematic or harmful sexual behaviour?	18.5% (n = 29)	73.9% (n = 116)	7.6% (n = 12)	1.3% (n = 2)

**Table 2.** Self reported encounters with children who display HSB.

Questions	Yes	No	I don't know	No response
Have you yourself experienced an encounter with a child who displayed HSB?	23.9% ( <i>n</i> = 38)	60.4% ( <i>n</i> = 96)	15.7% ( <i>n</i> = 25)	0
If yes, were you the one who defined the behaviour as harmful?	40.4% ( <i>n</i> = 21)	42.3% ( <i>n</i> = 22)	17.3% ( <i>n</i> = 9)	?

**Table 3.** Self reported cooperation with other agencies.

Questions	Yes	No	I don't know	No response
Do you cooperate with other agencies outside school with regards to challenging behaviours among pupils?	70.1% ( <i>n</i> = 110)	26.8% ( <i>n</i> = 42)	3.2% ( <i>n</i> = 5)	1.3% ( <i>n</i> = 2)
Do you have frequent opportunities to discuss your concerns regarding pupils?	83.4% ( <i>n</i> = 131)	14.6% ( <i>n</i> = 23)	1.9% ( <i>n</i> = 3)	1.3% ( <i>n</i> = 2)

### 3.1.2. Self-reported encounters with children who display HSB

Table 2.

## 3.2. Agencies teachers perceive are relevant to cooperate with when facing children who display HSB

### 3.2.1. Self-reported cooperation with other agencies

Table 3.

### 3.2.2. Self-reported perceptions of other agencies

Table 4.

What do you think of interagency cooperation between schools and other agencies?

The question received 125 responses, where 119 of the responses were positive and included comments such as "important, useful, good, valuable and necessary". 6 of the answers had a more negative connotation, where two responses stated that the interagency cooperation "could have been better". Three responses stated that there should be more interagency cooperation and openness between agencies because the cooperation was lacking and information flow varied a great deal. One response stood out by stating that "I don't have time for interagency cooperation. All my planning time is used for planning lessons."

**No response:** 21.4% (*n* = 34)

**Table 4.** Self reported perceptions of other agencies.

Which agencies would you consider to be relevant to cooperate with in cases where a sexual abuse against a child has been disclosed, and the sexual abuse has been committed by another child?		
Multiple choice answers	Number	Percent
Child Welfare service <sup>2</sup>	141	88.7
School nurse	140	88.1
Resource centre for victims of sexual abuse <sup>3</sup>	111	69.8
Children's House (Barnehus) <sup>4</sup>	80	50.3
Police	76	47.8
Children and young people's psychiatric out-patient clinic (BUP)	73	45.9
Pedagogical Psychological Services (PPT)	37	23.3
Other	4	2.5



**Table 5.** Self reported responses when encountering HSB.

What do you do in your school if you encounter a child who displays HSB?		
Multiple choice answers:	Number	Percent
Contact the principal	133	83.6
Contact the school nurse	114	71.7
Contact a colleague	62	39
Contact the Child Welfare Service	35	22
Contact the parents	16	10.1
Contact the police	4	2.5
I don't know	4	2.5
Do nothing	0	0

### 3.3. Teachers' responses to HSB

#### 3.3.1. Self-reported responses when encountering HSB

Table 5.

#### 3.3.2. Reported school procedures regarding sexual abuse against children committed by other children

Tables 6 and 7.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Teachers' self-reported level of knowledge of HSB

As can be seen in Table 1, an overwhelming majority of teachers respond that they have not received any knowledge, information or training about HSB, neither in general (72.8%), in their career (66%) nor in their education (73.9%). It is also interesting to note the number of teachers who responded "I don't know". 5.7% ( $n = 9$ ) of the teachers do not know whether they have received any knowledge about HSB in general, and 7.2% ( $n = 11$ ) do not know if they have received information or training about HSB in their career, and another 7.6% ( $n = 12$ ) do not know if they have received any information or training about HSB in their education. The high number of teachers answering "I don't know" might indicate an insecurity among teachers about what HSB is, and what constitutes this phenomenon. These findings concur with Ey et al.'s (2017) study "Educators' understanding of young children's typical and problematic sexual behaviour and their training in this area." where Australian teachers report that they have received little training in HSB, and have limited knowledge on the topic.

