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journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/chiabunegPreventing harmful sexual behavior in primary schools: Barriers and solutions[☆]Kjersti Draugedalen^{a,*}, Helle Kleive^b, Øystein Grov^c^a Institute for Culture, Religion and Social Science, University of South-Eastern Norway, Norway^b Resource Unit V27, Betanien Hospital, Norway^c Children and Youth Psychiatry, Resource Unit V27, Betanien Hospital, Norway

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ABSTRACT

Background: Schools are recognized as crucial stakeholders in preventing and combating public health problems such as sexual violence and abuse. While prevention efforts have often focused on safeguarding children from adult perpetrators, less attention has been dedicated to safeguarding against harmful sexual behavior (HSB) displayed by children and young people at school. As little is known about teachers' understanding of and responses to HSB in primary school more research is needed.

Objective: The objective of the study is to explore and identify barriers to the prevention of HSB in primary school. Possible solutions to these identified barriers are pursued through a transformative lens.

Participants and setting: Nineteen informants from six schools participated in focus-group interviews at their respective schools in the south-eastern region of Norway in May and June 2019. Fifteen of the informants were primary school teachers, three were school principals and one was a social worker.

Methods: The focus-group interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts and field notes were analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings: Primary school teachers report a lack of HSB competence and limited multi-agency cooperation or coordinated practice. Under these circumstances, the teachers perceive the prevention of HSB as an overwhelming individual professional responsibility.

Conclusions: The study suggests that the following three policy initiatives need to be prioritized:

1. Training in healthy, problematic, and harmful sexual behavior to be made mandatory across all schools and cooperating agencies
2. Statutory interdisciplinary cooperation between schools and relevant agencies to be enhanced
3. National guidelines on the prevention of sexual violence in schools, creating an overarching structure, to be developed and implemented.

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1. Introduction

The rise of sexual harassment, sexual offenses, and sexual abuse against children and young people has led to great concern in societies worldwide, and has been defined by the [World Health Organization \(2017\)](#) as a major public health problem and a grave violation of human rights. Numbers vary, but according to international research, between 30 and 50% of all sexual abuse offenses against children are committed by other children or young people ([Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers \(ATSA\), 2017](#); [Boyd & Bromfield, 2006](#); [Hackett, 2014](#); [Shawler et al., 2019](#)). Indeed, in school contexts, harmful sexual behavior (HSB) has been raised as a global concern since the 1990s ([Allnock & Atkinson, 2019](#)), but prevention efforts are still in their infancy. HSB among children and young people is a major challenge for societies, thus the prevention of sexual abuse should incorporate the perspective of intervening in such behavior ([Ey & McInnes, 2020](#); [Hackett, 2014](#); [Letourneau et al., 2017](#)). A recent study found that many respondents who had displayed HSB as adolescents reported that they did not get the interventions they needed ([Kjellgren, 2019](#)). [Shawler et al.'s \(2019\)](#) study found that caregivers and school personnel were most often the initial identifiers of HSB. These findings raise the question of how HSB can be detected at an earlier stage in order to prevent sexual abuse. While the primary school arena is recognized as important, few studies have explored teachers' perspectives on their safeguarding role. This particular study seeks to fill this knowledge gap by answering the following research questions: *What do teachers experience as barriers in the prevention of HSB in primary schools? What support do they need to overcome such barriers?*

1.1. Harmful sexual behavior

The term harmful sexual behavior (HSB) will be used throughout this paper to describe peer-on-peer sexual abuse. HSB is defined as "sexual behaviors of children and young people under the age of 18 years that are developmentally inappropriate, may be harmful towards oneself or others, or be abusive towards another child, young person or adult" ([Hackett et al., 2016](#), p. 12). This study focuses on HSB presented at primary school level among children aged between five and 13 years.

1.2. Framing the problem

A number of studies from around the world explore primary school teachers' perspectives on HSB, indicating specific challenges in operationalizing prevention work at the school level. For example, [Kaeser et al. \(2000\)](#), found that teachers often failed to report HSB, and stressed the need for training to be able to respond appropriately to the observed behavior. [Davies et al. \(2000\)](#) observed that their informants seemed to act on their own subjective beliefs when responding to sexualized behavior, and highlighted the need for training based on empirical findings. [Larsson and Svedin \(2002\)](#) and, more recently, [Miragoli et al. \(2017\)](#), underlined the importance of context when observing sexual behavior in young children, and pointed out that schools are likely arenas where HSB may be observed. In other recent research, such as an on-line survey of 107 educators in Australia, the responses indicated comparable findings where the teachers did not always classify the observed behavior accurately ([McInnes & Ey, 2019](#)). Teachers reported that they felt insecure when children presented HSB and that they both wanted and needed more training and support in identifying and responding to this problem ([Ey et al., 2017](#)). [Firmin et al. \(2019\)](#) found similar trends in UK secondary schools where teachers' responses to HSB were often individualized. Another study found that students reported experiencing sexual harm in secondary schools, but that teachers were often not aware of how to intervene or respond appropriately ([Lloyd, 2019](#)). Similar patterns reflecting non-intervention by teachers were reported in a South African high school case study ([Makhasane & Mthembu, 2019](#)). A recent study among upper secondary school teachers in Norway ([Goldschmidt-Gjerløw, 2019, 2021](#); [Goldschmidt-Gjerløw & Trysnes, 2020](#)) also concluded that teachers do not intervene adequately to prevent sexual harassment in schools. [Goldschmidt-Gjerløw \(2019\)](#) observed that teachers were often uncomfortable teaching about sexuality and that many avoided the topic altogether. Furthermore, studies have pointed to a lack of guidelines for teachers relating to the prevention of sexual violence ([Charnaud & Turner, 2015](#); [Firmin, 2019](#); [Lloyd, 2019](#); [McInnes & Ey, 2019](#)).

