

# Understanding gender and sexuality: The hidden curriculum in English schools

Catherine Donovan | Geetanjali Gangoli | Hannah King | Ayurshi Dutt

Department of Sociology, Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse, Durham University, Durham, UK

## Correspondence

Hannah King, Department of Sociology, Centre for Research into Violence and Abuse, Durham University, Durham, UK.  
Email: [hannah.king@durham.ac.uk](mailto:hannah.king@durham.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

Schools continue to produce regimes of gender and sexuality, including overt and covert curricula based on assumed essentialist differences between girls and boys, reinforced and regulated through uniform, sport and peer pressure. The recent focus on the experiences of trans and non-binary children in schools makes visible the ways in which all children are subject to heteronormatively gendered regulatory and disciplinary techniques in everyday school life. This article discusses the findings from a pilot study drawing on participatory action research techniques with 42 young people in six workshops in north-east England. Recruitment methods were required to be flexible given the context within which the study was conducted, which was with Covid-19 mitigations in place. This meant that we were not able to be fully inclusive of young people from local youth groups as they were either not meeting or only meeting online. We thus had to mainly recruit from university student societies and student residences from which we organised three workshops; sports organisations from which we organised one workshop, and a local youth group with which we ran one workshop. The final workshop was conducted with young people who had attended one of the previous five workshops, to enable feedback on our analysis. All participants were over 16 years of age. The majority of participants were women (25) with 16 men, including one trans-man, and one non-binary person. Most identified

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as white (31) with the rest identifying as Black, East Asian and British 'Other' (11). The focus of the workshops was to explore with young people their memories about where and how they first encountered being 'gendered' and/or having a sexuality. The data has been collected, recorded and transcribed within strict ethical guidelines. The workshop data has been analysed using a grounded theory approach, where we developed the theoretical models from the data. This article focuses on those key moments when their behaviours, presentation and/or ideas were subject to facilitators and/or regulators of their gender and/or sexuality. We draw out the contradictions inherent in, on the one hand, the essentialist rationales for difference and inequalities between genders and sexualities in schools and, on the other hand, the apparent need to enforce these 'natural' differences and inequalities. Participatory creative approaches were adopted in each workshop to promote conversations and drawings about who regulated/facilitated their gender and/or sexuality and how they did so. Each workshop cumulatively informed the next, leading to a sixth synthesising workshop that collectively analysed young people's reflections. Drawing on the conceptual frameworks of epistemic injustice (M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford University Press, 2007) and 'space for action' we conclude that young people want and need brave active spaces to discuss and 'do' gender and sexuality, and to resist essentialism and social control. Schools can be both places where control is created and entrenched and where it can also be resisted. Our research suggests that better whole school responses to dismantle regimes of gender and sexuality can be created by and for young people.

#### KEYWORDS

gender, participatory action research, schools, sexuality

## INTRODUCTION

It remains the case that schools are primary producers of the ideal neoliberal citizen: they are inculcated into the values and behaviours associated with the independent, self-regulating and responsibilised, economically independent individual (Nash & Brown, 2021). Schools are intended to educate, following the national curriculum, in a range of subjects deemed appropriate and necessary for a useful member of society and employment, but also to reproduce values and behaviours believed to be suitable in a responsible member of society. At the heart of this aspect of citizenship lies the personal life of the individual citizen and how they will live their intimate and family life. Although relationships and sex education (RSE) in England and Wales (DfE, 2019) has recently been reframed to focus on relationships

## Context and Implications

### Rationale for this study:

This study is a pilot for a larger participatory action research project exploring how identities of sexuality and gender are regulated and/or facilitated

### Why the new findings matter:

Findings identify the importance of schools as institutions that produce essentialist cis heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality that are hierarchical and unequal with impacts beyond school life.

### Implications for practitioners, policy makers and researchers:

The implications are multiple. First is for schools to realise their central role in reproducing essentialist cis heteronormative hegemony that regulates identities of sexuality and gender. Those responsible for relationships and sex education and for addressing gender-based violence will want to take notice of the need for whole school change in both visible and invisible agendas. Second, school leaders will want to consider the importance of bringing school students into the discussion about change. Third, the methodology adopted presents a method of consciousness raising that could be used in schools to promote discussion and collective identification of shared concerns and solutions.

and has an explicit agenda to educate school students about intimacy, sex and family life, promoting marriage and/or 'stable' relationships as the ideal arrangement for family life and parenting, the implicit agenda promotes conformity to cis heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality. However, more broadly schools play a pivotal role in reproducing and reinforcing a cis heteronormative set of norms about gender and sexuality, which they do more implicitly through school rules, culture and practices both inside and outside the classroom.

How this is done has profound implications for how school students come to understand their place in the world, their value and their roles, not just in their school but into their future, in relation to gender relations and gendered relationships of power in both public and private settings. Critically, the norms that students learn penetrate many areas of later life, demonstrating how schooling contributes to individual adjustment to an ongoing, social, economic and political order (Apple, 2019: 89). In this article we focus on a pilot study which co-produced knowledge about the lived experiences of young people in having their identities of gender and sexuality regulated and/or facilitated. Schools emerged as centrally important and in this article, we explore the key findings of the study and the implications of the methodology both for future research and also for promoting social change in schools around issues of gender and sexuality to position them more as facilitators than regulators. First, we consider in more detail the role of schools as institutions that contribute to producing dominant cis heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality that position unequal gender regimes (Connell, 2000). Second, we introduce the methodology and discuss some of the theoretical and conceptual ideas that supported the analysis. Following on from this we discuss the key findings from the data and finally we draw some conclusions.

## The hidden curriculum

The idea of the 'hidden curriculum' emerges from Marxist analysis of education in the 1970s, pointing to the ways in which education made labour ready for the next generation. In more

recent years the hidden curriculum has been exposed as having a much broader intent and impact than those related to the production of compliant labour. Much of the hidden curriculum has been made more formally explicit, such as school policies on uniform and behaviour pledges and there is greater awareness of young people's resistance. The hidden curriculum encompasses the 'implicit ways of thinking about the world, set of values and understandings, ideas and perspectives that are embedded in the objects, practices, transmission and social structures of formal education' (Speirs, 2021). The hidden curriculum delivers and legitimises the sub-texts and meanings of the dominant classes and cultures at the expense of other understandings and perspectives (Speirs, 2021). Contemporary discussion, often more nuanced around neoliberalism, has focused predominantly on the ways the middle-class hidden curriculum disadvantages working-class students (Reay, 2017). Yet research also demonstrates the ways in which a hidden curriculum continues to perpetuate gender difference (Francis, 2000). It is this that we are interested in—how it transmits norms and expectations about gender and sexuality, which research tells us is consistently the reproduction of middle-class, white, cis heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality—and what this means for young people, their identities, agency and resistance.

Schools seek to equip young people with the skills, tools and attitudes that are needed for the roles they are expected to play within society as adults. However, institutionally, schools represent the dominant gender relations and heterosexual norms of society, reinforcing an unequal gender regime through every aspect of school life, from management, through curriculum to discipline and interaction (Connell, 2000). Reflecting on half a century of evidence, Liu (2006) outlines the ways schools and their classrooms are thoroughly gendered in their organisation and practice. Schools go beyond reflecting the gendered ideology of society, actively producing and reproducing gender and heterosexual divisions (Macan Ghail, 1994).

## Schools as the problem

The regulation of heteronormative gendered experiences for young people begins in their early years and is embedded throughout the school system. The Fawcett Society (Culhane & Bazeley, 2019: 12) have documented the ways in which gender stereotypes are reproduced in early education through a number of means, including teachers' attitudes and expectations of children, gendered materials, peer interaction and gender imbalance in staff. Reporting from the Commission on Gender Stereotypes in Early Childhood, Culhane and Bazeley (2019) concluded that gender expectations, heavily reproduced through schooling, significantly limits children, resulting in lower self-esteem, poor body image and eating disorders in girls, poorer academic skills in boys, limiting career choices, which contributes to the gender pay gap and higher rates of male suicide and violence against women and girls. Secondary schools have been described as environments that foster 'compulsory heterosexuality and the sexist objectification, surveillance and regulation of girls and their sexuality', with gender differences performed in and perpetuated by the classroom (Francis, 2000: 48).