A similar picture can be seen in the answers to the question about personal experience with HSB in Table 2. 60.4% ( $n = 96$ ) of the teachers report that they have not encountered HSB. A total of 15.7% ( $n = 25$ ) teachers reported that they don't know whether they have encountered children who display HSB, which might be another indication that teachers do not know what the signs of HSB are. There is also a logical error in the reporting to this question: 38 teachers report that they have encountered HSB. Nevertheless, when asked to specify whether they were the ones to define the behaviour as harmful in the follow-up question, 52 teachers reply in total.

Altogether, this perceived confusion about what constitutes HSB in children and adolescents concurs with findings in other studies about teachers' lack of competence in differentiating between children's normal, problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. Ey and McInnes (2018)

**Table 6.** Reported school procedures regarding sexual abuse against children committed by other children.

Question	Yes	No	I don't know	No response
Does your school have procedures that are implemented if a sexual abuse against a child is discovered, and the abuse has been committed by another child?	30.2% ( $n = 48$ )	10.7% ( $n = 17$ )	59.1% ( $n = 94$ )	0



**Table 7.** Specification of school procedures regarding sexual abuse against children committed by other children.

If yes, specify the procedures:	
38 free text answers:	Emerging themes:
"I follow the guidelines from the municipality"	Follow procedures/municipality guidelines (n = 3)
"We have a file where all the routines are, but I do not remember them right now"	
"I follow the municipality's guidelines"	
"Contact the principal, and then he has a procedure to follow"	Contact the principal/administration of the school (n = 18)
"I report it to the principal"	
"I report it to the administration"	
"Report it to the administration, and follow procedures after that"	
"Contact the principal immediately. He has procedures for taking the case further"	
"Teachers contact the principal if they get a suspicion or knowledge about sexual abuse"	
"I contact the administration, who then contact the Child Welfare Service or other agencies"	
"The administration handles this. We report it I don't know the details of the procedures but I know they pursue it"	
"The principal and the administration take over and follow procedures"	
"Report to the administration"	
"I alert the principal. The principal has procedures for further follow up and investigation of the case"	
"Contact the principal, who further contacts the Child Welfare Service"	
"Contact my superiors, who then act on the information"	
"Contact our nearest leader. Follow further plan about what we should do in given order"	
"Contact the principal!"	
"We address the matter for the principal, who takes the case to the Child Welfare Service and the police"	
"The teacher alerts the principal at once, and principal and the administration starts with the procedure immediately"	
"I am not quite sure, but the administration contacts the Child Welfare Service, and further case procedures I do not know"	
"I contact the school nurse and the assistant principal"	
"Contact the administration and school nurse, and maybe pursue the case further after initial investigations"	
"Principal, school nurse, the Child Welfare Service"	
"That you contact the administration, as well as the Child Welfare Service"	
"Discuss it with the administration and contact the Child Welfare Service"	
"Contact the principal – contact the Child Welfare Service – contact the police – contact the Children's House"	
"Contact the principal and Child Welfare Service"	Contact other agencies (n = 4)
"Contact the school nurse, the Child Welfare Service, the police"	
"That the Child Welfare Service and the Incest centre are contacted"	
"Contact the Child Welfare Service"	Not sure what the procedures are (n = 6)
"Police, The Child Welfare Service are contacted, as well as the sexual abuse team in the municipality, Incest centre"	
"I know there is a plan, but I don't know what it contains"	
"I do not know because I have not been in such cases, but I know that the school has had those incidents"	
"I am unsure of the details, but I am sure that they have"	
"I do not have any knowledge of it"	
"I know where the file is and the routines are there, but I do not have them in my head"	
"Unsure"	

found that there are clear gaps in Australian teachers' understanding of typical sexual behaviour. Vorland et al. (2018) report a similar picture, where Norwegian teachers state that there is a lack of knowledge about both healthy, problematic and harmful sexual behaviour in school, and that this often leads to a lack of intervention. According to Lloyd's (2019) study in England staff in schools are often not aware of interventions and responses to HSB and therefore do not always respond appropriately. Hence, in some of the interventions, victim-blaming occur due to lack of competence.