1.3. The current Norwegian context

Recent reports from young people in Norway have revealed a lack of teaching about sexual health in schools, as well as a lack of school responses to sexual harassment and violations ([Barneombudet \[Children's Ombudsperson\], 2018](#); [Bergrav, 2020](#)). For years national expertise in sexual abuse has emphasized the importance of early prevention approaches, such as age-appropriate sex education at school, for addressing HSB among children and young people ([Aasland, 2014, 2020](#); [Søftestad, 2018](#); [Søftestad & Andersen, 2014](#)). Examples given include a wide range of topics related to sexual health, boundaries, consent, and abuse, starting in first grade in primary school, so that children can develop a language to express what they feel and think about the topic, enabling them to talk about both positive and negative experiences. As [Aasland \(2020, 2014\)](#) argues, children are highly competent in such discussions, and are also more likely to report abuse if there is a safe forum where they can talk. There is a wealth of Norwegian literature on HSB pointing out the importance of teaching sexual health as a preventive measure for children with HSB (see [Askeland et al., 2017](#); [Holt et al., 2016](#); [Ingnes & Kleive, 2011](#); [Kruse, 2011](#); [Moen et al., 2016](#); [Vorland et al., 2018](#)). Such literature reflects a growing awareness of HSB, sexual violence, and the need for prevention and intervention at the earliest possible stage in children's lives, and of the need to include primary schools in preventive and interventive efforts. Leading clinical and academic experts, such as the HSB resource team, Betanien V27, have initiated and promoted sensitization efforts; since the turn of the century the Betanien V27 team has pioneered the

development and streamlining of HSB intervention and treatment efforts. Together with the various regional centers dealing with violence, traumatic stress, and suicide prevention (RVTS), and the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies (NKVTS), Betanien V27 is contributing to the development of a more systemic approach to HSB. As a part of this developing approach to HSB, the role of schools in prevention and intervention efforts is now receiving more attention.

This greater awareness can also be detected in the new national curriculum for primary and secondary schools (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2020). The new curriculum has a sharper focus on children's physical and mental health and encompasses the teaching of sexuality as an integrated part of several subjects throughout primary and secondary school. Teachers are now expected to teach students about sexuality, consent, boundaries, and violations from first grade. Consequently, primary school teachers need to be able to identify HSB and to intervene. However, research suggests that teachers are underprepared for this additional safeguarding role. There are, to date, just two studies of teachers' understanding and responses to HSB in Norwegian primary schools (Draugedalen, 2021; Vorland et al., 2018). These studies confirm the findings of international research: teachers' lack of training, and their inability to differentiate between healthy and harmful sexual behavior. The studies also point out variations in and sometimes an absence of school procedures and responses.

1.4. Transformative perspectives on education, the teacher's role and research

The epistemological framework applied in this study is the transformative paradigm (Mertens, 2010). One ultimate purpose of education is to transform the world for the better through collective practices in schools (Kemmis et al., 2014). Education is a means of achieving social change, where teachers are the key stakeholders in implementing such change. They are agents of societal change who are in a position to implement societal transformative practices (Freire, 1974; Giroux, 2010). A teacher can critically address societal problems through dialogue and pupil participation, thereby creating a reciprocal fellowship with students who, in turn, can shape and transform attitudes and behaviors for the best interests of all. An important aspect of research conducted within the transformative paradigm is that the knowledge it produces should lead to positive change in society. Thus, the study is categorized as applied research in education that seeks to improve practices in schools (Palaiologou et al., 2016). As few studies have been conducted in the field, the study is also defined as exploratory research. The research design is informed by the perspectives of *Authentic Inquiry Research (AIR)*, which are rooted in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Context, culture, and community therefore play a significant role in the process of "making meaning" for the individual. AIR builds and elaborates on sociocultural theory in the classroom context, claiming that the teacher and students mutually shape and influence each other in meaning making. According to Alexakos (2015), authentic inquiry research does not only produce knowledge about the actual teacher role, but allows the researcher to explore the dynamics of the classroom. These classroom dynamics are essential for understanding the mechanisms of such collective processes as exclusion, marginalization, and conflict, and the teacher's role in these dynamics. Consequently, practices in school may be transformed and improved by exploring and addressing the factors that influence teachers' perceptions of agency in their safeguarding role.

