

# Children's rights and teachers' responsibilities: reproducing or transforming the cultural taboo on child sexual abuse?

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**Keywords:** children's rights, social science education, child sexual abuse, Norway

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## **Children’s rights and teachers’ responsibilities: reproducing or transforming the cultural taboo on child sexual abuse?**

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**Abstract:** Enhancing young learners’ knowledge about appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour is crucial for the protection of children’s rights. This article discusses teachers’ understandings of their practices and approaches to the topic of child sexual abuse in Norwegian upper secondary schools, based on phone interviews with 64 social science teachers. Countering child sexual abuse is a political priority for the Norwegian government, and the Committee on the Rights of the Child acknowledges several state initiatives to counter child sexual abuse through education. Nevertheless, this study shows that teachers do not address this topic to any great extent, indicating that the cultural taboos regarding teaching about and preventing such abuse, including rape among young peers, still prevails in Norwegian classrooms today. Emotional obstacles such as concerns about re-traumatising and stigmatising young learners hinder some teachers from addressing this topic thoroughly in the classroom. Additional explanatory factors may include heavy teacher workloads, little preparation in teacher education programmes, insufficient information in textbooks, and an ambiguous national curriculum.

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### **Introduction**

‘Sexual violence should not be a topic in social science education. We (teachers) don’t have time to deal with the consequences’ (personal communication with the author, 2018). This Norwegian teacher’s statement might provoke several questions. Does sexual violence have anything to do with social science education? Do we have time to talk about sexual violence, as doing so might open up Pandora’s box? What would the consequences be of keeping that potentially troublesome box closed, and why do some teachers avoid the topic? Although teachers have the potential to detect and prevent violence, the Council of Europe (2015, p. 7) pinpoints that many young people do not, in school, get the opportunity to discuss topics such as sexual orientation, gender-based violence or child sexual abuse. Some teachers may feel that these issues are too challenging to address.

Previous research in Norwegian secondary schools shows that sex education is primarily taught in natural science classes, less so in religion classes and even less so in the social sciences (Røthing & Svendsen, 2009, p. 16). A narrow understanding of sexuality appears to have dominated Norwegian sex education, one primarily emphasizing the biological aspects such as fertilization and reproduction (ibid, p. 23) instead of the more social dimensions of sexual behaviour.

In 2007, the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies conducted a survey among 548 students studying to become preschool teachers, elementary teachers or child protection workers. They were surveyed about how much knowledge they got about the following topics through their education: 1) The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 2) physical child abuse, 3) child sexual abuse and 4) conversational methods with children (Øverlien & Sogn, 2007). Elementary school teacher students, in particular, reported a great lack of preparation regarding how to deal with children exposed to violence (ibid). In a follow-up study eight years later, results show that 427 students within the same disciplines report that they have received more teaching about the four topics than those participating in 2007 (Øverlien & Moen, 2016, p. 3). However, the students in this study do not report a clear increased focus on these issues in their educational programme. The researchers find this worrisome and pinpoint how teachers and preschool teachers are in the unique position of seeing children daily and over time, which:

Gives them the opportunity to observe children's well-being, behavioural changes, signs of injury or other signals indicating that the child is in a difficult situation. Therefore, they have an important role in prevention and intervention (Øverlien & Moen, 2016, p. 3)

This article is based on the first study of how the issue of sexual violence is taught in social science classes in Norwegian upper secondary schools. The empirical data was collected through a phone survey of 64 upper secondary school teachers in 2018. The analytical focus of this article is narrowed down to child sexual abuse, and the research question is: 'To what extent are social science teachers reproducing or transforming the cultural taboo on child sexual abuse?' This is an essential field to study, because sexual crime against children and adolescents is a serious social challenge both in Norway and across the world today (National Police Directorate & Norwegian Prosecuting Authority, 2018; Mossige & Stefansen, 2016; Myhre, Thoresen & Hjemdal, 2015; World Health Organization, 2017).

Countering violence and child sexual abuse is a political priority for the Norwegian government (Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2014). There is a need for more knowledge about teaching practice on child sexual abuse in order to strengthen the practical implementation of the UNCRC through education. This article argues for the need to address this issue. The argument is based on key articles of this convention, which sees children's rights as a framework for education for social justice (Osler, 2016). The factors influencing teaching practice, based on empirical material, will be analysed. This is followed by recommendations on how teachers can include the children's rights perspective and use literary fiction in their teaching.

### **Child sexual abuse in Norway**

This section briefly outlines what I refer to when using the concepts of sexual violence and child sexual abuse, and how I perceive the differences between these terms. Sexual violence is a gendered phenomenon as it is 'intertwined with understandings of both masculinity and femininity as well as gendered relations of power on a societal level' (Skilbrei and Stefansen, 2018, p. 11). This article draws on the World Health Organization's definition of sexual violence as:

Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work (World Health Organization 2002:149).

I consider child sexual abuse to be a branch of the wider concept of sexual violence. Child sexual abuse entails any sexual act between an adult and a minor under the age of consent, or between two minors who have an asymmetrical power relationship, either in age, physical strength, or development, and there is an element of coercion (Bechtel & Bennett, 2019). Sexual abuse includes forcing or persuading a child to engage in sexual contact, including non-contact acts such as exposure to pornography, involving the child in pornography, and sexualized communication through the phone or the Internet (Townsend & Rheingold, 2013).