There are several ways the education system is implicated in the reproduction of harmful societal norms and cis heteronormative gendered identities (Butler, 1993), which can lead to violence (Ellis et al., 2006). The Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) Action Strategy for England and Wales (2021) identified the role that schools should have in prevention of the harmful gender regimes that create the conditions in which gender-based violence can happen. This has been made more urgent in light of the work of Soma Sara on Everyone's Invited,<sup>i</sup> a website where school students were invited to report sexual violence and victimisation in schools. Established in 2020, to date over 50,000 school students, mostly young women and girls, have responded and reported a range of sexual violence. The response of

Ofsted (2021), the English inspectorate for education services, was to undertake a review of sexual harassment in schools and colleges in April 2021. The review found that a culture of sexual harassment has become normalised in schools, leading to a lack of reporting of these behaviours by children and young people. The scale of the problem was underestimated by teachers and school leaders. The report highlighted that young people's reluctance to report may be due to being unaware of what happens afterwards and being unable to control its potential negative impacts. The report recognises the gendered nature of abuse, indicating the higher prevalence of experiencing sexual harassment amongst girls but states that these issues need to be addressed for all children and young people.

As a result, changes have also been made to the statutory guidance on safeguarding 'Keeping children safe in education' (DfE, 2022) to highlight the importance of a whole-school approach to making sure there are clear reporting mechanisms and a zero-tolerance approach for students experiencing 'peer on peer abuse'. As well as this, the VAWG Strategy (2021) points to the new statutory expectations about RSE as central in addressing harmful attitudes and behaviours that underpin and result in sexual violence.

## RSE policy

Comprehensive sexuality education has been defined by UNESCO (2017) as the 'curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being, and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.' In theory then, schools can also provide a space to discuss and criticise issues of gender, power and underlying attitudes that give rise to abusive tendencies (Donovan & Hester, 2008; Fox et al., 2014). Bragg et al. (2018) discuss the opportunities that exist for creating conducive contexts for discussion about gender and conceiving of school students as allies in this endeavour. Through RSE and safeguarding policies, there is the possibility to shift social understandings around sexual health, sexual harassment and domestic abuse.

Until 2019, RSE guidance in England had not been updated for 19 years (DfE, 2019). Through the Children and Social Work Act 2017, the subject was renamed RSE (Relationship and Sex Education) to emphasise the relationship focus and RSE has become a compulsory requirement for all secondary schools including academies, free schools, independent schools and maintained schools. All primary schools are required to provide relationships education. Though there was a pause in implementation due to the Covid-19 pandemic, by September 2021 all secondary schools were required to follow the new RSE guidance. This guidance also recommends that all primary schools 'have a sex education programme tailored to the age and the physical and emotional maturity of the pupils' (DfE, 2022). The Sex Education Forum (n.d.) highlights how the RSE, Health Education and Science Curriculum all work together to ensure children are protected and have knowledge of their bodies, acceptable behaviour and how to report concerns or abuse.

In contrast to the overt exclusion of LGBT identities and relationships within the old sex education guidance (as a result of what was known as Section 28), which directly banned the 'promotion of sexual orientation', the updated guidance includes a section on 'LGBT' and fosters LGBT inclusion in line with the Equality Act 2010. Under the Equality Act, schools are encouraged to tackle any disadvantage experienced by a group due to a protected characteristic. The RSE statutory guidance (DfE, 2019: 14) states 'schools should be alive to issues such as everyday sexism, misogyny, homophobia and gender stereotypes and take positive action to build a culture where these are not tolerated'.



Yet, a narrow focus on RSE and safeguarding policies that support reporting and responding to sexual violence, does not adequately recognise the holistic nature of the ways that schools operate to produce norms of sexuality and gender (e.g., Pomerantz et al., 2013). The reproduction of hierarchical, unequal, patriarchal practices that produce cis heteronormative gender roles positioning white, middle-class, hegemonic heteronormative masculinity as the most valuable presentation and practice of gender, takes place in every classroom and playground setting, in assemblies and in extracurricular activities (see also Ferfolja, 2007). Pomerantz et al. (2013:264) call this the heterosexualisation of children. This leaves other gender identities both within the school and in the future in society as subordinated, devalued and restricted. It is this hidden curriculum that this article wants to render visible.

Nash and Brown (2021) discuss how it was through campaigns for greater inclusion in core institutions of society—marriage, the military—that it became more evident that citizenship has been constructed as heterosexual. The neoliberal turn in recent years has permitted the inclusion of marginalised identities of sexuality and gender as long as they conform to the heteronormative—and now the homonormative (Richardson, 2017)—ideal of marriage, monogamy, parenting within marriage, economic independence from the state and a thoroughly responsibilised citizen, leaving those unwilling or unable to conform at the margins. This has not been straightforward and there have been campaigns pushing back against inclusive policies from, typically, right-wing and/or faith-based groups (Allen & Bull, 2018).

Despite the legislative justification, compulsory RSE continues to be a publicly debated and contested topic. When the inclusion of LGBT content was announced, protests erupted in schools in Birmingham and spread to other locations in England (BBC News, 2019). In January 2023, a petition to 'Remove LGBT content from the Relationships Education curriculum' with 209,721 signatures was rejected by government as they have 'no plans to change its advice to schools on this subject' (Petitions—UK Government and Parliament, 2023). Although these debates are active within the media, schools are required to consult parents on these policies. Although relationships education is compulsory for all children, parents still have the right to withdraw their child from sex education 'up to and until three terms before the child turns 16' after which it will be the child's decision (DfE, 2019: 18). Interestingly, this differs from the Gillick Competence and Fraser guidelines used for medical treatment, where young people of any age can give their informed consent to treatment (including the contraceptive pill) without parental consent, provided they are deemed to have the maturity to make their own decisions and understand their implications (NSPCC, 2022).

Our research also shines a light on sexuality and the ways in which this intersects with gender in relation to the hidden curriculum and young people's experiences. Including sexuality within such debates is somewhat novel, as it has been relatively invisible in educational stratification research to date (Mittleman, 2022). This is particularly problematic, given the unique relationship between gender and sexuality, as 'heterosexuality underwrites much of what we think of as gender' (Meadow, 2018: 53). 'Doing gender' is taken, as standard, to mean 'doing heterosexuality'. Mittleman's recent US study demonstrates the importance of exploring the interconnectedness between sexuality and gender in relation to academic inequality. He found that the rise in young women's academic attainment in fact relates to heterosexual young women and that concerns about young men's underachievement obscures the remarkable levels of academic success of homosexual young men (Mittleman, 2022: 304). It is this broader focus on schools having a whole school hidden curriculum with regard to cis heteronormativity that this article speaks to.

## METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a small-scale qualitative research project that adopted a participatory approach. Qualitative research lends itself to a pilot, which is exploratory in nature, as

this was. Exploratory in two ways: one in testing a co-productive method for the intended larger research project and the second in scoping the range of ways in which young people feel their identities or gender and sexuality are regulated and/or facilitated as they grow up. The latter was to enable the research team to better identify the research questions and focus for the larger research project. Qualitative approaches are often challenged about the reliability of data it can produce and its generalisability given the, often small, sample sizes achieved. For us, the reliability of the data is evidenced in the strength of the themes we identify in accounts from young people about the importance of schools in the reproduction of hegemonic cis heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality. The workshops allowed groups of young people to consider and affirm or detract from the concerns raised about schools and in this study schools were universally identified as central to the ways in which they had felt regulated in gender and sexuality (see more detailed discussion below). While we do not claim their accounts represent the absolute truth about 'what happened', we do claim they represent a collection of experiences and reactions to those experiences—that are affirmed by others in the workshops—that conjure up a pattern of ways that schools regulate identities of gender and sexuality. The selective nature of their accounts is indicative of the impacts the experiences had on them and suggests that they were critical moments in the context of them realising themselves as individuals with gender and sexuality (Donovan & Hester, 2014; Gabb, 2008). That the emerging themes were so strong across the workshops increases our confidence that they are reliable and worthy of being listened to both in schools and in future research.