2. Method

2.1. Research design and sample

The focus-group design (FG) was chosen to explore teachers' experienced barriers and solutions for the prevention of HSB. The FG allows the researcher to observe attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs shared by the group (Then et al., 2014), and creates a space where participants' relations and roles are situated through a hierarchy within the group (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). Six FG interviews were carried out with nineteen informants in six of the schools from the survey sample in May and June 2019. The sample comprised fifteen primary school teachers, one principal, two assistant principals, and one social worker.

2.2. Data collection

The informants were recruited after the researcher (first author) had presented the study in primary schools in the south-eastern region of Norway. The researcher approached the schools with multiple requests before the informants agreed to participate. One FG had six participants, one had four, whereas the other groups only had two or three participants each. The FGs were carried out after class in a quiet area in each of the six schools (one in the library, one in a classroom, four in a designated meeting room), and all lasted around one hour. The informants discussed the findings from the survey (Draugedalen, 2021) that had already been conducted in the area. Throughout the interviews, emphasis was placed on the participants' shared meaning-making process as they explored the previous findings from the survey. A semi-structured interview guide was used, but the informants were invited to freely discuss the findings. Key questions from the interview guide were:

- Why do you think many teachers in the survey stated that they do not observe problematic or harmful sexual behavior among students in school?
- If you experience problematic or harmful sexual behavior in school, how do you approach or deal with this behavior?
- Why do you think teachers in the survey answered that they are unsure of their schools' procedures when a child sexually abuses another child?
- What are the procedures for addressing such a situation in your school?
- Which people or agencies would assist or support you if you were addressing HSB in your school?

- What are the challenges you experience when trying to prevent the occurrence of HSB in school?

2.3. Data analysis

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) evaluative criteria of trustworthiness were applied to the analysis process, which involves establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To ensure credibility, several techniques were used, as described by Cohen and Crabtree (2006). Based on the researcher's *prolonged engagement* in education and frequent visits to schools as a researcher, sufficient time was deemed to have been spent on both understanding and *persistent observing* of the phenomenon of HSB in the school setting. The analyses of the researcher's interpretation of the data by the co-authors provided *analytical triangulation* with the second and third authors offering an outsider perspective. *Member checking* was undertaken by utilizing the previous results in the survey as a starting point for the interview guide. To ensure transferability, *thick descriptions* were extracted from the data to gain a deeper understanding. To establish dependability, an *external audit* was provided through feedback from an outside researcher who examined both the process and the product. Lastly, confirmability was ensured through an *audit trail*, which is a transparent description of the research steps taken and choices made in the process. The interviews were transcribed verbatim in Word right after each focus-group interview in preparation for the data analysis. Thematic analysis (Flick, 2009) was used when coding the data; themes and categories emerging from the findings were developed, starting with open coding where common themes in the transcripts were listed. Thereafter, the transcripts were read and re-read a number of times to regroup the coded themes into more distinct categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The thematic analysis resulted in five categories relating to barriers, as well as one category relating to potential solutions. Relevant excerpts from the various categories were translated into English. Transcription, the initial analysis, and the translations were done by the researcher, while the second and third authors read and commented on the various versions of the full article. As the second and third authors have extensive clinical experience of HSB and have pioneered developments in this field in Norway, they helped connect the findings with existing literature, and address implications for practice and future research. This back-and-forth process between the authors was also important due to the issue of *bias* (Robson, 2002). The researcher has a natural bias because she is a primary school teacher by profession, and an insider/outsider perspective requires a continuous self-reflexive attitude in the research process (Alexakos, 2015). Discussions between the authors throughout the process were crucial to achieving a degree of the objectivity in the conclusions reached here. Reflexivity and openness about the research may hopefully strengthen the study's trustworthiness (Attia & Edge, 2017).

2.4. Ethical reflections

To build trust with the informants the researcher emphasized that the aim of the study was to document *teachers'* experiences with students. To familiarize the informants with the phenomenon the researcher also used her own teaching experiences while underlining that there were no correct answers. The informants participating in this study were guaranteed confidentiality, which has some implications for the presentation of the data. South-eastern Norway is a small geographical area in terms of school districts, which makes the informants easily identifiable. For this reason, the gender and age of the participants will not be revealed to preserve their anonymity. Informed consent has been obtained in writing from all the FG participants. The research project has been approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD).

3. Findings

3.1. Level of awareness and knowledge about HSB

The first emerging theme from the focus groups centered on knowledge about sexual behavior. All of the focus groups confirmed the findings from the researcher's (Draugedalen, 2021) survey that referred to teachers' lack of knowledge and familiarity with the topic. Many of the interviewed teachers admitted they had never heard of the term HSB before, or even thought about children having sexual behavior. In general, many of the informants who participated in the focus groups displayed some degree of shame or embarrassment in feeling that this was something they should know something about, and expressed a genuine need to learn more so they could detect sexual violence and abuse. One informant confirmed this fear of overlooking HSB when talking about one's own work experience, due to a lack of awareness and familiarity with the phenomenon:

"But there has not been anything of a sexual character. I have never experienced that. And it does worry me that when you have worked every day for 10 years then you're scared that you have let something pass that maybe should have been discovered."
(Informant B, focus group 6).