The high percentage of teachers reporting that they have either not encountered HSB, or that they do not know, is quite alarming when viewed against the report from the Norwegian Ombudsman from 2018 entitled: “Everyone knows someone who has experienced it – conversations with youth about sexual violations”. As the title reveals, Norwegian youth report that this is an overwhelming phenomenon happening to almost everyone, and that they recognise that schools are important arenas which can intervene towards sexual violations. However, the youth report that responses towards problematic and harmful sexual behaviour vary greatly between schools, and it is therefore emphasised in the report that teachers’ competence about sexual violations must be increased so they can detect and intervene towards problematic and harmful sexual behaviour between children and adolescents (2018a, pp. 38–39). A concrete tool that has been launched to aid teachers and other professionals to differentiate between healthy, problematic and harmful sexual behaviour is various versions of “the Traffic Light tool” (Brook, 2013; True, 2015). The Traffic Light is also available in Norwegian (Hegge, 2016).

#### ***4.2. Agencies teachers perceive are relevant to cooperate with when facing children who display HSB***

As can be seen in Table 3, the majority of teachers (70.1%) report that they cooperate with outside agencies with regards to challenging behaviours among pupils, and that 83.4% of the teachers report that they have frequent opportunities to discuss their concerns regarding pupils. It is also important to recognise that most of the teachers are positive towards interagency cooperation with other agencies. These findings are encouraging with regards to interdisciplinary cooperation in HSB cases. Successful interventions in HSB cases depend greatly on various agencies working closely together with schools (Carson, 2006). Being that teachers inhabit such a crucial role in safeguarding children under the age of criminal responsibility it is also encouraging to note from Table 4 that 88.7% of the teachers consider the Child Welfare Service to be relevant to cooperate within cases where a sexual abuse has been committed by another child. Both Askeland et al. (2017) and Vorland et al. (2018) (as well as V27 and the RVTs centres) recommend that the Child Welfare Service should be the coordinating agency in HSB cases. Established routines of contacting the Child Welfare Services in HSB cases are essential for early intervention and appropriate assistance for the child in question.

#### ***4.3. Teachers’ responses to HSB***

The findings on teachers’ responses indicate a reported misperception about other agencies’ roles, and who to contact when teachers observe children who display HSB. An example of this mismatch is that the majority of teachers answer that they would contact principal (83.6%,  $n = 133$ ), the school nurse (71.7%,  $n = 114$ ) or a colleague (39%,  $n = 62$ ) if they encounter a child who displays HSB, as can be seen in Table 5. However, when asked if the school has procedures on a more systemic level when a sexual abuse against a child has been discovered, and the sexual abuse is committed by another child, the results in Table 6 show that a majority of teachers do not know if their schools have procedures. There is in fact an overwhelming percentage of 59.1% of the teachers ( $n = 94$ ) who report that they do not know whether their schools have procedures. Even some of teachers who first responded “yes” to the question about school procedures, end up stating “I don’t know” when asked to specify the procedure (see Table 7).

Another finding of significance is that the school nurse is one of the resources that are most frequently listed as a go-to by teachers if they encounter a child who displays HSB. This finding concurs with data in Vorland et al.’s (2018) study. However, a critical remark to make about the role of the school nurse is that of the top three resources to contact when discovering HSB (principal, school nurse, colleague) the school nurse is the only person who represents an outside agency. The school nurse is in other words the only contact point with outside agencies, making the school nurse a decisive factor in interagency cooperation. Ultimately, this list of prioritised persons to

contact means that it is up to the judgement of the respective administration in each school whether they contact other agencies outside the school or not. Referrals from schools in HSB cases may in other words be entirely dependent on the competence of the respective administration in each school, and that of the school nurse. These vulnerable structures have been identified in several studies, where Charnaud & Turner suggest “co-ordinated strategies from social service in supporting teachers” (2015, p. 1355) should be established in order to enable multiagency safeguarding approach. Vorland et al. (2018, p. 16) also address the need for “well-defined guidelines on how the various services should relate to children and young people with HSB”.