Undertaken as a pilot, the research sought to co-produce a research methodology and co-design a larger study with the young people. Given the constraints and capacity of the research, a 'pure' Participatory Action Research (PAR) project was not possible. Neither a methodology nor method, PAR is an orientation to the world which sits alongside positivist and interpretivist perspectives (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2019). Within PAR, knowledge is co-produced through collective understanding, centring lived experiences—researching 'with' rather than 'on' people (Heron & Reason, 2001). Challenging the power held within traditional research approaches, PAR seeks to engage with those directly affected by the issues under study as co-researchers and co-producers of knowledge. Borne from social justice movements and based on principles of democracy and equality, PAR can facilitate positive action and change through the creation of 'authentic' accounts, becoming agents of change (Banks & Brydon-Miller, 2019). PAR works particularly well with young people, whose voices and agency are often marginalised and left out of research and policy-making processes (Groundwater-Smith et al., 2015). A participatory approach was particularly appropriate given the focus of the research in uncovering the institutional and other forms of power held over young people in the formation of their gender and sexuality identities.

With an ideological commitment to forefront the capabilities and contributions of the young people involved, we piloted a participatory co-productive methodology reflective of the concerns and experiences of young people. According to Abma et al. (2019: 7), co-production means:

Involving people whose lives are at the center of research in making the key decisions of any research project: what should be the focus of the research, what are the research questions, how to answer these questions, what information to collect, how to make sense of the information, how to share it and what action to take as a result.

Principles of coproduction underpinned the research: plurality (including a range of young people, practitioners and policy makers); positioning (reflexivity in addressing hierarchies); competences (understanding the 'how' of engagement) and valuing outcomes (through coproducing

a research proposal). Co-creation included shared decision-making, ensuring credibility by respecting participants' experience and expertise, access to additional information (briefing notes) and skill-building (methods creation); legitimacy (including all marginalised groups) and balance of power (through effective facilitation, ground rules and agenda-setting). 'In participatory research, when people become researchers of their life or work rather than objects of research, they typically start with sharing their experiences amongst each other, telling stories to understand their experiences and to raise questions about their lives and situations' (Abma et al., 2019: 134). The co-production model employed within this research recognises the importance of empowering young people to talk about their direct life experiences in relation to barriers and facilitators of sexuality and gender in their transition to adulthood and builds on their capabilities to 'own' the research space by truly speaking their mind—thus enhancing the underlying consciousness-raising efforts of our research methodology.

A series of five workshops were undertaken with different groups of young people, with a final sixth synthesis workshop with participants invited from the first five. We understand 'workshop' as both a noun—a place where things are made or fixed—and a verb—to describe the act of working something through (Graham et al., 2015).

## Recruitment and sampling

From the outset, the research team sought to involve a range of young people from varying socio-economic backgrounds. We aimed to include voices of young women, young men, young members of LGBTQ+ communities, young people from racially minoritised backgrounds, and young people with varying immigration status, culture, social class and (dis)ability. Cognisant of the research timeline and budgetary constraints, we only approached young people living in the north-east of England. The recruitment strategy did not follow a direct route; based on young people's views on involving other informants, the team identified communities of interest and actively pursued their participation in the research—thus adopting an iterative and reflective approach to design and facilitating subsequent workshops. The research team utilised their own established networks with youth organisations, those supporting LGBTQ+ communities and people affected by domestic abuse to arrange workshops with young people within the age range of this research. Owing to the research team's presence in their educational institution, we were able to rally engagement from young people within the student community, approaching student-run clubs and societies and online platforms.

The following section summarises the sample and indicates group diversity in each of the five workshops.

- Workshop 1 (*recruited via clubs and societies within the university*): The total number of participants was nine ( $n=9$ ); all participants were women and identified as White British. This group had a mix of sexual orientations with young people identifying as straight, lesbian and bisexual.
- Workshop 2 (*recruited via clubs and societies within the university*): The total number of participants was seven ( $n=7$ ), out of which four were young women and three were young men. Four young people identified as Black British and three as White British. This group had a mix of sexual orientations with young people identifying themselves as straight, lesbian, bisexual and gay.
- Workshop 3 (*recruited via Facebook group actively used by students and targeted emails*): The total number of participants was nine ( $n=9$ ); all participants were women and identified as White British with the exception of one young woman of East Asian ethnicity. This group had a mix of sexual orientations with young people identifying themselves as straight, lesbian, bisexual, trans and asexual.



- Workshop 4 (*recruited via university sports group*): The total number of participants was six ( $n=6$ ); all participants were young men and identified as straight. Within this group, three young men identified as Black British, one as British Other (Turkish), one as British-East Asian and one as White British.
- Workshop 5 (*recruited via local youth group*): The total number of participants was 11 ( $n=11$ ). Ethnicity of this group was predominantly White British, with the exception of one young person of East Asian ethnicity. Of the 11 young people, 7 were male, and 4 were female. We do not have information about the sexual orientation of the participants.

Our workshops developed both the methodological approach and collected data on young people's views and experiences. Thus, methodological development and co-creation of shared understanding and experiences evolved incrementally and cumulatively through each workshop, with the first workshop informing the second workshop and so forth. Working with local organisations and groups, the workshops involved a diverse group of young people and took place onsite at the organisation's premises, importantly within young people's spaces. Researchers developed a series of participatory tools to facilitate the workshops, which acted as a springboard for collective knowledge building.

The workshops were organised around particular communities of interest to elicit understanding about how inhabiting identities of gender and sexuality is experienced through the lens of those communities and their perceptions of how the State, family and communities facilitate and/or regulate that process. These included diversity in sexuality, gender, age, ethnicity and religion. Although the workshops themselves co-produced the key questions to be addressed in understanding how identities of gender and sexuality are inhabited, the following topics were explored as a starting basis: what are the most powerful shapers of identities of sexuality and gender (family, faith groups, schools/education, internet, peer groups, youth groups, social media platforms, career aspirations etc.); how to understand and explore the boundaries between guidance, advice, regulation, control, choice, consent and coercive control; how to recruit participants from each stakeholder group for the larger study; what kinds of questions should be asked of stakeholders; and whether and how we can support young people to become researchers in the larger study. The final synthesis workshop focused on reflecting on the data and finalising the methodology with participants invited to form a Youth Advisory Panel and become peer researchers for the future study.

Each workshop started with the workshop coordinators introducing themselves with regard to particular moments when they recognised their gender and sexual identities, and invited participants to share these moments. There were three activities that we planned for the workshops. These included: (1) walking the line: asking participants to map out particular points in their life histories when they were (made) aware of their sexualised or gendered identities, using flipcharts and sticky notes; (2) if you ruled the world: asking participants to think of particular areas that they believed needed change; and (3) suggestions for future work and methods—asking participants to suggest gaps in our methods. It is important to note, however, that we used a fluid approach with regard to the activities. In two workshops, we chose not to interrupt the flow of organic discussions within the group to introduce the activities, in one workshop, we had to ask additional questions to enable discussion.

Using an intersectional and co-produced approach, this research also examined how the development of sexuality and gender are embedded and enacted through other identities: ethnicity/race, immigration status, faith, culture, (dis)ability, social class. In total, 42 young people, aged 16–24 years, participated in the workshops—29 young women and 13 young men, 30 of whom identified as white and 11 identified as Black or racially minoritised, with all except one group including a range of sexualities. The workshops were originally intended to include a range of young people drawing from existing groups inside and outside university,

namely young women at universities identifying as feminists, working-class young women, Black and racially minoritised young people, young people identifying as LGBTQ+, and young people with disabilities. On numerous occasions, young people inhabited intersectional identities, which overlapped with the broader groups identified and led to multi-layered insights into the workshop questions. These groups were recruited to ensure diverse experiences, identities and characteristics were incorporated into the research, which was constructed through an intersectional lens.

Project constraints rubbed against our commitment to engaging diverse voices, which led to this purposive sampling approach. The biggest constraint was the continued impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, including related regulations throughout the fieldwork period in January–June 2022. This substantially impacted our ability to secure the involvement of young people in youth groups because either they were not meeting or, as the lockdown lifted, they were loath to meet online. The consequence of this was more reliance than intended on university students, and less diversity than planned—we managed to include fewer young people who identified as racially minoritised, neuro-divergent/disabled or care experienced. Recruiting young men also proved particularly challenging and we return to this in the discussion of the findings.