Children can sometimes also sexually offend each other, and this phenomenon is referred to by different terms. The following section is based on Skilbrei and Stefansen's overview of this body of literature (2018, pp. 14-15). The psychologist Kjellgren (2009) refers to this phenomenon as 'adolescents who sexually offend' or 'youth who sexually abuse'. In addition, the term 'young people displaying sexually harmful behaviour' is also found in research literature; this is often defined as young people who commit sexual acts in an asymmetrical relation of power due to age, emotional maturity, gender, physical strength, and/or intellect (Myles-Wright & Nee, 2017).

In Norway, it is illegal to engage in sexual acts with children under the age of 16. It is also illegal for minors to have sex with each other. Sexual acts with children below the age of 14 are considered rape, in order to enhance children's protection and signal the severity of engaging in sexual acts with children (National Police Directorate & Norwegian Prosecuting Authority, 2018, p. 53). In a phone survey conducted by the Norwegian Centre for Violence and Traumatic Stress Studies, 1,012 girls and 1,050 boys between the ages of 16 to 17 were asked if they had experienced sexual abuse (Myhre, Thoresen & Hjemdal, 2015). Thirteen percent of girls and four percent of boys said that they had experienced sexual abuse, which includes sexual contact before the age of 13, rape, drug-related abuse, unwanted touching by using threats, or pressure to commit sexual acts. Seventy-five percent of these abuses were committed by a person known to the victim (*ibid*, p. 14). In Mossige and Stefansen's study (2016), 2,673 girls and 1,857 boys between 18 and 19 were asked about their experiences of sexual violence. The results showed that 775 girls and 130 boys of the 4,530 teenagers surveyed had experienced sexual abuse.

According to the Norwegian police, there has been a substantial 46 percent increase in reported crime related to sexual acts and rape of children under the age of 14 from the first third of 2017 to the first third of 2018 (National Police Directorate & Norwegian Prosecuting Authority, 2018, p. 55). This increase in reported crime is explained by several factors; there has been an increase in uncovering unreported cases, but the police also believe that there has been an actual escalation in sexual crimes against children, especially related to online abuse.

### **Norway's implementation of the UNCRC in educational institutions**

The UNCRC is a legally binding document, since Norway ratified the Convention in 1991. Two articles in the UNCRC, namely articles 19 and 34, explicitly protect the child from violence and sexual abuse;

#### Article 19

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child. (UNCRC, 1989, article 19, part 1)

#### Article 34

States Parties undertake to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. For these purposes, States Parties shall in particular take all appropriate national, bilateral and multilateral measures to prevent:

- (a) The inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity;
- (b) The exploitative use of children in prostitution or other unlawful sexual practices;
- (c) The exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials (UNCRC, 1989)

In order to provide children and adolescents with protection from child sexual abuse, it is important they have access to knowledge and participation rights (Osler, 2016, p. 144). This is linked to the right to education (UNCRC, article 28) and the right to be heard in matters that affect their lives (UNCRC, article 12). According to the report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to education:

The right to education includes the right to sexual education, which is both a human right in itself and an indispensable means of realizing other human rights, such as the right to health, the right to information and sexual and reproductive rights [...] Thus, the right to comprehensive sexual education is part of the right of persons to human rights education (United Nations, 2010, p. 7).

Human rights education consists of education and training *about, through* and *for* human rights (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2011, article 2). Education *about* human rights includes 'knowledge and understanding of human rights norms', education *through* human rights consist of 'learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners', and education *for* human rights entails 'empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others' (ibid). When addressing how child sexual abuse is a violation of children's rights, the teacher creates a space for education about human rights. By actively listening to children's voices in the classroom, and perhaps listening to their experiences with this kind of

violence outside the classroom, the teacher educates through children's rights. Through that potential transfer of knowledge about abusive situations from student to teacher, the teacher has an ethical and professional commitment to act on behalf of that acquired knowledge: the UNCRC article 3 safeguards this by stating that 'the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration'. The teacher could directly influence the life of a child who is being abused through talking about how some secrets should not be kept, informing the child protection services and contributing to ending the violence. Such actions are efforts that work for children's rights. Education for human rights in relation to sexual violence entails equipping young learners with profound respect for their own human worth, their own bodily rights, and the human worth and rights of others both in the present and in the future.

It must be stressed, however, that the child's voice should also be taken into consideration when informing the child protection services, because it might take some time before the child agrees to that. This could constitute an ethical dilemma, because according to the Norwegian law on child protection services §6-4 ([www.lovdato.no](http://www.lovdato.no), 2018), notifying the authorities if there is suspicion of child abuse is a professional obligation. In such cases, it would be important to talk with the child in question about how some secrets should not be silenced (Raundalen & Schultz, 2016).

