



# Educating Teenage Boys About Consent: The Law and Affirmative Consent in Boys' Socio-Sexual Cultures and Subjectivities

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## Abstract

Educating boys about consent in schools in England is required as part of the now-statutory Relationships, Sex, and Health Education curriculum and, moreover, is considered important for addressing sexual violence, abuse, and harassment among young people. The present paper draws on qualitative data collected in three schools in southeast England to explore how boys are being taught about consent and how they relate to and interpret educational messages about consent in terms of their sociosexual subjectivities and peer sexual cultures. Data was collected during May–June 2022 through classroom observations, focus groups with boys, and discussions with teachers in a co-educational academy, a boys' academy, and a boys' independent school, all in southeast England. The data suggests that while typical consent education messages may rationalise or provide a 'road map' for consent, the boys felt uncertain and anxious about navigating the perceived, often anticipated, realities of youth sexual culture. The framing of sexual activity as only consensual, and thus legitimate, if there is a clear and direct yes, conflicted with these realities. As supposed initiators of sex, as masculine heterosexual subjects, the boys felt a responsibility for obtaining consent yet seemed to lack confidence regarding the socio-affective skills required for doing so. The paper calls for an integrated model of consent education that addresses knowledge, skills (including emotional literacy), and the normative contextual contingencies that constrain the operation of free choice.

**Keywords** Consent · Sexual violence and abuse · Boys · Relationships and sex education · Masculinity · Heterosexuality · Sexual culture

School-related sexual violence, abuse, and harassment (SVAH) among young people is recognised as a global problem (UNESCO & UN Women, 2016; UNHRC, 2001-2022; World Health Organization et al., 2013). In England, it was reported on by the Women and Equalities Committee (2016). Some years later, in July 2020, the Everyone's Invited Instagram page and website was created, which encourages young people to share testimonials about their experiences of SVAH in schools. There are now over 55,000 testimonials and over 3,000 schools are named. Following the murder of Sarah Everard in March 2021, Everyone's Invited became part of a national conversation about the prevalence of SVAH and it was declared a 'moment of reckoning' for schools (Topping, 2021). A 'rapid response' report conducted by UK schools' regulator Ofsted followed (Ofsted,

2021), and detailed a 'shocking' normalisation of SVAH in state and independent schools and colleges. It was identified that girls and gender non-conforming young people are disproportionately likely to be victims of SVAH, while boys are more likely to perpetrate SVAH.

An absence of consent is considered a defining feature of SVAH and, in turn, educating young people about what constitutes consent and their legal rights and responsibilities regarding consent is central to many preventative interventions. Schools are already required to teach about consent as part of the now-statutory Relationships, Sex, and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum (Department for Education, 2019). The emphasis on schools educating about consent, as well as about the definitions of 'healthy' and 'unhealthy' relationships, was further underscored in the above-mentioned Ofsted (2021) review and the Department for Education (DfE) is producing further non-statutory guidance for 'Teaching Relationships Education to prevent sexual harassment and sexual violence.' Given the documented disproportionate involvement of boys in the perpetration of SVAH and girls and gender

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non-conforming youth as victims, the implicit–oftentimes explicit–approach to practice has been to educate the former about their legal and moral duties to seek and obtain consent and the rights of the latter to refuse and withdraw consent (de Villiers et al., 2021; Phipps & Young, 2015; Phipps et al., 2017).

The targeting and involvement of boys in SVAH prevention efforts is not new and much has been written about as effective and ineffective interventions for addressing the problem with them (Flood, 2011; Jewkes et al., 2014). In this paper, I draw upon qualitative data collected in three secondary schools in southeast England during May–June 2022 to explore how teenage boys relate to consent education and interpret educational messages about consent in terms of their normative peer gender and sexual cultures and their gendered sexual subjectivities. The research was conducted in partnership with Life Lessons Education (LLE), an RSHE provider, which designs resources for schools. LLE was interested in how best to design and deliver RSHE on consent for boys, and the current study was intended as an evidence-gathering exercise. We devised the following research aims to understand:

- Boys’ perspectives on the consent education they have received in school and if and how this education aligns with their perceived consent cultures and sexual subjectivities.
- Teachers’ perspectives on teaching boys about consent including their priorities for, concerns about, and experiences of designing and delivering RSHE on consent for boys.
- Boys’ engagement in RSHE, in general and about consent.