Ethical considerations were paramount, given the focus of the study and the participatory approach. Ethical approval was obtained through Durham University's ethics process and agreements developed with collaborating organisations. By engaging with a methodology that gives value to equality, democracy and care in the process of knowledge production, the project was underpinned by a feminist ethics of care as part of an ethics of justice (Banks, 2014). The study was undertaken by skilled and experienced researchers from the fields of Violence and Abuse, and Youth Studies. As expected, some participants did disclose experiences of abuse and trauma, which the team had prepared for. Rather than 'avoiding' or managing emotions, researchers tried to create a brave and safe space for action (Kelly, 2003) where the young people could feel free and empowered to share their experiences and have these recognised by themselves, their peers and the research team. Researchers closed the workshops by ensuring that the young people involved felt supported and safe, providing further signposting and engaging in further one-to-one discussion as necessary. While informed written consent was secured in advance of the workshops, in line with participatory approaches, consent remained an ongoing process throughout the study. Anonymity and confidentiality in reporting the study have been maintained, but ethical discussions with each group addressed the ethical challenges in participatory work and possible limits of confidentiality when working in groups. The topic guides and group-based methods of data collection were co-developed with group members.

An integral part of the research methods was to ensure that the final workshop with the participants allowed us to 'check in' with the young people with our analysis, and our proposed ways forward. The analysis itself was iterative, and was developed during the workshops, using a grounded theory approach. Following Charmaz (2014), we used the grounded theory approach to develop systematic yet flexible guidelines for both collecting and analysing data to find and develop theories that were grounded in the data. We believe that the grounded theory approach is based on an ongoing conversation between data collection and analysis, rather than a linear sequence where data collection is completed before the analysis begins (Dunne, 2011). The themes that emerge from the analysis therefore feed into the methods and data collection, enabling the researcher to be consciously reflective about the processes of both data collection and analysis (McGhee et al., 2007). Some of the key themes that emerged from this process are explored below but first of all we outline the key theoretical and conceptual frameworks we used to make sense of the data.

## THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

The key theoretical frameworks that emerged from the grounded theory approaches were epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), space for action/reaction (Sharp-Jeffs et al., 2017) and consciousness-raising.

### Epistemic injustice

We understand epistemic injustice as injustice related to knowledge, and the ability to articulate that knowledge (Fricker, 2007). Fricker defines epistemic injustice as the unfair discrimination against some actors in their capacity as knowers, based on structural inequalities and prejudices linked to people's social identities and attributes, including gender, social background, ethnicity, race, sexuality, accent and class. Fricker argues that there are two distinct forms of epistemic injustice, namely *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. *Testimonial injustice* takes place when the testimonies of some speakers are seen as less credible than others and refers to prejudices about the speaker (Fricker, 2007), giving an unfair advantage to those who are not subject to these prejudices. The framework of testimonial injustice includes the extent to which credibility is compromised because of the deflated significance credited to their narratives vis-à-vis other sources of knowledge, and other speakers.

Testimonial injustice may be experienced within a criminal justice framework (see, for example, Lackey, 2020), and has also been explored particularly in the context of children, and young people. Elsewhere, we have argued (Gangoli & Hester, 2023) that children in particular experience testimonial injustice, because their testimonies of suffering are not articulated in the language of adults, or in forms that adults deem to understand, and are generally deemed to be unreliable. This is particularly the case in allegations of child sexual abuse, for example, where the testimony of the child challenges adult authority, and in cases of male perpetrators, hegemonic masculinity. In our work we were careful to be sensitive to the testaments given by the young people about the injustice they experienced from schools and adults in those schools. We did not want to repeat the injustice and took the approach that their accounts were reliable and credible in describing not only what they experienced but also the impacts those experiences had into adulthood.

Testimonial injustice can lead to *hermeneutical injustice* (Fricker, 2007: 162), where due to systematic under-representation of the experiences of some individuals and groups, members of these groups are not able to make sense of their experiences, including lacking the language to articulate these experiences. The lack of conceptual frameworks to make sense of one's experiences is an injustice, according to Fricker (2007), because it unfairly advantages those who are able to have their experiences represented in the collective body of knowledge to be able to successfully communicate their experiences to other people: 'the powerful have an unfair advantage in structuring collective social understandings' (Fricker, 2007: 147). The work of Pomerantz et al. (2013) is relevant here, where they found in their study with girls in schools that neoliberal and post-feminist discourses of 'Girl Power' and 'Successful Girls' meant that the participants had no language with which to explain their experiences of unequal treatment or collective discrimination. Instead, they only had available narratives of individual incidents. Again, in our project, focusing on group work allowed for individuals to compare experiences. In several of the workshops, individual participants recognised that their own experiences very closely mirrored what others were saying and participants did not necessarily outline their own experience but limited their comments to agreement. This resulted in participants being able to recognise similarity in experiences and articulate a more collective analysis of discrimination and inequality.

Although we acknowledge that Fricker's conceptualisations are invaluable in understanding how young people are silenced and face injustice in the context of their expression of their sexuality and gender, we suggest that Fricker's understanding of epistemic injustice can sometimes be hegemonic and perhaps not allow space for expressions of resistance. Through our analysis, we found that regardless of epistemic injustice, participants gave accounts of resistance that were both individual and collective. Further, our research also uncovered the need expressed by participants to create, through our research, spaces for action to redress the injustices inherent in these processes.

## Space for action

The concept of 'space for action' was developed within the field of domestic abuse (Stark, 2007) and trafficking for sexual exploitation (Kelly, 2003) to describe the ways in which the coercively controlling behaviour of a domestic abuse perpetrator can entrap a victim/survivor such that they have limited autonomy over their own lives, and therefore restrict the ways in which they can resist coercive control. The concept refers to both the current life and future potential life lived by the victim/survivor. The abusive partner is able, through their abusive and coercively controlling behaviours, to limit the victim/survivor's decision-making over everything from their presentation of self (i.e., what they wear, whether/what make up they wear), their behaviours within the relationship (e.g., expectations to conform to gender roles in the home, in relation to servicing their abusive partner), their social behaviours (e.g., their ability to sustain relationships with other members of the family and friends, to stay employed) and their inner life (e.g., their self-esteem, ability to make decisions, sense of safety). The concept of space for action therefore provides a way of making sense of the cumulative impact of school regimes of cis heteronormative gender and sexuality on all students. Space for action can be understood to delineate the extent to which individuals can fully realise their own integrity and autonomy as an individual. Nevertheless, we are also able to point to the ways in which the participants in this research resisted limits to their space for action even while they were feeling the impacts of the restrictions brought to bear on them in school. They also highlighted how research can create spaces in which participants can reflect on and enhance their space for action through sharing and encouraging each other.

Donovan and Barnes (2020) built on the concept of space for action by outlining space for reaction as a way of illustrating the many and various ways victim/survivors of domestic abuse 'fight back' against the abusive power and controlling behaviours of perpetrators. This is not a space for action in which to grow and become autonomous but a space for reaction in fighting back against the abusive partner. Fighting back might include verbal and/or physical self-defence, challenge or retaliation. In our work there were many examples given where individually and collectively girls/young women and boys/young men resist the cis heteronormative regimes of gender and sexuality that exist. They rebel and fight back, sometimes explicitly in flouting rules and/or campaigning for change and sometimes implicitly through the friendship groups they form, the internal dialogue they develop to counteract the school regime and the support they actively seek from friends and family. Space for reaction can result in a sense of 'not having given in' to the school of having retained a sense of agency and identity that has not conformed, a sense of empowerment and determination to break free from what are seen as archaic rules that are no longer defensible.

However, although girls/young women and, to a lesser extent, boys/young men are able to provide evidence of their resistance to the regimes of gender and sexuality of school, their space for reaction, like their space for action, is limited. The structures within which they are educated are powerful and although they may seem 'extreme' in their

adherence to and reproduction of heteronormative gender and sexuality, they can also be seen as providing the basic building blocks of heteronormative gender that school students will require to navigate their lives beyond school. Such are their enduring impacts. Yet, in this study there was a lot of evidence that space for reaction exists and continues to exist into young adulthood for many young people. There is little evidence of simple acquiescence to the demands of gender and sexuality regimes. Most of the young people in this study, but especially the young women, are angry, demanding of change, impatient with their young male peers, and individually and collectively vocally and politically engaged in change.