In the new Norwegian general principles for education, it is stated that 'when teachers care for the pupil and see the individual, human worth is recognized as an essential value for the school and society' (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training 2017, p. 5). This document confirms that education should be in concordance with the UNCRC regarding both children's knowledge and practical implementation of their rights.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child monitors implementation of the UNCRC by its state parties (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2019). The latest report from the Committee acknowledges that the Norwegian state has undertaken measures to deal with violence and child sexual abuse through education (Committee on the Rights of the Child [CRC], 2016). From 2014-2016, county governors organized courses on talking to children about violence and sexual abuse for staff working in kindergartens and schools. The report affirms that:

The school's role in preventing violence and sexual abuse has been strengthened in recent years. The goals concerning pupils' knowledge about violence, violations, violence linked to sexuality, and violence in close relationships were clarified in the learning objectives [...] in 2013 (CRC, 2017, p13)

The Norwegian government has made it a priority to counter violence and child sexual abuse, publishing the strategic document *Childhood Comes but Once* (2013) and the action plan *A Good Childhood Lasts a Lifetime* (2014). This plan includes an increased focus on violence and child sexual abuse in professional educational programs and assigns human resources in schools to support the teachers in their work (Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2014). The document *A Good Childhood Lasts a Lifetime* acknowledges that:

We all have a duty to act when we have reason to believe that a child or an adolescent is at risk. Management and the individual staff members in public service agencies have a special responsibility. It is also important that members of children's social networks act on any suspicion of violence or sexual abuse. We can all make a difference in the lives of children and youth at risk. There is no excuse for looking the other way (Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion, 2014).

According to this document, countering violence and child sexual abuse is Norway's most important contribution to fulfilling the country's commitment to the UNCRC (ibid, p. 9). Nevertheless, there appears to be a discrepancy between the alleged strengthening of the school's role in preventing violence and sexual abuse when this is compared to my empirical material on teaching practice in Norwegian upper secondary schools (discussed later).

### **The cultural taboo on child sexual abuse**

The concept of cultural taboos is essential to understanding the findings in my empirical data. This section is in part based on my translation of Søftestad's discussion of cultural taboos (Søftestad, 2008, pp. 49-52). The taboo is here defined as a cultural phenomenon that entails a social prohibition on making visible or telling others about child sexual abuse (Leira, 1990). The culture maintains its taboos with contempt as a sanction and this contempt can lead to shame, stigmatization, and isolation. Most people will seek to avoid these social reactions, and therefore subordinate themselves to comply with the norm of making sure that the invisible remains unseen. According to Mossige (2000), the cultural taboo regarding child sexual abuse can work in two ways: firstly, it prevents adults from engaging in sexual actions with children; secondly, it works as an obstacle for talking about the sexual abuse that has taken place - for the offender, the offended, and others who know or might know about the misconduct. Steine et al. (2016) conducted a survey of 508 victims who had experienced sexual abuse as children. The anecdotal evidence reflects some of the emotional obstacles victims of sexual violence face:

Afraid of consequences/punishment, afraid of not being believed, afraid of ruining the family, afraid of doing harm to the perpetrator and the rest of the family, the feeling it was my fault, I had done something wrong, afraid that others would get mad at me, shame, afraid that everybody else would know what I had done, afraid of being rejected, afraid that everybody else would know how disgusting I was, and that they would think I was disgusting (Steine et al., 2016, [the author's translation]).

This quote pinpoints how fear and shame work as obstacles to telling someone about their experiences. It takes on average 17.2 years before victims of child sexual abuse tell anyone (ibid).

### **International research on preventive teaching**

There is international recognition for the potential of preventive teaching to enable children to recognize and avoid potentially sexually abusive situations, as 'developmentally, it makes sense to educate young people in appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour in a time when their sexual identities are forming' (WHO, 2010, p. 46). A review on child maltreatment prevention from mainly English-speaking countries found mixed results on the effectiveness of child sexual abuse (CSA) programmes in schools (Mikton & Butchart, 2009, p. 354). Through these programmes, children learn about body ownership, the difference between good and bad touch, and how to recognize abusive situations, say no, and disclose abuse to a trusted adult. These programs have a positive effect on strengthening knowledge and protective behaviours against sexual violence. However, it is uncertain whether such programmes decrease child abuse.

A review of 24 school-based education programs for the prevention of child sexual abuse (Walsh, Zwi, Woolfenden & Shlonsky, 2015) also indicates that preventive teaching is effective. These studies included 5,802 participants in both primary and upper secondary schools in the United States, Canada, China, Germany, Spain, Taiwan, and Turkey. The educational programs included the 'teaching of safety rules, body ownership, private parts of the body, distinguishing types of touches, and who to tell' (ibid, p. 3). Children who receive preventive education are more likely to report past or on-going abuses, and it is likely that such education increases the child's capability to protect himself or herself from abuse (ibid).

### **Merging quantitative and qualitative research methods**

I collected the data for this study through a phone survey with 64 social science teachers in Norwegian upper secondary schools from February – October 2018. The 34 female and 30 male respondents were currently teaching, or had previously taught, the mandatory social science subject in upper secondary school in the previous two years. This subject is the only social science subject taken by all upper secondary school students in Norway, regardless of their study program.