The current research was grounded in the notion that meaning and experience arise at the intersections of culture, interpersonal relations, and individual subjectivity (see Jackson & Scott, 2010). Data analysis aimed to identify how consent education was actively taken up by boys as they created meaning about and enacted a gendered sexual subjectivity within a social context in which the gendered relations of consent are, at least deemed to be, potentially in flux. This paper identifies the implications for educating about consent and the potentialities and limitations of consent education for engaging with the complexity of gendered sexual subjectivity among boys and for disrupting and transforming youth sexual consent cultures in ways that support the prevention of SVAH.

## Young People’s Sexual Consent Culture

Typically, RSHE about sexual consent in England educates about the law and ‘affirmative consent’ (Gilbert, 2018; Whittington & Thompson, 2017). The relevant law

in England and Wales (the Sexual Offences Act 2003, s45) defines consent in terms of freedom, capacity, and informed choice and requires both parties to ensure that consent is given. Affirmative consent goes further and places responsibility on initiators of sex to secure consent through clear and direct agreement and it challenges any notions of assumed or pressured consent (Gilbert, 2018; Mueller & Peterson, 2012). Analogies, such as the ‘Cup of Tea’ video which compares sex to offering someone a cup of tea, are available as resources to educate about affirmative consent. There are, however, problems with this teaching, including the disconnect between abstract and legalistic standards of consent and the complexities of youth sexual consent culture and the ways in which individuals, including boys, form meanings about and enact gendered sexual subjectivities (Hirsch et al., 2019; Setty, 2020; Whittington & Thompson, 2017).

Studies investigating young people’s perceptions and attitudes toward sexual consent suggest that their consent cultures are shaped by heteronormative gender and sexual norms and stereotypes that operate to the detriment of girls. Both young people and young adults have been found to express gendered attitudes that normalise pressured and predatory behaviours by boys and, in turn, position girls as gatekeepers responsible for consent (see Muehlenhard et al., 2016, for a review). Seminal work in the field has shown that young women may internalise these constructs into narratives of personal responsibility and blame for unwanted sex, while young men may be able to identify and interpret refusals, including the cultural normative ways that refusals are performed, but pursue sex regardless (Burkett & Hamilton, 2012; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). Consent has thus been conceived of as a continuum characterised by varying levels of force and pressure, including ‘grey areas’ of uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence shaped by subtle levels of normalised gendered sociocultural expectations and assumptions (Hirsch et al., 2019; Powell, 2008; Whittington & Thompson, 2017). Sexual *compliance* rather than consent exists for many young people (Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010), while grey areas also operate through risk and transgression, including in precarious contexts of pleasure and danger, for example involving alcohol and ‘casual’ sex at parties (Demant & Heinskou, 2011; Setty, 2020).

Yet, young people’s ‘sexual scripts’—or the expectations of the self and other that they bring to sexual interactions including regarding if and how consent is sought and established—have been theorised as resulting from an interplay between culture, the interpersonal situation, and individual subjectivity (Jackson & Scott, 2010). While, therefore, norms and meanings pertaining to gender and sexuality form part of cultural resources that shape sexual scripts, they are not deterministic and unfold through the active ways in which young people make meaning about and enact a gender sexual subjectivity including through and within interpersonal interaction with one another.

## Boys, Masculinity and Sexual Consent

On one hand, it has been identified that boys and young men who more strongly endorse traditional and stereotypical gender roles are more likely to normalise, perpetrate, and/or blame victims for SVAH (Flood, 2009; Flood & Pease, 2009; Smiler, 2013). As a result, addressing so-called ‘hegemonic masculinity’—the dominant ideology of masculinity predicated upon male power and dominance including over girls and women in the field of heterosexual gender relations (Chambers et al., 2004; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Holland & Thomson, 2010)—is part of SVAH prevention.

On the other hand, it has also been suggested that those boys and young men are in the minority and masculine sexual subjectivities are more fluid, complex, and multifaceted than is oftentimes believed (Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Flood, 2009; Pascoe, 2003; Smiler, 2013; Smiler & Heasley, 2016). Masculinity is, essentially, not fixed and is instead ‘contested and resisted’ (Frosh et al., 2003, p. 85; see also Epstein et al., 2009; Smiler, 2014). Most boys and young men may not want to commit SVAH but are navigating sexual consent cultures characterised by meanings and norms about what is expected of them (and, indeed, what they are entitled to) as masculine subjects, particularly in heterosexual relations of sex and consent, and the enactment of a subjectivity that aligns with these constructs may be a way for them to gain recognition and inclusion in peer contexts (Flood, 2008). The ways in which boys and young men navigate these cultures varies, however, and while they may perceive a norm, they do not necessarily enact it or, at least, their enactment is active and may be constitutive of or resistant to the norm in various ways and to various extents.