Altogether, these findings indicate that the majority of teachers are not certain whether their schools have systemic procedures for sexual abuse against children committed by children, or how they as individuals should respond to these situations. The mismatch in the answers can be accredited to different interpretations of the question about what a procedure actually is, but it can also point to a general confusion about the school’s systemic responses to HSB. The discrepancy between the individual teacher response, as opposed to the perceived whole school procedure and approach, might therefore indicate that the responses to HSB occurring in schools might be dependent on the individual teacher’s perception of the behaviour, and may therefore end up relying solely on teachers’ judgements since the systemic response of the school is not clearly communicated. Although not being the school’s intention, a lack of systemic whole-school response in such cases may end up outsourcing the entire responsibility for detection and intervention of HSB on the individual teacher without having a support system in place. According to McInnes and Ey’s (2019) study Australian teachers reported distress, emotional exhaustion and stress in dealing with children with HSB, and that stress was higher where they felt unsupported by site leadership. Lloyd (2019) addresses the challenges of individualised responses in staff, and argues that the actual social norm creation process among staff in schools often ends up enabling HSB. Firmin (2017) therefore advocates for a more systemic response towards the prevention of HSB. Firmin (2017) argues that the traditional whole-school approach towards prevention lacks a focus on the actual relationships between HSB and the environments the behaviours occur in. School environments must be viewed in connection with the larger community in order to achieve what she has coined “Contextual Safeguarding” of all children in that community. Lloyd (2019, p. 4) further claims that instead of focusing on individualised responses to each HSB incidents in schools, it is important to look at factors in the schools and across schools with an emphasis on context and the interplay between different contexts. The school response should thus be a part of a broader multi-agency response. Both Firmin (2017) and Lloyd (2019) emphasise that national policy frameworks on systemic responses, such as contextual safeguarding, is vital for a successful implementation. Firmin and Lloyd’s ideas of a contextual safeguarding network resemble Kemmis et al.’s (2014) perspective on the holistic approach to education. According to Kemmis et al. (2014) practices in education must be understood through the intrinsic role the education system has to the society. Practices can either enable or constraint transformations in education as well as society. By strengthening the support network around teachers through clear structures and interdisciplinary cooperation, teachers can be equipped to inhabit a unique position to influence children’s attitudes, development and well-being, as described by Giroux (2010).

Clearer roles and mandates in multi-agency responses have also been addressed on a more general level by the Norwegian Ombudsman (2018b), in the report “Had we gotten help earlier, everything would have been different – The Ombudsman’s report on children who have been exposed to violence or abuse”. Youth who had experienced violence and abuse were interviewed about their experiences of multi-agency responses, and many identified lack of coordination between the agencies as one of the major obstacles to receiving proper intervention and assistance. Some of the youth who were interviewed described their meeting with the various agencies as a system that ended up making their situation worse (Norwegian Ombudsman 2018b, p. 20). The Change Factory in Norway, which is comprised of young people with experiences from the Welfare services (referred to as “experts”), argues that the system listens too little to young

people's voices when trying to help them. The experts also state that most children and young who experience violence and abuse do not tell others because they do not feel safe. They claim that professionals need more training in safeguarding and taking care of children to gain children's trust ([www.forandringsfabrikken.no](http://www.forandringsfabrikken.no)). In this perspective, the teacher's role is decisive in children's development and learning within the education system, and this position comes with a great ethical responsibility and requires that teachers are equipped with an understanding of which conditions that enhance or prohibit children's development and learning (Freire, 1970). Translated into practice for teachers, this means that if a child starts revealing concerning information which needs to be acted upon, a teacher must first create a setting that feels safe for the child. After having established such an environment, supportive communication and active listening are important techniques for the teachers in order to promote open communication with the child. According to Freire (1970) these are also the principles which foster empowering and authentic dialogue. Further, the teacher must ensure that the child is fully informed about involving other agencies, and that the child's participatory rights are honoured when deciding the next steps. Collaborating with the child in finding solutions is underlined by the Change Factory as the most significant factor for a successful intervention.