My interview technique was to use a structured survey with fixed response alternatives, but simultaneously invite the participants to share their thoughts during the phone interview, merging elements from both quantitative and qualitative methods. This resonates with a branch of mixed methods research called 'merged method', embodying in one single method the advantages of both approaches or methods (Gobo, 2015). One of the objectives of this study was to quantitatively measure which sensitive topics are being taught and, at the same time, gain insight into the teachers' experiences from everyday life in the classroom. In most cases, I asked follow-up questions that were not part of the structured survey, because I wanted to know more about why the informants answered the way they did. I took detailed notes on a physical copy of the survey, while also 'ticking the boxes' on the predetermined Likert scale, which will be explained below. The answers to the fixed response alternatives were later transferred to the computer programme Stata for analysis, and the qualitative information was gathered in a notebook.

Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) call for 'reflexive research', referring to awareness of how one produces knowledge. My previous job as a phone-interviewer for Statistics Norway influences how I view statistical knowledge production. At Statistics Norway, we only registered informants' answers to the fixed response alternatives, although people often wanted to explain why they replied the way they



did. In my own study, I wanted to include teachers' reflections on why they responded the way they did, because it provides a richer understanding of how they perceive their practice. This article's analysis is based on descriptive statistics and qualitative information I obtained through my phone interviews with the teachers. In addition, I have conducted a brief content analysis of the most frequently used social science textbook.

### **Survey design**

This survey was designed based on my experience as a social science teacher in 3 different Norwegian upper secondary schools over the last six years. It consists of:

1) Personal information: age, gender, education, work experience.

2) Perceptions of:

- Their education's relevance for teaching about gender, sexuality and sexual violence
- Their eligibility to teach about these issues
- The importance of addressing gender, sexuality and sexual violence in the classroom
- The difficulty of teaching about these issues in different classrooms

To measure their perceptions, I applied a version of the Likert scale. For example, in asking 'to what extent has your educational background been relevant to teaching about sexual violence', the fixed alternatives range from 0 – To no extent, 1 – To a little extent, 2- To some extent, 3 – To a relatively high extent, and 4 – To a high extent.

3) 14 questions about to what extent certain topics related to sexual violence are covered through their teaching:

- Rape: Statistics and penalties for committing rape
- Laws protecting against sexual harassment and abuse
- The #MeToo movement
- Sexual harassment: Gender differences in sexual harassment, sexual harassment as a challenge for gender equality
- Asymmetrical relations of power in sexual harassment and abuse
- Non-consensual sharing of sexual imagery
- Child sexual abuse

I calculated the mean average of what all of the respondents answered to each of these 14 questions. Each topic has a score between 0-4 – see Table 1.

4) Questions about what kind of work methods teachers use to address sexual violence, including to what extent they use:

- Clips from TV-series, movies or news - Audio-visual tools
- Reading the social science textbook
- Reading news articles
- Writing
- Group work
- Class discussion

5) Questions about to what extent social science textbooks cover topics related to gender, sexuality and sexual violence.

6) Questions about to what extent the national curriculum covers the issues in question.

7) Questions about cooperation among the social science teachers and focus on sexual violence from the school management.

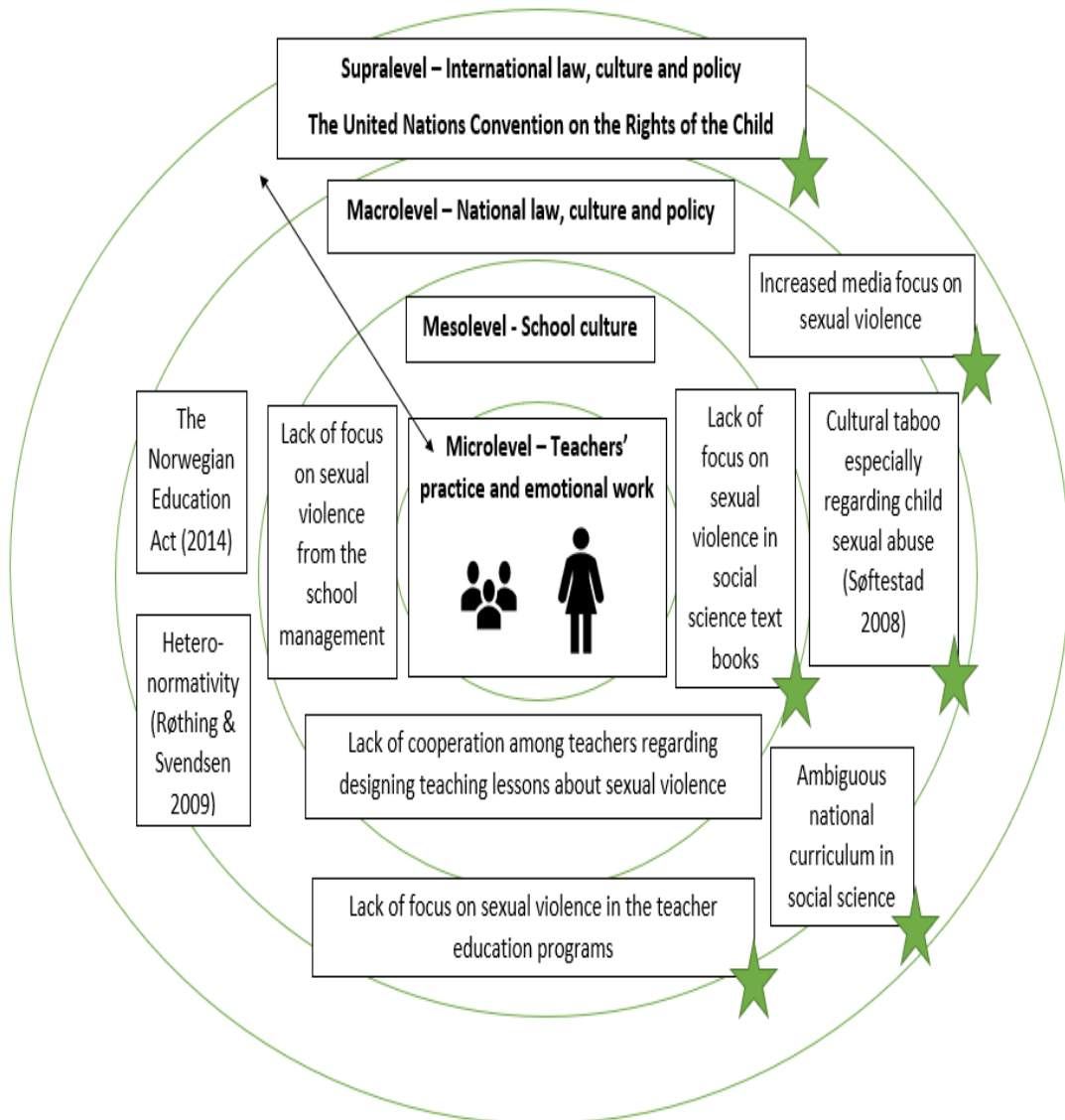
### **The ‘Dark Room’ investigation and media coverage of child sexual abuse**