The grey areas of consent thus also potentially operate at the intersections between cultural, interpersonal, and individual levels of meaning and experience as individuals navigate the various messages about gender, sex, and consent to which they are exposed and, indeed, that they construct and co-construct in their peer and social contexts. These complexities also relate to boys’ and young men’s experiences of SVAH, and the meanings given regarding their right to form and articulate consent as well as to seek and obtain it. It has been shown that boys and young men can experience SVAH (Krahé et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2021; Naezer & van Oosterhout, 2020; Setty, 2020). Some may agree to unwanted sex due to awkwardness or discomfort about refusing sex, or to enhance their social status through the pursuit of idealised standards of masculinity (Meenagh, 2021; O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010), suggesting both an interpersonal and normative context to the meanings of these experiences.

At a time when cultural constructions of masculine entitlement and feminine passivity in heterosexual gender relations are in flux (see Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019), there ensues a question about how boys and young men are

relating to and making sense of the ‘global conversation’ about SVAH that is currently taking place, including in the micro contexts of RSHE on consent that they receive in school. How, in other words, are macro-level discourses about gender and sexuality filtering down to the education they are receiving and what are their perspectives on this education in terms of their developing socio-sexual subjectivities? On one hand, there is evidence of backlash and resistance among some boys and young men about their responsibilities and, due to the legalistic framing of consent, the perceived risks that they face regarding legal censure and punishment (Burrell, 2021; Hirsch et al., 2019; Setty, 2020). Support for affirmative consent and bodily and sexual autonomy can, furthermore, co-exist alongside gendered narratives and male entitlement (Metz et al., 2021). These reactions and tensions could be interpreted as a way for boys and young men to claim ‘good men’ status while avoiding a deeper transformation of power (Burrell, 2021). Yet, it could also result from the dilemmas that boys and young men may experience in conceiving of and articulating a gendered sexual subjectivity and, in turn, the need to support their emotional literacy and to create safe spaces for the development and expression of fluid and multifaceted forms of masculine subjectivity (Smiler & Heasley, 2016).

While education about what constitutes consent and young people’s legal rights and responsibilities has increased, attitude and behaviour change cannot be presupposed (Whittington & Thompson, 2017). It has been shown that the relationship between knowledge, attitude, and behaviour change is complex and non-linear, including in the field of SVAH prevention (Flood, 2011). Instead, it is argued that educational interventions need to be sustained and holistic, addressing knowledge but also the cultural, interpersonal, and individual levels of meaning and norms that infuse young people’s understandings, attitudes, and practices regarding themselves as gendered sexual subjects and their decisions and actions regarding consent (Coy et al., 2016; Flood, 2011; Gilbert, 2018; Pearce, 2013; Setty, 2020; Whittington, 2021). It must recognise boys and young men as individually negotiating and navigating wider social and cultural discourses about gender and sexuality while addressing social norms and structures at the community level (Flood, 2011; Graham et al., 2021; Wells & Fotheringham, 2021). There is a need both to engage boys and young men in the process (Allen, 2005; Hilton, 2007), but also help them to cope with any discomfort that arises when working through matters of (in)equality and power (Keddie, 2021).

The present paper contributes to the field of knowledge about teenage boys’ understandings of and attitudes to consent, specifically regarding the ways in which they are making sense of the messages they receive about consent through RSHE in school and how their interpretation of these messages is shaping and being shaped by their perspectives on

sexual consent cultures and their understandings of themselves as gendered sexual subjects. Consent is understood here to be ‘socially constructed’, insofar as what constitutes consent, how it should be established, and roles and responsibilities for consent were given meaning by the boys through their engagement with the discourses within consent education and the wider sociocultural contexts in which they were forming and expressing gendered sexual subjectivities (Ólafsdóttir & Kjaran, 2019). The purpose of this paper is not to presuppose a particular definition of consent and objectively examine the extent to which the boys’ perspectives conformed to ‘reality.’ Instead, it considers what consent means and how these meanings relate to and unfold through the boys’ attitudes and expectations of themselves as gendered sexual subjects within (often anticipated and hypothetical) sexual contexts. While the primary objective of the paper is, therefore, constructivist in nature, there is a broader concern with feminist objectives regarding the prevention of SVAH, specifically regarding the extent to which and how preventative educational interventions targeted at boys and young men can best engage with and address the underlying causes of SVAH (Flood, 2011).