Another teacher expressed that it is difficult to discover sexual abuse and violence among students, and pointed out that the ability to prevent such behavior first presupposes being aware that these things actually happen between children:

"I think that I, at least, do not have enough knowledge to see which of the children in this class might be there. But we do see, and have a gut feeling when we see that the behavior of a child maybe changes, or we feel that there is something there... But how to detect it?" (Informant A, focus group 2).

Most of the informants admitted that they had not learned anything about this topic in their education nor at their place of work. A few informants had learned about sexual abuse in their education, but this information was usually related to so-called special awareness days. Only one informant had participated in advanced studies in sexual abuse.

3.2. The need for specific training related to HSB and the management of HSB

There was a consensus within all the groups that the motivation for participating in this study was that they would gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Some of the groups also requested lectures on sexual behavior for the whole school. One informant additionally reported that the reason for participating in the group was to seek advice to help in a current case. Another informant made an interesting point in addressing the lack of and need for training:

“And I think that if we’re a part of this, we’ll pay more attention to it, because I believe we’re overlooking a lot. (...) Because you find yourself in a situation where you need it, so you learn a little about it, sort of (...) and then you learn it, really, too late, I think.” (Informant D, focus group 2).

Comparatively, it became evident that where teachers themselves had asked for or had been offered more training, tutoring, or information, this was linked to an increasing awareness about what to pay attention to and where. An informant who had received some training expressed the need for school personnel to recognize potential high-risk situations in schools:

“You always have to be present in the informal spaces, it’s when... it’s where they are. In the woods? Yes, exactly. It doesn’t happen in class, in the classroom, no. No, no, it’s not about putting a finger down someone’s trousers in class. No, it happens in the informal spaces outside, right?” (Informant C, focus group 5).

Lack of opportunities for training was addressed by most of the informants, and many teachers had experienced being involved in challenging cases where they felt that their competence was inadequate. However, possibilities to receive training were often viewed as difficult to realize due to teachers’ fully booked schedules. Thus, the informants expressed that they were grateful to have participated in the FG interviews, and that the very setting, where mutual reflections and discussions were shared with colleagues in the group, had created a new collective awareness of the topic and its relevance for teachers.

3.3. Overwhelming role as a teacher

Most informants addressed the lack of time and resources as a constant constraint on their ability to carry out their professional safeguarding role. One informant expressed great concern when describing the importance of having the statutory and earmarked dialogue time with the students, knowing that these moments often function as a catalyst for children in terms of disclosing adversities:

“Through statutory dialogues with students, then we all of a sudden notice that, out of the blue, things that we consider very, very severe just come up. Actually just out of one dialogue, where you’re supposed to find out how they’re doing in school, then very serious matters suddenly arise (...) and that’s what’s really sad, sort of, that you get too little time to have these conversations.” (Informant A, focus group 6).

Teachers across the focus groups addressed a general sense of having too many tasks, and that this often resulted in having to decide which problem was the most acute at any particular point in time. Making such priorities often led to them not having the capacity to follow up all serious cases. A teacher in another focus group talked about similar challenges that grew out of the lack of time for detecting problems due to the increase in the number of children presenting concerning behavior:

“And I think, I actually think a lot about it because I feel that children are becoming more and more restless, and I think there is a lot of... I, now I work in first grade, right? I think there are a lot of children who have problems that I fail to get to the bottom of.” (Informant A, focus group 5).

Some informants suggested that more resources in the form of extra teachers could aid in creating more available time for each teacher, as well as in supporting them in difficult situations while facing potential adversities. These situations could range from when children actually are disclosing serious matters in class, to having a parent-teacher conference where there is a conflict, or being able to utilize a sudden opportunity to talk more with a child who needs it. Altogether, several teachers reported that the lack of time, together with the feeling of having the sole responsibility for their students’ learning and healthy development were experienced by many as an enormous burden:

“To be the sole teacher... that I consider to be an enormous responsibility. I almost get, like, a heart attack sometimes because I have had so many heavy cases, and yes, many who are suffering and struggling... and to be all alone (...), and you go to meetings after meetings, and it’s you alone who has to think about these children. It really gets to you.” (Informant B, focus group 1).

As seen in the above excerpts, many informants reported that they felt alone in dealing with difficult cases, and that the teacher’s role therefore could be experienced as overwhelming. This feeling also extended to the absence of multi-agency work and external support in the school setting when faced with behaviors such as HSB:

“We need environmental therapists and more agencies entering into the everyday practice in school. We, we cannot end up waiting for several months until we get some tips and guidance about how we can... We try all that we can, but it’s pretty heavy here sometimes, really.” (Informant B, focus group 1).