Recently, the Norwegian police launched an investigation named ‘Dark Room’, in which 84 persons have been charged with rape, human trafficking, and presenting and sharing sexualized pictures and abusive material online, involving babies and children worldwide (www.nrk.no, 2019). This is the most extensive investigation related to online child sexual abuse in Norwegian history, and the trials have been closely covered in the media. In 2019, a man was sentenced to 16 years in prison for having sexually abused over 190 babies and children under the age of 16. This man had contacted a mother in the Philippines, paying her to make her three-year-old daughter sexually abuse her three-month-old baby brother (Rognstrand, 2019). This case illustrates how child sexual abuse has moved to digital realms – transcending time and space as it can be video-recorded and spread worldwide, no longer being confined to the physical presence of victim and perpetrator.

Although there is much focus on child sexual abuse in the media, the cultural taboo in personal relations seems to prevent teachers from addressing this topic thoroughly. Søftestad (2008, p. 51) writes that media often portray scandalous cases of this kind of abuse, which might give the impression that child sexual abuse is no longer a general cultural taboo. However, she points out that the cultural taboo still prevails in the everyday work of uncovering such abuse by schools, kindergartens, and child protection services. This coincides with the findings in this survey that portray the prevalence of taboos on this issue in Norwegian classrooms today.

### **Factors influencing teachers’ practice regarding sexual violence**

This model pinpoints factors influencing teachers’ practice regarding sexual violence; it is based on my empirical material. The analytical focus has evolved around three aspects: namely, teachers’ perceptions of how sexual violence is addressed in 1) the most widely used textbooks, 2) the national curriculum for social science and 3) the media. The concept of cultural taboos is relevant for understanding how child sexual abuse is partly silenced in social science textbooks and the national curriculum.



**Figure 1: Structural and relational factors influencing teaching practice in the classroom.**

(The stars indicate the analytical foci of this article. The model is based on empirical data collected by the author, 2018. It is inspired by Uri Bronfenbrenner [1979]).

**From teaching about #MeToo to child sexual abuse**

Table 1 portrays the mean averages of responses regarding the extent to which social science teachers say they cover these topics through their teaching. It includes a percentage overview, so that nuances may be seen:

| Ranking | To what extent informants say that they cover these topics through their teaching | Average<br>0 (No extent)<br>– 4 (High extent) | No extent | Little extent | Some extent | Relatively high extent | High extent |
|---------|---|---|-----------|---------------|-------------|------------------------|-------------|
| 1       | The #MeToo movement   | 2,55  | 6%        | 13%           | 27%         | 29%                    | 25%         |
| 2       | Penalties for rape  | 2,25  | 6%        | 9%            | 50%         | 22%                    | 13%         |
| 3       | Sexual violence   | 2,10  | 5%        | 19%           | 40%         | 14%                    | 12%         |
| 4       | Non-consensual sharing of pictures with sexual imagery                            | 2,09  | 11%       | 11%           | 45%         | 23,5%                  | 9,5%        |
| 5       | Sexual harassment as a challenge for gender equity                                | 2,06  | 6%        | 25%           | 41%         | 12%                    | 16%         |
| 6       | Asymmetrical relations of power in relation to sexual harassment and abuse        | 1,96  | 14%       | 17%           | 39%         | 17%                    | 13%         |
| 7       | Gender differences in sexual harassment and abuse                                 | 1,95  | 9%        | 23%           | 38%         | 22%                    | 8%          |
| 8       | Intimacy boundaries regarding one's own body and the body of others               | 1,90  | 9%        | 25%           | 39%         | 19%                    | 8%          |
| 9       | Statistics about rape   | 1,89  | 6%        | 25%           | 45,5%       | 20,5%                  | 3%          |
|         | Rape  | 1,89  | 6%        | 28%           | 44%         | 14%                    | 8%          |
| 10      | The legal framework protecting against sexual harassment and abuse                | 1,87  | 16%       | 19%           | 39%         | 17%                    | 9%          |
| 11      | Sexuality and sexual orientation  | 1,82  | 6%        | 22%           | 56%         | 14%                    | 2%          |
| 12      | Rape among peers  | 1,81  | 16%       | 20%           | 38%         | 20%                    | 6%          |
| 13      | Child sexual abuse  | 1,62  | 9,5%      | 31,5%         | 50%         | 6%                     | 3%          |

\* The #MeToo movement is relevant from the schoolyear 2017/2018 and onwards.

**Table 1: Perceived teaching methods when addressing sexual abuse**

According to Table 1, the #MeToo movement was the most discussed topic regarding sensitive issues during the school year 2017/2018, whereas the two least addressed topics were rape among young peers and child sexual abuse. There appears to be more focus on the penalties for rape rather than on the legal framework that protects citizens from sexual harassment and abuse, and we see a greater

emphasis on punishment than on the rights every human being possesses. There is room for improvement in how Norwegian social science education can raise young students' awareness of the legal framework protecting children and adolescents from sexual violence. This resonates with the report from the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which states there is a need for more familiarity with the UNCRC in Norwegian educational institutions (CRC, 2017, p. 5). In the words of Osler (2016, p. 119), 'People need to know they have rights in order to claim them'.

Forty-two percent of the informants said that they do not, or to a small degree, cover the topic of child sexual abuse through their teaching. In this study, I have identified several obstacles to why teachers are willing to address child sexual abuse. Some are hesitant because it might be time-consuming to hear the children's stories of abuse and from there take necessary measures. This is linked to at least two factors: the workload teachers face, and the sheer amount of competence aims in the current curriculum. The mandatory social science curriculum consists of 35 competence aims with only three 45-minute teaching lessons per week (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013). Such organisation makes many teachers feel stressed for lack of time, disabling them from contributing to in-depth learning for their students, which is not an ideal situation.

There is one competence aim in this curriculum that clearly states: '*Analyse the extent of various forms of crime and abuse and discuss how such actions can be prevented, and how the rule of law works*' (Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training, 2013). However, 73 percent of the informants stated that the national curriculum in social science does not, or to a small extent, cover sexual abuse. This might be because of the different interpretations of the Norwegian word for 'abuse' [*overgrep*] – this term can also be used for physical or psychological abuse that is not sexual. However, it is most commonly used in referring to sexual abuse ([www.Overgep.no](http://www.Overgep.no), 2017). This lack of clarity provides room for individual interpretation, which contributes to making this topic invisible to many teachers. The objective here is not to blame teachers, but rather to critically examine the curriculum.

Beyond the 'lack of time' phenomenon and the ambiguity of the curriculum, 66 percent of the informants said that their educational background has had no or little relevance for teaching about sexual violence. There is reason to believe that there is room for improving how teacher education programmes can open up for classroom dialogue about sexual violence and, in particular, child sexual abuse.

Moreover, there are several emotional obstacles to putting child sexual abuse on the agenda. Some teachers are anxious about re-traumatizing children who might have experienced unwanted sexual acts by talking about it in the classroom. Most teachers are concerned about not causing the students any harm, and some feel that teaching about child sexual abuse could potentially do this. My interpretation of this is that most teachers care for their young students, but that their care is misunderstood if this issue is not addressed: such silence does no-one any favours. Addressing child sexual abuse is a way of taking the child seriously, recognizing that, for some children, childhood can have dark sides.

Some teachers surveyed spoke of the risks for potential stigmatization, if, for example, one of the students exits the classroom in tears during the lesson. This shows a concern for how fellow students would react if they knew, and also a concern for how the potential student would feel if s/he knew that others possibly knew that there had been an abusive situation. This is linked to the cultural taboo: what if

someone found out about something that no one was supposed to know? I would argue that the silence needs to be broken if we wish to counter the perpetuation of sexual abuse. Teachers have the opportunity to do this, and an ethical responsibility to do something about the fact that it takes an average of 17.2 years for victims to disclose that they have suffered child sexual abuse.