#### **4.4. Identified challenges and implications for practice and future research**

The challenges related to lack of information, knowledge and training that teachers report in the survey concur with reported challenges from teachers worldwide (Charnaud & Turner, 2015; Lloyd, 2019; McInnes & Ey, 2019; Vorland et al., 2018), and have great implications for practice in schools. It is vital for an actual prevention of sexual abuse that teachers themselves feel capable of detecting and intervening towards problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. However, teachers in the survey and other studies report that they do not feel capable, and have not been equipped with the appropriate training they need to inhabit such a role. Hence, there is an urgent need for building competence among teachers. Additionally, teachers report confusion around various agencies roles' in HSB cases, which stresses the need for a more systemic top-down structure of prevention in schools. The results from the survey support the growing body of research which stresses the importance of competence building for teachers, *and* a whole school and community approach in safeguarding children against sexual abuse and HSB (Allnock & Atkinson, 2019; Firmin, 2019; Hackett & Taylor, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014; Lloyd, 2019; McElearney et al., 2019; McInnes & Ey, 2019; Pedersen et al., 2017; Sprott et al., 2005). As shown from the teachers' responses in the survey, there is a need for a more systemic response from the individual schools in question. However, as reported by the youth in the Ombudsman's reports, school responses do vary greatly (2018a), as do the multi-agency responses (2018b). On a macro level, there is an emerging necessity for clearer direction from the central governing bodies when it comes to ensuring procedures and roles in safeguarding children. As noted by Firmin (2017) and Lloyd (2019) HSB must be addressed both within the school, as well as in the broader context in the community through a multi-agency response. At the Contextual Safeguarding website (<https://csnetwork.org.uk/>) there is a programme called "Beyond Referrals" which offers schools a multi-agency toolkit for a more holistic approach to safeguarding. Further, by developing national standardised guidelines for schools, a more systemic prevention of sexual abuse among children in schools throughout the country could be secured (Firmin, 2019; Vorland et al., 2018).

The study should be replicated at a larger scale with more scientific rigour in order to further document teachers' understandings and responses towards HSB, and contribute to the building of an international body of research in the field.

### **5. Concluding thoughts**

Research shows that teachers can be key stakeholders in acting on, and preventing, sexual violation and abuse among children and adolescents in schools by utilising their unique position in the

classroom. However, as seen both in the survey presented and in other studies, teachers report lack of information and training, and that they find it difficult to differentiate between healthy, problematic and harmful sexual behaviour. Further, they report a confusion about other agencies' roles and mandates in HSB cases, which leaves teachers in a vulnerable position with regards to referring these cases to outside agencies, and ultimately safeguarding children in their schools. A more systemic response from both the schools and communities in HSB cases could ensure better safeguarding and a more proactive prevention approach. Moreover, by creating national guidelines for schools in HSB cases, the approach taken by the individual school may not tend to vary to the degree which it is today. Streamlining procedures in HSB cases nationally would at the end of the day strengthen teachers' competence and the ability to cooperate with outside agencies.

## Notes

1. in American literature (Bonner et al., 1999; National Center on the Sexual Behavior of Youth (NCSBY); Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA), Ontario Centre of Excellence for Child and Youth Mental Health (2014) and Australian literature (O'Brien, 2008; Briggs, 2014; Blomfield, 2018)) the terms "problem sexual behaviour" and "sexual problem behaviour" are more frequently used.
2. "The Child Welfare Service's task is to provide children, adolescents and families with help and support when there is a difficult situation in the home or a child is in need of help from the Child Welfare Service for other reasons (for example, behavioural problems or problems connected with drugs or alcohol)" ([https://bibliotek.bufdir.no/BUF/101/Barnevernet\\_Brosjyre\\_ENGELSK.pdf](https://bibliotek.bufdir.no/BUF/101/Barnevernet_Brosjyre_ENGELSK.pdf)).
3. The Resource centre for victims of sexual abuse is a Norwegian private charity foundation which offers assistance to survivors of sexual abuse, and children and adolescents displaying HSB. The centre also carries out educational programmes in kindergartens and primary schools.
4. The various National Children's Houses are a part of the respective police districts, and offer assistance to children and young people who have been sexually abused where the case has been reported. Some Children Houses also offer treatment in HSB cases. <https://www.statensbarnehus.no/>.

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