There was also consensus on the importance of the administration supporting their staff, and how this support made the teacher role feel less overwhelming in difficult situations. Many teachers expressed the significance of trust and good relations with their leaders as a precondition for acting on serious matters with children. Additionally, in schools where the administration was perceived to be supportive and present in discussing difficult matters, the teachers also expressed more confidence when it came to contacting an outside agency for assistance.

One observation that was made from the groups where school leaders were present was that these teachers generally tended to

communicate a more united approach or agency in relation to how to deal with HSB in school. An example that may be used to illustrate this tendency further is the fact that all of the above interview excerpts came from groups where no administration members were present.

3.4. An absence of multi-agency work and external support

All the informants had a certain degree of knowledge about various cooperating agencies, and most of them had very positive experiences with advice and tutoring from a range of agencies in cases where concerns had been raised. The school nurse was listed as the resource most frequently used by teachers (both in the survey and confirmed by the focus groups). However, many teachers wanted even more access to this resource. The informants expressed that the school nurse was often in high demand with teachers for spontaneous discussions on concerns, but that the nurse did not always have time for these conversations due to various preplanned tasks in and out of school. Several informants reported that it was difficult to access other agencies in emergency situations when they needed to discuss cases right away. Therefore, some teachers called for statutory cooperation with more external agencies on the school premises due to the severity of behavior that they observed.

At the same time, ambivalence was detected in some teachers' experiences with multi-agency work. A few informants disclosed a latent fear in contacting the child welfare service because they had experienced that it initiated an excessive and irreversible process in a case resulting in a negative outcome for the child in question. Several teachers also addressed the lack of information as a problem when cooperating with agencies such as the child welfare service. The lack of information from other agencies in ongoing cases was especially emphasized by informants who had experiences of HSB cases in their school. These teachers also reported that relevant agencies with whom the schools cooperated did not have the know-how they were seeking. Indeed, one informant who had been involved in two major domestic abuse cases had experienced great difficulties in finding experts who could offer advice to the teachers. According to this informant, the dominant impression from these cases was that many of the involved parties just did not know what to do, or who should do what.

3.5. An absence of clear practical guidance for addressing HSB at the school level

Most of the teachers revealed the absence of a procedure in school if faced with HSB, which confirmed the findings from the survey (Draugedalen, 2021). One teacher expressed this confusion when talking about a current HSB case in first grade where there was a lack of experienced coordination and a plan of measures for the child:

“But the fact is that I’m a bit frustrated because - what happens? (...) Yes, what’s going to happen further? What, who is coordinating and helping the child to...? (...) I can’t be in all places at the same time, and my frustration is maybe (...) related to the fact that that the child does not have an intervention in place.” (Informant A, focus group 5).

Many groups therefore called for more earmarked time in their schedule for cooperation between school personnel focusing on concerns about children and mutual practices so they could have a more systemic approach to challenging behavior. Usually, coordinated practices and procedures for HSB prevention and intervention seemed to evolve after the fact, and out of concrete experiences of difficult cases. For example, one school had articulated very clear procedures as a result of their experiences of several serious cases involving other agencies. The following conversation describes the difference in school procedures between schools, as the teacher talked about a case from a school in another part of Norway where the informant had been working earlier. The teacher had been asked to escort a child to a Children’s House (Children’s Houses are operated by the Norwegian police and conduct judicial, forensic interviews with children in reported cases where they either are victims of or have witnessed violence and abuse. Some Children’s Houses also interview and treat children and young people who have been reported for HSB):

A: “I think that here, for example, when everything has gone off track, when it has been reported to the police (...) and then you’re supposed to take the child to the Children’s House without the parents’ consent, for example, right? That... I don’t think it was right to put me as a teacher in that situation.”

B: “But we don’t do that. Here, we’re absolutely consistent in that someone from the administration takes it (*the child*), and that is exactly to protect, to ensure that the parents can still cooperate with the teacher.” (Informant A & B, focus group 4).

In this school, the procedures were clearly communicated to the teachers concerning who would be doing what when cooperating with outside agencies. However, significant discrepancies were detected when it came to coordinated practices between the respective schools. As the following excerpt describes, many variables are connected to various schools that may influence and complicate coordinated practices and procedures:

“Because the practices in these two schools I have been working in are very different. And, so this is a much bigger school with more leaders (...). It’s easy to place the responsibility with another leader when you have so many... So, is it the school counselor one talks to, right? Or is it actually my immediate superior? (...) There’s no clear procedure that I have been shown.” (Informant A, focus group 1).

Subsequently, having clear procedures was a topic that was addressed in all the focus groups, and many informants also addressed the need for more general guidelines for the prevention of HSB. The significance of the administration’s leadership in implementing safeguarding procedures was also addressed under this theme by many of the informants, both within the school itself and between the school and cooperating agencies. Three of the six focus groups had experienced recent changes in the administration (change of principal), and this was raised in these groups as a decisive factor in changing the safeguarding practices at their school.