Some of the limits to their space for action and reaction can be explained by positioning their agency as situated. Vera-Gray's (2017: 4) research into women's safety work frames this as an expression of 'the way women are both acted on, by, and capable of choosing to act within, the patriarchal gender order'. The concept of situated agency enables us to better understand the complexity, ambiguity and tension in young people's experiences and the ways in which this interacts with space for action and reaction. Seeing young people's agency as situated recognises that their agency is simultaneously free and restricted (Vera-Gray, 2016). Kelly (2003: 143) explains that agency 'is exercised in context, and contexts are always more or less constrained by material and other factors'. By theorising agency as 'embodied and relational (McNay, 2004); as a model of girls as subjects acting on, in, and through the body that is located in different and similar ways along a hierarchy of worth' (Vera-Gray, 2017: 6) we can better work with/for spaces for action for young people.

Our research explored the ways in which spaces are/are not being created, how young people live within and navigate these and the tensions within this. Expanding Beauvoir, Vera-Gray (2017: 6) explains that 'agency is situated by, and exercised in, material and structural locations that both widen and narrow our space for action'. The spaces that young people occupy are often overlooked or prescribed by adults, in particular schools. In exploring young people's (situated) agency, we also consider how embodiment enables and constrains that agency and space for action—how can young people act through their bodies when such spaces are opened up. In shining a lens on the tension in young people's experiences, we seek to understand and identify how we can disrupt and transform closed spaces into (embodied) spaces for action by/for young people.

## Consciousness raising

This concept predates, but is strongly associated with, the second wave of feminism in Western countries which began in the 1960s. The slogan 'the personal is the political' was made famous by the work of Betty Friedman in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), which focused on white women in the USA. This demonstrated the ways in which the malaise of middle-class white women living in suburbia prioritising motherhood was shown to emanate from deep dissatisfaction with life and the division of labour between women and men. The individual circumstances of each woman were connected to a collective set of experiences and, subsequently, demands for social change. Friedman's lack of inclusion of racially minoritised women, lesbians and working-class women have been systematically critiqued. However, the work can be argued to have paved the way for many women to come together, share their personal circumstances and by so doing, having their consciousness raised; what they had thought of as their own inability to be happy/satisfied was the result of structural oppression and that anger, frustration, political action were empowering outcomes. There is evidence of women being marginalised on the basis of sexuality, gender, race and class coming together in consciousness-raising groups that speak to their particular circumstances (see, for example, Norman, 2006). In considering



the accounts given by the young people in this study, it became clear that many of them appreciated the opportunity being in the workshop had given them to consider and reflect on their experiences of having their gender and sexuality regulated and facilitated. For some, the impact of the research itself was of value in enabling them to make better sense of what had happened, of being able to share similar and different experiences with peers and in feeling empowered and reassured that their experiences had not been right and should have been better.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All of the groups of young people we engaged with suggested that schools are one of the main institutions and spaces that shape and regulate their experiences and understandings of sex, gender and sexuality. Schools are sites and vessels of/for the reproduction and regulation of gender, sexuality, gender regimes and of the normalisation of abuse. This extends well beyond the well-known problematic terrain of RSE. Schools are established and operated through a patriarchal framework of white male cisgender heteronormativity impacting on the spaces, bodies and behaviours within them. The three areas we focus on in this article are: school rules, school cultures and peer support.

### School rules

In co-educational schools a key rule identified by students is 'the necessary separation of boys from girls'. Separation is presented as inevitable and with no need of explanation: it is obvious that girls are biologically and fundamentally different to boys, with different interests, capabilities and, subsequently it is learned, different values. Woolley (2017: 84) argues that the impact of neoliberalism is that gender and sexuality are presented as individual choices rather than being 'imposed and shaped by structures of inequality'. In schools, Woolley points to the common sense presentation of dominant societal beliefs which, in our study, are about gender and sexuality, both of which are constructed as givens, fixed and natural especially when cisgendered and heterosexual. Yet, even being cisgendered and heterosexual is not enough unless there is conformity to dominant white cis heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality expected by schools both in the present and in the future, for example, with monogamous marriage and family life as the goals. In preparation for achieving those goals, separation comes to feel like common sense given the assumed natural differences between young men and women. It is in the separation practices of schools that it is revealed that non-conformity literally has no place—in school lines, in sports teams, in toilets, in physical education (PE) activities, in some school subjects, in expected behaviours in classrooms and expected attitudes to study (see Bragg et al., 2018). This is communicated through binaried gendered rules about school uniforms and games, as evident in these testimonies from some young women:

I was in a, in a private primary school for one year, which used to be a boarding school, and they had houses. And we had co-ed, but in the houses, after, after school we were gender split, so any after school activities we would do only with girls, which, just sort of meant that people didn't know to, people didn't know how to interact with each other, outside of their own gender groups, and it was really very strange. And it just added to people, like, boys not feeling like we were humans, sort of thing.

I was really confused at the idea of girls' sports and boys' sports ... but not just having separate sports, but having different sports, having netball versus basketball, hockey versus football, which just seems quite nonsensical to me.

I, like, [other] girls couldn't play cricket at my school, we had to play rounders.

School uniforms are laden with biologically determined binaried gender signs and values which further emphasise the need for separation and difference. Participants told us of how girls' shoes were often too thin in the sole which made their feet cold and inhibited their ability to run or take part in sports easily, of enforced skirt wearing for girls that included prescribed lengths, of school shirts for girls that were not only of a colour they disliked but also of a material that was see-through. Always, the accounts tell of uniforms that restrict the movement of girls either literally or because of the impact on their sense of self, privacy, body awareness:

Yeah, it was like you're not allowed to roll up your skirt, but you have to wear a skirt. So it was like you have to be feminine ... feminine enough to wear a skirt, but you can't show your midriff, like wear a crop top, you can't roll your skirt up, yeah, sorry.

Was there a difference between boys and girls uniforms?

Yeah, the girls shoes were basically slippers; they're not practical, you can't do anything with them, they're cold.

You couldn't like play football in them, in girls' shoes ...

My school they finally were like, okay, girls can wear trousers as well, but girls had to wear these yellow shirts, which were really see-through so you could see the girls' like, nipples or when they were wearing bras you could see the bra, and boys would like talk about this, and then one girl was like, 'I don't wanna wear a see-through yellow shirt, can I wear a grey shirt like the boys?', and the school were like, 'no', and it really bothered me. I felt really uncomfortable.

It just reinforces that apparently gender is an important difference, right, and the boy stuff was comfortable, and useful, and the girl stuff I mean ... Yeah, exactly, practical; wearing short skirts in winter is not what you should be doing.

Rules about uniforms that include measuring the length of girls' skirts and the types of shoes girls can wear, not only render visible assumed and expected differences between girls/young women and boys/young men but because of the values invested in those differences, amplify messages about resultant inequalities. For example, girls wearing shoes that mean they are not able to play sport or even run and/or make their feet cold because the soles are too thin. On the other hand, boys/young men's uniforms imply expectations about their intended activities that include comfort, practicality and physicality. At the same time, there is nothing in the participants' accounts of uniforms for boys being sexualised or being about sex whereas uniforms for girls were, contradictorily, both intended to emphasise their heterosexual femininity while being asexual or devoid of sexual desire—and punishments were available for girls who were perceived to sexualise their clothes with skirts too high or crop-tops.

Individual school RSE curricula, are devised by schools in agreement with parents and governors, yet the public story (Jamieson, 1998) about biological differences that sustain the rationale for separateness and unequal value between cis heteronormative binaried gender and sexuality, are given pseudo-scientific credibility within these curricula. The heterosexualisation

of school rules are substantiated with accounts of the different biology of girls/young women and boys/young men which communicate the privileging of boys/young men's heterosexuality, sexual desire, sexual satisfaction and, literal, dominance in heterosexual relations. The message that is promoted and internalised is that the sexual needs of girls/young women do not matter other than that they pay attention to how to avoid pregnancy:

I just think, like, sex education generally, in being so focussed on like, pregnancy and male pleasure, really like, minimises like, yeah, female pleasure and like, sexual experiences as like, being equally about women, and I think then that plays into the experiences that me and my friends had with boys and just feeling like we were objects for their desire, and that our needs or sexual desires weren't as valid as theirs. So, yeah, I think that's very damaging.