## Method

The current research involved classroom observations of RSHE lessons, discussion groups with boys, and interviews/discussions with teachers. The participants, materials, design, procedure, and data analysis are outlined below.

## Participants

Data were collected in three secondary schools in southeast England during May–June 2022. Schools were selected for diversity in terms of setting and pupil composition, though no claims are made about the generalisability of the findings to other contexts. The schools included a co-educational academy in a relatively middle-class, monocultural (white British) semi-rural area; a boys’ academy in a relatively socioeconomically deprived urban area serving predominantly black and minority ethnic pupils; and an independent boys’ school in an urban area serving a relatively socioeconomically privileged cohort. Schools were recruited via LLE’s network and each expressed interest in the topic and wanted to learn more about boys and consent.

In the co-educational school, a Personal, Social, Health, and Economic education (PSHE) lead was solely responsible for designing and delivering the curriculum and had extensive experience and training in PSHE/RSHE topics, including consent. The lessons were timetabled on a bi-weekly basis throughout the academic year. In the inner-city school,

there was a PSHE lead who oversaw the design of the curriculum, and a range of teachers were involved in delivery, with lessons typically taking place in a 50-min registration period at the beginning of the school day. In the independent school, there was a lead teacher responsible for provision, with timetabled lessons delivered by tutors and the school nurse.

Within the schools, participants included teachers involved in RSHE design and delivery and the groups of boys. Group discussions with boys included: one group in the co-educational academy with year 9 (age 13/14), three in the inner-city academy with year 8 (age 12/13), year 10 (age 14/15) and year 12 (age 16/17), and two in the independent school with year 10 and year 10/12. The interviews/discussions with teachers included a joint interview with the PSHE lead (white middle-aged female) and deputy head (white middle-aged male) in the co-educational academy; extensive discussion with the PSHE lead (white middle-aged female) in the inner-city school; a discussion group with six tutors who deliver RSHE (male and female, all white, various ages) in the independent school.

## Materials

For the classroom observations, an observation template guided notetaking, covering content, the style of teaching and learning, and pupil behaviour and engagement, along with any other noteworthy observations. We were less interested in objectively assessing practice, and more interested in what unfolds in the classroom.

For the focus groups with boys, we used a semi-structured discussion guide that was designed by the author and LLE. We discussed and agreed the topics of interest and the author produced the guide with an emphasis on open questions and distancing techniques. We took an incremental approach starting with what the boys understood by consent (i.e., what comes to mind when we say the word ‘consent’) and then what they had been taught about consent. We then explored how they felt about what they had been taught regarding the extent to which they felt willing and able to seek, obtain, provide, and establish consent and, in turn, refuse, withdraw, and deal with the refusal and withdrawal of consent. The guide then elicited views on how consent education could or should be improved for boys and what they think the priorities and challenges are for consent education.

Similarly, we developed a semi-structured discussion guide to use with the teachers that took an incremental approach to establishing what the teachers felt are the priorities for consent education with boys, how they approach the design and/or delivery of the education, the challenges they experience in educating boys about consent, and their suggestions for consent education with boys. Again, the author devised the guide with open questions. Across the data

collection methods, these materials were used flexibly, and we were open to pursuing lines of inquiry as they emerged during the observations, discussions, and interviews.

## Design

The research involved a triangulated qualitative methodology (see Carter et al., 2014; Flick, 2018), with data collected via different methods (focus groups, observations, interviews) and from different sources (pupils, teachers, classrooms). The research was designed to create dialogue with and learn from participants and research sites in pursuit of social justice aims regarding consent education and the prevention of SVAH (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013). We chose classroom observations to gain insight into how RSHE is delivered and what the boys are engaging with and relating to. We then explored boys' and teachers' perspectives through group discussions and interviews to understand, respectively, how consent education is taken up by the boys and the intentions and hopes of the teachers for the education. The study was reviewed by University of Surrey Ethics Committed and received ethical approval.