3.6. Identified contributions to breaking down teachers' experienced barriers

Despite all the barriers that the teachers experienced, they also reported some promising developments in their schools. Many of the focus groups mentioned how a new design with the child welfare service in schools had made interdisciplinary cooperation and support in difficult cases a little less challenging. In recent years, the regional child welfare service has had a designated caseworker in place in many of the primary schools for a designated number of hours each week. As one teacher suggested when asked who to contact if faced with HSB: "and we now have someone from the child welfare service who is available to us each Friday, so I think that maybe that would be a natural cooperation partner to discuss things with." (Informant E, focus group 3). The caseworker, available to both teachers and students, can have informal and impromptu conversations about concerns on the school premises:

"And I just have to say that I personally have had negative experiences, especially with the child welfare service, and how difficult it has been. Where you write a report about this child, but there is no dialogue. But now I experience after having talked with the caseworker who comes to our school that this has changed." (Informant F, focus group 3).

Other promising examples of interdisciplinary cooperation which may offer teachers more competence, clarity, and support are schools' encounters with the Children's Houses. Informants in the schools who had been involved with a Children's House in specific cases reported more confidence in contacting external agencies, as well as being aware of procedures and roles in cases involving violence and abuse. Teachers also said that they had learned techniques for talking to children about their concerns, and concrete experiences with expert agencies also informed a new awareness among teachers. Informants who had observed judicial interviews were impressed by the approach to the child and took that awareness back to their school where they advocated for more training of teachers in having difficult conversations with children. Many of the focus groups also mentioned that the educational programs for primary school students provided by the local resource center for victims of sexual abuse were a source of information and assistance for teachers. Some teachers mentioned that the resource center's modelling of conversations on controversial themes with the students was very useful, and that it helped them to put a greater focus on the phenomenon through raising their awareness. Some teachers also reported that they received support and guidance in specific cases. However, the reported level of involvement of the teachers in the educational program varied significantly between schools.

4. Discussion

4.1. Promotion of HSB competence for teachers

The findings clearly indicate some of the barriers that primary school teachers experience in their attempts to prevent HSB. Two of the major challenges found were related to the lack of and need for HSB competence in schools. As noted in international research, teachers' lack of HSB competence can mean that children and young people who display HSB in school are receiving unhelpful and sometimes even harmful responses (Hackett, 2014; Meiksans et al., 2017). These responses may in turn impede or obstruct the possibility of giving proper assistance to the child in question, as well as safeguarding its peers. Furthermore, if teachers do not know which signs to look for when trying to identify the behavior or find out how to deal with it, it will become difficult for them to create safe spaces in schools where students are protected from sexual violation. Similarly, if teachers are insecure when it comes to how to deal with problematic or harmful sexual behavior, it is highly unlikely that they at the same time will feel comfortable teaching students about sexuality, consent, and boundaries. Consequently, teachers need HSB-specific competence if they are to be able to implement transformative practice for children's behaviors.

HSB-specific training for teachers is now being offered in various parts of the world as a measure for enhancing teachers' understanding as well as securing more appropriate school responses, and a few studies have started to measure the effect of HSB training for teachers. Two studies found that even short training programs for teachers had a notable effect on their subjective competence in approaching HSB (Charnaud & Turner, 2015; Yoder et al., 2016), whereas three studies (Clements et al., 2017; Hackett et al., 2013 and Vorland et al., 2018) showed the same result for inter-professional and interagency training in HSB. The participants in all the studies reported that they felt more confident in working with children and young people displaying HSB after the training, and Hackett et al. (2013, p. 341) also pointed out that the participants "understood the reasons leading to sexually abusive behaviors in young people and the frequency of family problems in young people's backgrounds". Clements et al. (2017) claim that one of the most important aspects of the short HSB training program is that the training raises awareness among professionals. The authors maintain, as do Kaeser et al. (2000), that this is a crucial point because this awareness can facilitate earlier intervention at the lowest level within universal services, such as schools. As seen in the findings, discussions and reflections around children's sexual behaviors enhanced the teachers' awareness. Raising the awareness of HSB and potential reasons for it can empower teachers to address this behavior in a dignified manner that in turn can empower the child to change. However, acquiring such competence requires multiple steps. Clements et al. (2017) argue that raising awareness is only the first step in HSB training, and that further training for teachers should be more comprehensive with a variety of activities over time supported by other agencies.