Well so with like, sex education in school, you know when they talk about relationships and stuff, they don't talk about the fact that a relationship might be between two people of the same gender, or something, it's always like a man and a woman. And also like they always, like the emphasis is always just on pregnancy and stuff, and that's like, that's actually quite exclusionary.

What we were taught about sex and reproduction was just reproduction and they, yeah we had the diagram of the female anatomy and learned the function for every single thing except for the clitoris, and it was like the only thing they talked about pleasure was the that male orgasm produces life, and it was like the female orgasm didn't exist, and it was just the whole time we were learning ... I went to an all-girls school and we learned more about male pleasure than we did about female pleasure, we didn't learn anything about female pleasure. We weren't taught anything about how to practice sex safely, or anything to do with gender or sexuality, and I suppose that some people may deem it inappropriate at a school, but if you're gonna talk about the male orgasm you should.

The key public story communicated through RSE is 'sex is for boys/men, is heterosexual, penetrative and for reproduction'. This sets the scene for cis heteronormative sex and relationship lessons, and a definition of its purpose that centres heterosexual, cis men's sexual organs, orgasm, and the consequences of their heterosexuality. Men's heterosexuality typically frames the curriculum for sex education whereas women's heterosexuality is rarely discussed. Pregnancy is presented as a problem to be avoided, and reproduction as a future activity embedded in a 'stable', ideally married, relationship. The condom signifies the centrality of the penis to (hetero)sex education and its use serves as the solution to the unwanted outcomes of men's inevitable sexual behaviour, that is, condoms prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. Participants speak about never having heard the word clitoris in sex education and for too many the idea that women could enjoy sexual pleasure was entirely novel and one they were introduced to only after they had left school.

The relational components of RSE rely on assumptions about complementarity in ways that mirror expectations about heterosexual relationships. However, rather than complementary, more often cis heteronormative gender roles are experienced as impositions of differential values, whereby everything concerning girls/young women is less valuable than everything about/for boys/young men. For those who question or come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer or questioning about their sexuality and/or who are questioning their gender identity, it can be difficult to navigate understandings and identities of gender when these are so integrally embedded with assumptions about (hetero)sexuality. Holland et al. (1998) demonstrate the impact of the hegemonic construction of compulsory heterosexuality in schools, which results in misogyny

(reflected in the high levels of sexual violence experienced by young women) and homophobia (reflected in the high suicide rate for young gay men). However, their study also demonstrates the negative impact such extreme pressure and limitations have on young men of such dominant constructions of heterosexuality.

Conversely those who are non-binary can find it extremely challenging to comprehend that heteronormative gender is being constructed as binaried, either/or categories rather than, for example, anything more contingent, fluid and/or with an understanding that very little about gender is fixed or biological. Some trans young people might find such binaried categories for gender helpful in being able to position themselves in relation to what they are not, as well as what they understand themselves to be. However, it is also interesting that in some of our workshops, discussion about gender was taken to mean discussion about being trans or non-binary gender whereas discussion about sexuality was taken to mean discussion about being lesbian, gay or bisexual (and sometimes trans), illustrating the persistent misunderstanding of the distinctions between identities of gender and sexuality. In addition, this equating of discussions about gender with trans and non-binary issues and sexuality with lesbian, gay and bisexual issues, results in heterosexuality and heteronormative gender norms being taken as given (natural) and not up for discussion.

And I remember Year Five, we learned about puberty, and all the blokes would like, go into some room or whatever, and all the girls would like, go into some room, and I was just so confused, because I had to sit with these girls and they were learning about puberty, and it was like, I just had no idea it was all gonna happen to me. Like, I just hadn't, I just didn't think, 'right'. I was not taking notes, I was just like 'why, what, why am I here'? I really was. I was like, so confused about it. Literally, it just never dawned on me that I was gonna grow up to be a woman. And, I guess like, when I was like thirteen and s\*\*t, and I obviously had to think to myself then, like, hang on a moment, this is like, not the right road.

## School cultures

School cultures include the general ways that schools communicate and reinforce expectations about dominant white cis heteronormative norms of gender and sexuality. The production of dominant constructions of femininity and masculinity in school cultures and rules are the production of dominant white constructions of cis, heteronormative masculinity and femininity. Girls/young women and boys/young men are positioned in relation to each other in expectations, standards, behavioural norms and presentation of self in ways that deliver the message that what is about/for girls/young women is of less value and not what is about/for boys/young men. What being a boy/young man or girl/young woman entails, is further modified depending on their school age (primary/secondary), their class and their ethnicity (Connolly, 1998; Reay, 2001).

This can include some teachers not recognising, challenging or taking seriously sexism or misogyny in the classroom or playground and schools' acceptance that boys dominate school playgrounds for their sport, typically for football. It is in the culture of the school that rules are understood to represent differential values between binaried gendered behaviours, achievements and expectations. This translates into boys/young men's sports teams being seen to be actively encouraged with specially designed and bought kits as well as extra time being given to sport practice. Girls/young women, for example, might, in theory, be able to play football; however, the lack of opportunity, specially designed kit and extra time being provided for practice, send a significant message that their football is not as valuable to the school or to girls/young women as the boys/young men's footballing contributions.

So in secondary school, by the time I was about mid-secondary school they had made a football club, and I joined, but it really didn't get any support from the school, it didn't get funding, it didn't get the attention. Whereas a cheerleading club that was started, like, two years later, suddenly got a lot of funding and attention and I feel like that's, that's a sort of very girls' school thing to be doing.

Like, when I was at a co-ed prep school they would always read out the boys' sports results first, and the boys got, like, access to all the pitches and girls would just have to, like, go in the gym, like on a little, like, side pitch, whereas the boys just got so much, like, more money and resources thrown at them...

Prevailing school cultures are often visible in what is not done or where boys'/young men's behaviours aren't checked or challenged but protected as 'natural'. If teachers and other school staff privilege the behaviours of boys/young men to the extent of reinterpreting their behaviours as benign, the message for girls/young women is stark; that they have misinterpreted, that the fault is theirs if they feel wronged. The following excerpt illustrates this in a group discussion:

If a boy would be like a bit mean to me or something, and I told my mum or I told the teachers, they would be like, oh, but he just fancies you ... I think this is about gender ... about, like, the power-dynamic between genders ... it's like, if a boy is being mean or diminishing me, or belittling me, it was like well he must just be attracted to me, rather than ...

... which is a horrible way to teach children about relationships.

And also that then leads to violence against women later on, because you're saying to, you're legitimising that treatment of women, and you're validating that behaviour

You're allowing abuse on the same level as love ...

In another workshop, a young woman reiterated:

And also we spoke a little bit about, like, moving on to sexuality, but also gender, like, if a boy is being mean to a girl, it's like, well he's got a crush on you, or he must like you, and that kind of shaping young expectations and like invalidating an experience of being treated unkindly by a boy, and with sexuality, like, just a lot about at a young age, schools but also parents, like, assuming that heterosexuality is the norm, and like, I know that I'm in a minority here, being heterosexual, but actually like, I still object to that being taken for granted as like, an assumption. Like I didn't get to, I didn't come out as heterosexual, that was just assumed, from a very young age.

For racially minoritised students the dominant cis heteronormative gender binaries they were being presented with in schools did not chime with their own experiences, which enabled them to better understand that what the school was doing was not about them.

I also found it really strange how like femininity is associated with like having grace and like being docile, whereas in reality femininity is like putting in a lot of grease, putting in a lot of hard work. It's like chopping up vegetables in the kitchen and doing ironing. And then these days as well it's like having a double burden to take



care of kids as well as come back and do the ironing as well as all of these other things, so I really found it strange why femininity was associated with this. I guess it's white femininity is associated with this, being docile, being like quite pink and cute and stuff when the femininity that I was like raised with and attuned to was this like aggressive, chop up the vegetables, do this, do this, and this is.