## Procedure

The observations were conducted in the classrooms and varied across the sites. In the co-educational academy, we observed two one-hour classes; one on contraception with year 9 and one on periods with year 7 (consent lessons had already taken place). While the topics were not directly comparable to consent, the lessons showed how RSHE is delivered in terms of the teaching and learning style. While it is likely that boys will engage with and relate differently to the topics of contraception and periods compared to consent, we were able to observe the varying emphases on information, skills, and norms, which was helpful to us when interpreting how the boys spoke about consent education. We do not make any claims about how consent is taught in this school, but instead present data based on what we observed being taught about consent in the other schools and reflect on the implications regarding what the boys across the schools said about consent. In the inner-city academy, we observed four 40-min lessons about consent, two with year 10 and two with year 12. In the independent school, we observed two one-hour lessons combining consent and contraception, both with year 10. Across the schools, the lessons involved the teachers delivering their usual RSHE on content and not anything from the LLE resources. Teachers were aware of and content with our presence. Opt-out consent was used for pupils and parents (none received).

The discussion groups with boys lasted between 40 and 60 min and took place in available classroom space. A teacher was present in the co-educational and inner-city

schools but sat away from the group and did not participate. We were alone with the boys in the independent school. All participants gave informed consent, with parental consent also provided for under 16 s. Discussions were recorded and transcribed. The recordings failed in the independent school, so we relied on the extensive notes taken by the assistant for analysis. The interviews and discussions with teachers varied across the sites. In the co-educational academy, the interview with the PSHE Lead and the Deputy Headteacher took place on MS Teams and was recorded and transcribed. In the inner-city school, we interviewed the PSHE Lead and took notes of the discussion. In the independent school, we held a group discussion with PSHE tutors. The recording of this discussion failed and so we relied upon the extensive notes for analysis. Across the data collection with the boys and teachers, the author led the discussions with the LLE co-founder or research assistant present for notetaking and, where necessary, asking any follow-up questions that they had.

## Data Analysis

Extensive discussions were held by the research team during data collection. We explored emerging findings and started to identify the implications of what we had heard and observed. The author led the formal data analysis and worked with the team to develop, refine, and agree on themes. Thematic analysis was used to identify major codes and themes. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), this process involved: (1) familiarization with the data by reviewing and annotating the data; (2) generation of initial codes; (3) sorting and grouping the codes and identifying initial themes; (4) reorganizing and reviewing the themes; (5) defining and naming the themes; and (6) describing and discussing the themes. The ensuing themes capture commonly articulated perspectives in the data but also the breadth of findings, particularly regarding the different perspectives on consent and how the boys responded to each other in the groups.

Bringing together academic and practice perspectives sometimes entailed addressing differences in perspectives about what was significant. LLE was interested in understanding the tangible ramifications for best practice but were also highly engaged with understanding and exploring the academic interpretations of the data. They both wanted to understand *what* should be done based on the findings and *why* it should be done. The process involved 'reflection, discussion, and debate' about the data (Fassinger & Morrow, 2013, p. 77). It can be challenging to identify 'what to do' with data from different methods and sources (Carter et al., 2014, p. 546). Morse (2009) recommends analysing the data separately to maintain trustworthiness, and then to 'synthesize and identify similarities and differences' (Carter et al., 2014, p. 546). Doing so involved '[integrating] the various

perspectives in the data generated' (Flick, 2017, p. 55) which created potential for an analytical outcome beyond the sum of the methodological components (see Bazeley & Kemp, 2012). In other words, we did not merely focus on what happens in the classroom, what the boys think and feel, and how the teachers approach consent education in isolation, but rather we explored the intersections between the data points and were able to make sense of the different aspects in relation to one another.

## Results

The findings are captured within five main themes: (i) the teaching of consent as an objective legal reality and as achieved through affirmative consent; (ii) the framing (and protection) of boys as initiators; (iii) the othering of SVAH among boys; (iv) power and 'grey areas'; (v) meanings and perceptions of 'false accusations' of SVAH. The themes are summarized in Table 1.