4.2. Promotion of a more sustainable teacher role

Another finding in this study is that teachers are often overwhelmed by their role, and that this feeling undermines their ability to safeguard students the way they need to. As reported by the informants in this study, various constraints on teachers, namely lack of time, resources, multi-agency cooperation and a coordinated practice, contribute to lack of agency and the experience of the teacher

role as overwhelming. Many teachers felt that this predicament deprived them of the opportunity to have important conversations with students, or to follow up on matters of concern. This is in line with [Allnock and Atkinson's \(2019\)](#) study, where teachers reported resource problems as the reason for not having the capacity to develop close relationships with their students. The transformative potential of the teacher role requires that teachers have enough time together with students to be able to realize their unique position in the classroom. According to [Freire \(1974\)](#), one of the most important factors when it comes to a teacher's influence lies in the actual relationships with students, and a teacher must therefore invest both much time and energy in building close relationships with students in their class. If teachers are feeling overwhelmed due to a heavy load with little time and support, expecting transformative practices in the prevention of sexual abuse in schools simply becomes unrealistic.

It is, however, interesting to note that in the groups where no members of the administration were present, the feeling that the teacher role was overwhelming was communicated more clearly. It must be noted that his finding might be due to the fact that the teachers in groups with their leaders present were hesitant to criticize their superiors. However, it could also indicate that the groups where leaders were present felt more supported by their superiors, possibly also evidenced by their very presence in the focus group. Several studies have emphasized the importance of leadership as support for the teacher's ability in the safeguarding role. [Walker \(2020\)](#) reported that the administration is key in enforcing a safe and sustainable school culture for both students and teachers by offering teachers the necessary time and resources they need. [Meyer \(2008\)](#), [Firmin et al. \(2019\)](#), and [Allnock and Atkinson \(2019\)](#) have pointed out that if teachers are to act on sexual violence and harassment, they need to be supported by their own leaders. These studies also showed that teachers who felt unsupported by their administration were more unlikely to react to sexual harassment. [Allnock and Atkinson \(2019\)](#) further state that when teachers do not act upon sexual harassment and violations, students also give up on reacting to presented HSB. Subsequently, the attitudes of school administrations influence all aspects of implemented school policies, whether formal or informal. As seen in this study, teachers express the need to be supported by clear leaders if they are to implement a more systemic safeguarding process. Hence, a sustainable teacher role requires school leaders who *enable* their teachers to become agents of change through providing sufficient support, time, and resources.

4.3. Coordinated practice and multi-agency cooperation

The data material in the study reveals that teachers report a lack of a coordinated and systemic practice in the prevention and management of HSB in schools. In order to implement such a practice in schools, there is a need for an inclusive approach where interdisciplinary cooperation with relevant agencies is a given. As [Carmody \(2009\)](#) maintains; "Education alone will not prevent sexual assault. Rather it is a key strategy within a comprehensive multi-sectoral and multi-level response eliminating sexual and other forms of violence" (p. 13). [Hackett and Taylor \(2008\)](#), [Firmin et al. \(2019\)](#), and [Lloyd \(2019\)](#) have therefore pointed out that if support is to be effective, an intervention must be integrated both throughout the entire school and in the multi-agency partnership. Moreover, [Charnaud and Turner \(2015\)](#) underline the importance of "coordinated strategies from social services in supporting teachers for effective safeguarding and promoting of the welfare of children" (p. 1355). Even though there is strong consensus on the significance of multi-agency cooperation, various authors identify some challenges in the potential teamwork. [Ey and McInnes \(2018\)](#) claim that there is a need to train educators in understanding how to respond to such behaviors and engage support services. However, according to [Lloyd's \(2019\)](#) study, multi-agency partners frequently reported teachers' anxiety when it came to making referrals, thus showing that educational staff need support and training to be able to act. The anxiety over referring a student was also identified in this study, especially when it came to referrals to the child welfare service. Hence, [Lloyd \(2019\)](#) and [Kaeser et al. \(2000\)](#) suggest that teachers need to work with professionals in other services on a regular basis so that schools and cooperating agencies can share a coordinated practice and understanding of the various agencies' roles. Such practice would ensure that the cooperating agencies would also receive the necessary training and competence. The promising examples of interdisciplinary cooperation identified by the informants indicate that innovate approaches from various stakeholders can indeed benefit and support teachers. As seen, these initiatives both transferred competence into the school and raised awareness among teachers at the same time. The most important success factors of the case worker and the local resource center are that they are available for cooperation with teachers at their actual site of work:

If we want a change in education across a nation, we can only have it by its being realized in each site, site by site. If we want national change in education, we must also harness the agency, experience and wisdom of the people who know and inhabit the site – in particular, of course, teachers and leaders and students at each site. ([Kemmis et al., 2014](#), p. 218).

4.4. Limitations

The focus groups were composed of informants from a small geographical area of Norway, which makes the results difficult to generalize. Furthermore, being situated in Norway, the authors' interpretations are influenced by a specific geographical, political, and cultural context. The transformative perspective chosen for this study permeates the analysis and discussion, and the normative aim of improving practice may have impacted the informants' meaning making. Finally, the principals and assistant principals' presence in FGs may have influenced the informants' level of honesty. There is also a possibility that informants could have been influenced by the researcher's presence and participation in the focus groups, an issue also mentioned by [Flick \(2009\)](#). The interviews were transcribed in Norwegian, and later translated into English by the first author. The informants' meaning making might have been affected by the translation. Caution must therefore be advised in interpreting the various data presented in this article. Wherever possible, the findings from the focus groups have been triangulated with existing research in the field to compensate for the small sample, and validate findings, as recommended by [Flick \(2009\)](#).