According to Table 1, rape committed by young peers is, on average, the second most silenced topic in the classroom. This relative silence is problematic for a variety of reasons. When examining the surveys on the prevalence of unwanted sexual acts experienced by children and adolescents in Norway, we see that those who most frequently sexually abuse girls under the age of 14 are not adult men, which is the stereotypical image, but rather adolescent boys between 15 and 19 (Mossige and Stefansen, 2016). In Mossige and Stefansen's study (2016), the respondents who had at least one experience with unwanted touching, rape or attempted rape, also answered a question regarding their relationship to the offender. Two-thirds of the unwanted sexual acts were committed by a friend, boyfriend/girlfriend or acquaintance (ibid). According to Skilbrei and Stefansen (2018, p. 59), knowledge about which relations that are most 'dangerous' is important for preventing sexual violence when talking to adolescents.

The mandatory social science subject is offered in the first year for those in general studies and the second year for those in vocational studies, meaning that most students taking the course are between 16 and 17. This is a crucial age for discussing these issues. Preventive teaching can not only make adolescents aware of potentially abusive situations, but it can also increase their knowledge about their inherent rights and sense of self-worth. In addition, young people who sexually offend could also become more aware of the implications and consequences of their actions.

One of the challenges teachers face when addressing rape among peers is victim-blaming. This concept refers to how victims of sexual violence are perceived as having taken part in what happened to them and having shown poor judgement by being at the wrong place at the wrong time (Skilbrei & Stefansen, 2018, p. 12). One informant, whose pseudonym is Maya, told me that one of the comments she hears in the classroom is 'it's not really rape – the girls want it'. When this occurs, she tries to relate it to a beloved member of the family: 'What would you say if someone raped your mother or your sister?' She says that this is useful in making young students think about what they are actually saying and is a way of triggering their sympathy.

### **Making sexual violence invisible in social science textbooks**

Most of the informants surveyed use the textbook *Fokus* (Aschehough, 2013), whose nearly 300 sides have only half a page devoted to sexual violence. This includes some information about an increase in reported sexual crime, and three sentences about how many victims of sexual abuse often know the offender. There is no mention of the asymmetrical relations of power that often prevail between victim and offender, nothing about the shame that might make victims reluctant to press charges, nothing about how the UNCRC explicitly protects children from sexual exploitation and abuse, and, perhaps what is worst, nothing about the importance of telling someone after experiencing unwanted sexual acts. Seventy-four percent of the informants believe that the social science textbook does not include or to a small degree include the topic of sexual violence. To counter the insufficiency of the textbooks, many informants find alternative tools for addressing sensitive topics. Table 2 portrays

which kind of teaching methods the teachers use if addressing sexual violence in the classroom:

| Teaching methods                                       | Mean average<br>0 (No degree) –<br>4 (high degree) | No degree | Little degree | Some degree | Relatively high degree | High degree |
|--|--|-----------|---------------|-------------|------------------------|-------------|
| <b>Class discussion</b>                                | 2,64   | 8%        | 9%            | 23%         | 30%                    | 30%         |
| <b>News articles</b>                                   | 2,07   | 8%        | 23%           | 37%         | 16%                    | 16%         |
| <b>Group work</b>                                      | 1,73   | 23,5%     | 19%           | 28%         | 20%                    | 9,5%        |
| <b>Video-clips, movies or other audio-visual tools</b> | 1,62   | 22%       | 25%           | 33%         | 9%                     | 11%         |
| <b>Writing</b>   | 1,26   | 25%       | 37%           | 27%         | 8%                     | 3%          |
| <b>Reading the textbook</b>                            | 1,12   | 28%       | 39%           | 26,5%       | 4,5%                   | 2%          |

**Table 2: Perceptions of teaching methods based on data collected by the author in 2018.**

In this study, the most common teaching method for addressing sexual violence is class discussion. Several teachers reported how they use news articles as a point of departure for class discussion and/or group work. Several of the informants said that they use different kinds of literary fiction and/or documentaries as a strategy of varying the teaching methods and countering the insufficiency of textbooks. Two of the series and video-clips they mention are the popular Norwegian TV-series *SKAM* [Shame] (<https://tv.nrk.no>, 2016) and the video-clip “The UK explained sexual consent in the most British way possible” ([www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com), 2016). This latter production uses the metaphor of drinking tea – we would not pour tea down someone’s throat if they had said they didn’t want a cup.

### **Countering the insufficiency of textbooks by cultivating the learner’s narrative imagination**

It can be challenging as a teacher to know where to start when planning a class on child sexual abuse. Discussing different approaches with colleagues and designing a lesson together can be useful. When dealing with highly sensitive issues in general, I believe that it is important to prepare the students some days in advance. In this case, this would entail informing them that the next lesson will be about child sexual abuse, and telling them how you will be working with the topic. I recommend that teachers explicitly highlight how this topic is related to the UNCRC - every child has the right to be protected from sexual exploitation and abuse, the right to comprehensive

sexuality education including child sexual abuse and the right to be heard in matters that affect their lives.

It is essential to mention to students that if anyone has questions or any comments, they are more than welcome to approach the teacher privately beforehand. In this section, I would like to make some recommendations on how to go about the actual teaching. In addition to TV-series or video-clips such as those mentioned above, it can be useful to turn to literary fiction, to short stories or animated picture books. Inspired by the Indian poet and educator Tagore, Nussbaum writes about the importance of cultivating young people's narrative imagination, which can be defined as:

The ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. As Tagore wrote, 'We may become powerful by knowledge, but we attain fullness by sympathy... But we find that this education of sympathy is not only systematically ignored, but it is severely repressed' (Tagore 1961, p. 219 in Nussbaum 2006, p. 391).