This respondent brilliantly identifies one of the core contradictions of the dominant constructions of heterosexual femininity: that its surface presentation is of passivity and, as the student says, 'grace', yet the lived experience is of the opposite, it is of doing, of action, of coordinating, of ensuring a household functions and meeting the needs of everybody in it. The student is unable to recognise the presentation of gender the school provides and explains this as probably to do with their position as a racially minoritised woman. This is both true and not true. The dominant presentation of heterosexual femininity is both racialised as well as classed. Middle-class white women are better able to maintain 'grace' and avoid 'a lot of grease'. However, the contradiction of surface 'grace' and in reality, action and 'a lot of grease' is shared in the lives of most women.

## Peer support

Peer support can include friends but also the general connectedness between school students that might exist because of being in the same school over several years. A sense of familiarity and recognition between school students can result in relationships that are not identified as friendships, but they can still be influential in shaping students' behaviours, attitudes and interests. Both friends and peers can regulate and/or facilitate conformity or nonconformity to school rules and culture, reinforcing the dominant messages about the need for conformity to cis-heteronormative gender binaries.

Yeah, so in secondary school because there was a school uniform, all the boys had to wear trousers, and all the girls had to wear skirts, which, there are some, like, non-binary people in the school, they didn't, like, it was they didn't realise they were non-binary, it wasn't good [laughs] and so at secondary school I had a similar situation, except that you were actually allowed to wear trousers, but there was a huge social pressure not to; very few people did, the few people who did just for religious reasons, and it was sort of uncool which was a whole different problem. And then at some point in about Year Ten I got the courage to wear trousers anyway, and that was nicer.

The following discussion sheds further light on this:

All the girls that wore like, trousers, in primary school it was always like the tomboy, and like all the girls were like oh no, they're not girly-girly and they're kind of like excluded out just because you didn't quite comply to what girls are supposed to do

Yeah, like, I remember, we probably would have been about, like, eleven or twelve, twelve, was it? Like, early secondary school, and that everyone would very much, like, go around and like, say who they like fancied, in our year, and I, I remember I like, basically, lied, well there was one guy that like, I feel like everyone knows who people are like supposed to like, d'you know what I mean? There's like someone...

But also I feel like you get a lot...

... people who everyone has a crush on, like the most attractive boy and the most attractive girl,

And everyone knows who, like...

But also I feel like you get very good at working out who you're supposed to have a crush on, and if you don't have a crush on someone then you feel like you're supposed to

Like I pick my celebrities. Yeah, so I remember like, yeah, like, if someone asked, I would have the person in my year that everyone said was like the most, cos that was like the, like, easiest one.

I came out to my friends when I was like thirteen and six of them fell out with me because they thought I was doing it for attention and they were like "well, go kiss a girl then" and I was like, this is so like, you wouldn't question someone being straight.

The impact of these gendered messages, especially when confirmed by friends and peers, is not only 'in the moment' but also 'for the future'. Girls/young women learn that what they do should be in the service of boys/men, that they should maintain a heterosexualised presentation and practice of self in the school. For example, in a school where girls/young women are actually allowed to wear trousers, the effects of peer pressure can render the girls/young women who wear trousers problematic, other than if they do so for perceived to be 'legitimate' reasons, such as faith. Thus, pupils police the gendered behaviour of their peers, punishing those who do not conform to traditional heteronormative gender norms (Skelton et al., 2007). These impacts can be long term insofar as their expectations are being managed and regulated by such gender regimes. Making way for what boys/young men want to do or being shaped by what boys/young men might want in a girl/young woman becomes expected behaviour in the school and continues into later life. Thus, the restricted space for action of girls/young women in response to the priorities of boys/young men has impacts into their futures. At the same time boys/young men are encultured into ways of being that understand their gender and sexuality as accruing entitlements in their individual relationships as well as their intended life outcomes (employment, social standing, income etc). Although being a man will and does bestow privileges and expectations of certain kinds of treatment from women and other men, racially minoritised men are also encultured into understanding that their privileges and entitlements will be limited by racism, as the following excerpt from a racially minoritised young man reveals:

Coming from, like, an African background. I also felt the pressure to perform in school, as a man, play certain sports, like, I weren't allowed to play sports like, netball, rounders, or even, like, tennis, cos there was no, like, physical aspect to it. I also put 'showing emotion' and 'the pressure to look like a certain way, physically'.

The young men who participated in our workshop also testified to pressures they faced to 'prove' their heterosexuality, even when they were not sure:

I agree with the peer pressure thing; it's not just about, like, repression. If you are unsure about anything, it also, like, kind of, accelerates you on that journey.

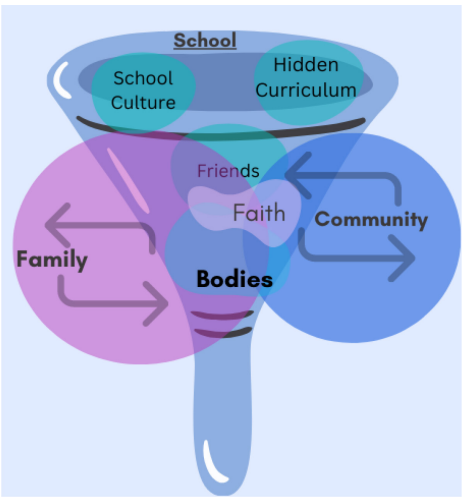
Like, if, if, like, people are making jokes, like 'oh, you- you're not talking to any girls', or you haven't got a girlfriend, then you're kind of like rushing through your own thinking process about contemplating your own sexuality, and you're kind of looking for these things that the society pressure is putting upon you. So you don't really get to discover for yourself, like, what your own sexuality is.

Growing up in school... gay jokes were a big thing. So, like, if you'd see your friends, like, joking about it, if you in your mind, like, rationalise it, 'oh, if I feel this way, I'm gonna get made fun of'. So, even if you had those feelings, you'd probably bury them deep.

The impacts of cis heteronormative gendered expectations embedded in school culture and rules can also be seen in the ways that peer pressure works to reinforce a lack of space for action. The reproduction and reinterpretation of school rules along gendered lines can have profound impacts for space for action for both girls/young women and boys/young men. Messages from peers for boys/young men can include the belief that status is established through physicality, strength, agility and sports prowess. The rewards for those who can achieve these markers of hegemonic masculinity are clear in school culture and practices and within peer cultures. In this study there was some evidence that for some young men from racially minoritised communities being physically strong and engaging in sport at school was a route they were encouraged into, including by family, sometimes when it was not what they really wanted to do. Regardless of whether individuals can be successful or not in achieving the expectations, the pressure to conform limits their space for action.

### Safe and brave spaces—space for reaction and participatory research spaces

Although these spaces (schools) are controlling, they are also spaces for action. Through recognising these tensions, these spaces can be seen not as hegemonic but as transformative. [Figure 1](#) visualises how we can reconceptualise schools (in relation to the family and community) as an empowering safe space.



**FIGURE 1** Reconceptualising spaces for action.

Most of the students in this study provided accounts that cumulatively produce a construction of school life as repressive and productive of dominant cis heteronormative, binaried gender and sexuality. They speak of the damage that was done to them and others in their schools at the time and into the future by the rules, culture and peer pressure that demanded conformity. Yet, at the same time, students also evidenced their taking opportunities for space for reaction in their non-compliance and fighting back against school imposed norms and/or rules; and/or their situated agency in retaining a critical sense of self against the prevailing dominant expectations and norms. The fact that they provide the accounts they do is testimony to their sense of unease, dissatisfaction and outright rebellion against what they were being told and the expectations of their behaviour and aspirations. Creating space for reaction as illustrated in their resistance and dogged determination to push back against the restrictions on their space for action results in the articulate students who took part in the research. Friendships and peer support were important in these stories:

You know, you have that one friend, that, when you're figuring stuff out, you talk to your friend about your identity and stuff. Anyway, I had this friend, and she's been pretty... actually, since, she's come out as bi, which is interesting, but she supported me a lot, she helped me come out. She helped me kind of feel alright about it.

And like, friends, my friends at home, in our friendship group at school, like, half were queer, half weren't. So I knew, you know, I knew they would always be very accepting of me.

In some instances, there was also examples given of space for reaction—fighting back against the injustice they perceived in school rules and/or culture:

I remember girls complained at our school cos the girls couldn't play rugby, and I think, like, a load of people just complained and they actually got rugby on for girls, like I think, when I was like, leaving, because they were, like, it's really bad that you just absolutely split it up, like there's no reason for it.