4.5. Implications for practice and future research

Based on the findings from this study, the following three areas need to be addressed at the policy level in going forward with a more systemic prevention of sexual violence in Norway. First, training in healthy, problematic, and harmful sexual behavior should be made mandatory across all schools and cooperating agencies. As seen above, empirical evidence supports the belief that HSB-specific training for teachers and cooperating agencies both raises awareness and enhances teachers' competence in detecting and intervening in HSB cases. This is therefore a fundamental and inevitable step towards enabling professionals to comfortably provide safe spaces for conversations on sexuality, as well as making them capable of detecting and intervening in the event of sexually abusive behavior. HSB training through AIM3 (Assessment, Intervention & Moving on) courses and RVTS West's "Basic knowledge about problematic sexual behavior among children and young people" are currently available (both off- and online) to all professionals working with children and young people in various parts of Norway. (AIM courses have been adapted from the AIM Project in the UK for the Norwegian context by V27, and are now offered by the various RVTS centers.) The short courses would be a feasible solution for providing teachers with the initial awareness that is a necessary starting point, as described by Clements et al. (2017). The newly launched RVTS website www.seksuellatferd.no [transl: *sexual behavior*] is another resource site for professionals which provides a digital version of the Traffic Light Tool (Hegge, 2016), which is used to identify healthy, problematic, and harmful sexual behavior. The website also makes the recently launched school manual for primary and secondary schools available. The manual aims at aiding teachers and other school personnel in detecting and intervening in cases of problematic and harmful sexual behavior. In addition to the manual itself, an e-learning tool is also included as a part of a systemic competence package made available to schools. The e-learning features up-to-date video lectures on relevant topics, and can provide teachers with a viable opportunity for training at their own pace and time. The manual includes a section about healthy sexual behavior related to the themes in the new curriculum, and can offer schools concrete support with respect to how to approach the subject in school. Procedures for problematic and harmful sexual behaviors are listed, and the manual aims to offer schools and cooperating agencies a shared understanding of the various stakeholders' roles in HSB cases.

The second policy area to address is enhanced statutory interdisciplinary cooperation between schools and relevant agencies. Eriksen and Germeten (2014) emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration between teachers and other agencies for enabling early interventions. One specific method for providing time and resources is for the administration to earmark slots on the timetable for multi-agency cooperation. Systemic interdisciplinary collaboration enables a collective increase in the professionals' competence and creates a broader network of expertise through professional learning. The new design within the child welfare service, where a child welfare caseworker is situated in schools has initially had promising results when it comes to low-threshold interdisciplinary cooperation. As seen in the teachers' accounts, this caseworker also functions as support for teachers in challenging cases, and might make their experiences of isolation and ineptitude a little less overwhelming. It is reasonable to believe that such a design may help with the reported lack of time and resources that the teachers experience. However, further studies into this design are needed to provide more rigorous findings on the effects this has in schools. More research is also needed on the cooperation between Children's Houses and schools in individual cases, and the effect this measure has on school responses to HSB (and sexual abuse in general). Teachers who were in contact with Children's Houses reported that they were more confident in procedures and roles in HSB cases after the agency's involvement. More research is also needed on the educational program offered by the local resource center for victims of sexual abuse, both from teachers' and students' perspectives.

The third policy area to address is the establishment of an overarching structure for detection and intervention of sexual violence in schools with national guidelines, as recommended by Vorland et al. (2018). One step in the right direction is the school manual for primary and secondary schools. This is a promising start to the creation of a robust national structure. In theory, such a structure can help individual schools and the relevant agencies to streamline their procedures and practices in HSB cases, as opposed to the current system where there are major discrepancies between different schools and communities. This would ensure a systemic and coordinated practice, not only in a school, but in all schools. However, in practice, this structure requires a national implementation of a comprehensive approach including guidelines, a manual, training, and more resources allocated to schools, which in turn must be administered and prioritized by the government.

4.6. Concluding thoughts

This study has focused on exploring the barriers teachers experience in the prevention of HSB in primary schools. It was discovered from the teachers' own accounts that they do not feel they are equipped with the knowledge and competence needed for them to be able to detect and intervene in cases of sexual violence and HSB. Additionally, conditions that undermined their ability to perform their profession as intended were also discovered, namely, lack of time, resources, and coordinated practices in school. As shown through international research, these challenges are not unique to Norwegian teachers. The study therefore suggests ways forward for schools and cooperating agencies in proposing training and a more coordinated practice for schools. However, as emphasized in the discussion, to furnish a holistic system that can protect children and young people from harm, there also needs to be good multiagency cooperation with schools, which in turn can enable teachers to utilize their unique position as children's and young people's protectors in school. Ultimately, realization of the teachers' safeguarding role according to the new curriculum will therefore require an overarching governmental initiative.

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