From my perspective, enhancing both knowledge and sympathy is probably the most powerful combination when addressing different kinds of oppression. Nussbaum goes on to say that 'the narrative imagination is cultivated, above all, through literature and the arts' (ibid). The idea is that through our imagination we can gain insight into the experience of another person that is difficult to attain in daily life (Nussbaum 2014, p. 391).

Raundalen and Schultz (2016) suggest the use of literary fiction for opening up a dialogue about child sexual abuse in the classroom. The great advantage of this approach is that young students learn through a story and characters that are not them, but with whom some might identify. It creates a common platform for discussing the content, which can form the basis of a democratic dialogue between teacher and pupils about social taboos, feelings of shame and guilt, asymmetrical power relations, the power of trust, and adults' responsibility to protect children and adolescents from harm. In their book, they include literary fiction on preventive teaching through the story 'Mom's Secret' (Raundalen & Schultz 2016, pp. 75- 120). The protagonist of the story is 16-year-old Kaja, who discovers that her mother had been sexually abused by her own father as a child, and that her best friend Kathrine has also been abused by her step-father. It might be thought that this story upholds stereotypical images of who sexual offenders are; both Kaja's mother and Kathrine were abused by older adult men, which is not necessarily always the case. However, it creates a common platform for discussion.

The picture book *Blekkspruten* [The Octopus] (Dahle & Nyhus, 2016) tells the story of a young girl who is sexually abused by her teenage brother. Here the stereotypical image of an adult male offender is challenged because it recognizes that there are also some children who abuse other children sexually. In Mossige and Stefansen's study (2016), approximately 10 percent of unwanted sexual acts were committed by a family member.

In both of these fictional works we meet a girl who is abused by an older boy or man. In the classroom, it would be important to pinpoint that sexual abuse is not



just something that happens to girls - it also happens to boys and, in some cases, the perpetrator of violence could be of the same gender. Moreover, it is increasingly important to talk about the fact that abuse can also occur online.

Literary fiction can be used to explain the term 'asymmetrical relations of power' and students need to be provided with knowledge about how asymmetrical relations of power and shame are part of the cultural taboo that maintains the silence. Discussion of this issue can be based on Søftestad's more extensive overview of what often characterizes the relationship between offender and offended (Søftestad 2008, pp. 49-55). Asymmetrical relations of power can be understood as relations in which one party has a greater ability to get his or her needs covered than the other party, given differences in age, physical strength, and so on. By not taking into consideration the other person's emotions and wishes, a subject-object relationship is established. Treating a person as a subject instead of an object requires respecting the person's own will, emotions and wishes. It could be a useful exercise for the students to identify the asymmetrical relations of power that are at play in the piece of literature. The shame many victims feel is also an element that should be brought up in class. I recommend pinpointing that victims of sexual violence are never to blame for the crime committed, although some might feel that way. Students should also know that it takes on average 17.2 years before a victim tells anyone about his or her experiences, because shame is a powerful obstacle to disclosure (Steine et al., 2016). Perhaps the most important aspect to include in this kind of teaching is the importance of telling someone if you are the victim of sexual abuse - this enables young learners' action skills. Telling a trusted person about such experiences requires acknowledging and respecting one's own human worth and dignity, as well as upholding one's right to freedom from sexual abuse. It might be that becoming aware of one's right to freedom from violence and sexual abuse can contribute to restoring a sense of worth. Through breaking the silence, a victim of sexual injustice can embark on a process of healing, transforming him- or herself from a victim to a survivor.

### **Concluding remarks**

Sexual injustice cannot be silenced in educational institutions if we are to foster healthy, respectful, and democratic citizens who protect not only their own human worth and human rights, but also those of others. However, there are factors maintaining the cultural taboo on child sexual abuse in the classroom: inadequate preparation in teacher education programmes; insufficient information in textbooks; and the ambiguous national social science curriculum. Moreover, some teachers are concerned about doing harm to students when addressing child sexual abuse. It would appear that these factors combine to silence this topic in the classroom. I argue that today's teaching practice on child sexual abuse does not fully comply with the children's right to education, the right to be heard in matters that affect their lives, and the right to freedom from sexual exploitation and abuse. As pinpointed by the Norwegian government, there is no excuse for looking in a different direction, because despite these obstacles, teachers have both the agency and the opportunities to counter the perpetuation of child sexual abuse.

I recommend working closely with other social science teachers, as well as in interdisciplinary teams, when designing classes on child sexual abuse. Working together can overcome the cultural taboo. Including literary fiction to cultivate young learners' narrative imagination is a powerful teaching method in combination with

key knowledge about the UNCRC, asymmetrical relations of power, how the cultural taboo works to maintain victims' silence and the importance of telling someone about the crime committed. I conclude with an inspirational quote: 'Equipping learners with skills implies equipping them with action skills through which they can take the next step to shape and realize a more just society' (Osler, 2016, p. 119).

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