In terms of sexuality that was the worst, like, there was, like, my friend set up a gay-straight alliance, and they weren't allowed to advertise it. Just cos they were, the school was actually some of the teachers were liberal, but what they were really worried about was parents complaining, and parents saying, like, we're paying fees and this is not...

Change can be brought about but it requires work and takes time. Small victories are important but overall, it is clear that schools are currently not broadly safe and brave places, or indeed 'spaces for action'. It was also evident that the co-production process that we used in our project enabled some 'brave spaces' that could be replicated in schools because the workshops worked inadvertently as opportunities for consciousness raising. Participants shared their individual experiences of having their identities of gender and/or sexuality regulated or facilitated and recognised shared experiences, shared impacts, shared outrage for the ways in which they had been treated because of their gender and/or sexual identity.

Some young people in the workshops already knew each other. Pre-existing friendships can impact the way young people relate to the co-production process. Young people reflected on the co-productive space differently and knowing or not knowing their group members characterised the way they saw themselves in relation to these spaces. In one workshop where most young men and women knew each other to a certain extent, we noted that young people led

the co-production element by merely asking follow-up questions, in a respectful fashion, when lived experiences were shared in the group. Additionally, they posed rhetorical questions to the group including the workshop facilitators which made the process of co-creation even more interconnected. The excerpt below summarises the way these young people thought of the co-productive space as effective in having critical discussions with peers and their comparison of this co-developed space with university seminars demonstrates not only their level of engagement but also a sense of satisfaction from the process.

No, it was just fun, I think, I think going back to the methodology I think that yeah, this is what my romantic view of what a [University] seminar should look like, but it doesn't.

Sometimes, pre-existing friendships added nuance to the process. The group of young men who knew each other from the sports group, while identifying their contributions in creating a *shared space*, saw this as a 'very new' activity that they were undertaking as friends. The following quote captures the novelty for these young men of engaging in a discussion around their gender and sexual identities:

As far as like, what this topic of gender, identity and sexuality, I think, like, women are more open to talk about it. I feel like, the things we've all said in this room, today, I'm sure... I know I've never had this kind of conversation with any of these guys here, you know, we spend a lot of time together, so, men don't necessarily share their views on it as much.

This is not necessarily a new topic of discussion for these young men, but they associate this co-productive space as the first time they had engaged *with each other on this topic*. Thus, the co-production process directly led to young men creating a space for these issues to be talked about for the first time. It is widely recognised that encouraging men to participate in topics which, according to them, 'have to do more with women', is a challenging endeavour which reverberated in this research as well. But from a methodological perspective, the young men moved beyond it by means of an internal acceptance of the space they created for themselves, and the potential of doing that in future.

I was gonna say I felt quite comfortable. I haven't really had that conversation, in particular about gender identity, with like, a group of men. However, I've found I've never been in the situation where I've had to, so I feel like, I wasn't anxious to share what perspective I have on it.

What was also noticeable in the only men-only group we were able to run, was the participants' realisation as the group discussion progressed, that they had never had the opportunity to talk and reflect on the issues they were raising. For some, this was their first realisation of themselves as gendered beings. In this sense, the group acted as a consciousness-raising group in that the young men were able to hear similarities in experiences and contextualise them not as individual, family or school contexts but of broader social forces. In our analysis of the data, we reflected on the consciousness raising potential of this kind of research and are determined to include this more explicitly in our next research project.

Co-production happens best when young people are trusted and navigate their own way through what and how much they want to share. In cases where young people did not know each other prior to the workshop, commonality was sought as a way of building trust to be able to share their lived experiences. In one group comprising of young women, pop



culture references around homophobic and transphobic representations served to form a common ground to discuss the issues personally faced by young women. Although the research team ensured participant confidentiality, in a setting where people feel like 'strangers', trust and confidentiality can be sought in a gentler way. Below is an example of how a young trans man used the co-created space to share his discomfort in sharing his experiences but also placed trust in the young people in the group, thus 'owning' the space:

I will say that like, I personally find it very hard to be emotionally open in a group, so I think that that, possibly, is like, something that could hamper some people. I tend... like, a lot of the stuff that I talked about today are things that genuinely emotionally upset me, but I have to make jokes, cos, like, I don't feel comfortable in front of strangers. You guys are all wonderful.

It not only shows the vulnerable and emotional side to this space but also draws our attention to how these spaces can look different for different young people depending on where they are at in their journeys.

## CONCLUSION

This was a successful pilot in many ways. The methodology, which adopted a Participatory Action Research approach, was successful in bringing together young people willing to consider and explore how gender and sexuality are regulated and facilitated. The exercises used to prompt discussion worked and, in fact, often we only drew on the first exercise as this was enough to start the group discussions about whether, how and when young people realised their identities of gender and sexuality were being shaped. Schools emerged as a key societal institution that through its rules, culture and peers produce rigid cis heteronormative binaries of gender and sexuality, which are presented in common sense ways as natural, fixed and defining not only of the present, in school everyday life, but beyond school and into the future. There is evidence of the inherent contradictions of presenting gender and sexuality as biologically determined yet creating a rule-bound school culture in which there is very little room to critically reflect on the norms of gender and sexuality being produced. Schools manufacture expectations and 'truths' about gender and sexuality and non-conformity is barely tolerated. Peers, who might also be friends, can be instrumental in shoring up dominant norms of gender and sexuality by disagreement or a range of more or less punitive behaviours that signal dissatisfaction with non-conformity.

At the same time, while recognising young people's space for action is limited and their agency is situated and embodied, we also see evidence that students in our sample found space for reaction insofar as they resist the pressures from school rules, culture and peers and although they might conform, they do so in the knowledge that they believe the rules, culture and peers are wrong. In so doing they retain some sense of self, push back against the restrictive school environment and endeavour to develop their own identities of gender and sexuality. Here friends and peers can also be useful in forming a protective group in which they encourage and reassure each other that their non-conformity is valuable. There was also some evidence of students creating space for reaction, actively rebelling against the rules, culture and peers and campaigning for changes to school policies.

Finally, what we did not expect is that the methodology we chose, participatory action workshops, would provide a solution to the problems with schools that students outlined. It was clear that for too many, the workshops were the first opportunity they had had to consider what had happened, how they felt about their school rules, culture and peers, and how

they made sense of what had happened in relation to who they were now and what they thought should happen differently. We concluded that the workshops acted as opportunities for consciousness raising since there were several examples of students making links between individual experiences and realised there were many shared experiences of schools' regulatory practices, and that these practices can be challenged and changed. It is through such collective endeavours that neoliberal heteronormative individualising and responsibilising discourses and structures can be challenged and redefined, opening up spaces for resistance and progressive action (King et al., 2021).

The methodology had its limitations. Primarily, the impact of conducting fieldwork during Covid-19-related restrictions meant that our initial intention to include more formal youth groups could not be realised, mostly because they were not meeting or had become tired of only meeting online. We also had limited success in recruiting a diverse sample. Young people were not explicitly asked to disclose any disabilities or additional needs and so these may have remained hidden and certainly none of the young people identified as being disabled and/or neurodiverse. We also only had partial success in recruiting racially minoritised participants and men. Because of the nature of the project, the topics of gender and sexuality were considered by the young men who took part, to be topics that young women would have more interest in. This in itself indicates the challenges for the project team in any future research in how to attract men to take part. There is scope for using these methods with wider groups of young people, including with school-aged students, and for using other methods including the creation of large-scale datasets and comparative samples to further test our preliminary findings.

Finally, the key findings speak to the central importance of schools as a source of 'the problem', that is of regulating gender and sexuality in ways that establish gender inequalities as natural, common sense, and to be expected, both during school and for the future. However, we also suggest that schools must be part of the solution. Rather than them focusing on the provision of inclusive RSE, policies for bullying and/or sexual violence and safeguarding, a whole school approach (see, e.g., End Violence Against Women, 2023) should be adopted with an eye on the rules, culture and peers in order to effect whole school change in facilitating the development of identities of gender and sexuality that are less hierarchical, unequal and differently valued.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There were no conflicts of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research data are not shared.

## ETHICS STATEMENT

Ethical approval was secured through Durham University Department of Sociology.

## ENDNOTE

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.everyonesinvited.uk/>.

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