### Consent as an Objective Legal Reality

#### Consent as a Legal Requirement

As per the statutory guidelines for RSHE (DfE, 2019), each school was teaching about the law and consent, including that consent must be free and informed and given with capacity. As found by others (Gilbert, 2018; Whittington & Thompson, 2017), they went further and emphasized the need for affirmative consent (see Mueller & Peterson, 2012), in which consent must be communicated via a clear and direct 'yes' and that anything less is not consent. In the inner-city and independent schools, the teachers conveyed these messages about consent via factual statements and scenarios. Pupils were asked about whether different scenarios are likely to be consensual, and therefore legal, in respect to the facts about consent and, while ostensibly involving active participation in terms of eliciting pupils' responses, there was a right and wrong answer. The scenarios often raised issues of informed and pressured consent, power dynamics, and the use of alcohol/drugs. There was some emphasis on *why* elements of consent are important. For example, a teacher in the inner-city school said that being intoxicated may mean that sexual interactions are 'impulsive' and 'quick,' which may preclude the type of reflection and communication required to establish consent. However, the aim seemed to be to tell the pupils what they need to know about what is legal and acceptable.

Analogies were frequently used and referred to, including the Cup of Tea video, and pupils were asked to consider the principles of consent across sexual and non-sexual situations and examples. There was some lively engagement with

different situations and examples by the boys, suggesting that they may help to bring to life and make relevant the different dimensions to consent in ways that boys can immediately relate to and understand. The teachers varied in the extent to which they engaged with the socio-affective dimensions of consent, including the specifics of sexual consent (see below). Some were factual and formulaic; for example, a teacher in the inner-city school stated that it is important to 'come up with rules' about consent and how to obtain it. At other times, teachers explored how people may feel in different situations; for example, if consent is violated. Typically, it was about identifying emotions and reinforcing the message that consent is important to obtain because of potentially negative socio-affective impacts of non-consent.

#### Consent as Requiring Clear and Direct Agreement

In the focus groups, we found that the messages about consent had been absorbed by the boys. A boy in the inner-city school described consent as 'clear agreement' and many said they were aware that intoxication is risky for consent. Most were, at least initially, positive about the education. A boy in the co-educational academy said it has been 'quite interesting... we kind of understood it better.' A year 12 boy in the inner-city school said it has helped in thinking about 'if you're ready to have sex not just like doing it because you're in a relationship... [or] peer pressure', suggesting that not only had facts been learnt, but there had also been some reflective engagement following the education. A year 8 boy in this school said that 'asking for consent' is good because it shows they 'care enough to ask... to make it feel like it's okay', indicating that consent is a positive aspect to socio-sexual life and relationships. The analogies drawn with non-sexual situations were seen as common-sensical and helpful. For example, a boy in the co-educational school said, 'it's that kind of simple' and that a good person 'wouldn't go against your wishes' whether the matter is sexual or something else, reflecting the notion of SVAH as perpetrated by 'bad' people, explored further below.

#### Consent as Straightforward and Rational

The boys appreciated the structured nature of the education. A year 12 boy in the inner-city school liked 'how we went over the law... that's good because it shows you what the exact law is so you can actually follow the procedure.' Another boy added that it is helpful for providing a 'general understanding of what consent is needed... and for what purposes.' Another said he previously did not realise that consent needed to be directly communicated and 'thought it was just a mutual thing, like when the time's right, you'll have sex. I didn't know you had to question them before.' When asked what he meant by a 'mutual thing', he said

**Table 1** Definitions and Examples of Consent Themes

Theme	Description	Prototypical Example	Samples Observed In
Consent as an objective legal reality <i>Consent as a legal requirement</i>	Emphasis on the law and legal definitions of consent and requirement for consent for sex to be legal	“I feel, like, how we went over the law, like that’s good because it shows you what the exact law is so you can actually follow the actual procedure.”	Co-educational academy Inner-city year 8 Inner-city year 10 Inner-city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Consent as requiring a clear and direct yes</i>	‘Yes means yes’ and anything less is not consent	“Like a clear agreement, basically. You wouldn’t go and do something if someone has not told you that you actually can because it’s just plain wrong.”	Co-educational academy Inner-city year 8 Inner-city year 10 Inner-city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Consent as straightforward and rational</i>	Consent is as simple as obtaining a yes and so long as this is obtained then sex is legal and legitimate	“It’s common sense because if someone doesn’t agree to something then it’s not okay.”	Co-educational academy Inner-city year 8 Inner-city year 10 Inner-city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
Boys as initiators <i>Boys as responsible for obtaining consent</i>	Boys initiate sex from girls and therefore need to seek and obtain consent from girls	“You have to make sure that she’s comfortable with it and she doesn’t feel like in danger of any sort”	Co-educational academy Inner-city year 8 Inner-city year 10 Inner-city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Boys as active and desiring sexual actors</i>	Boys are motivated to want sex and are socially and personally rewarded for doing so and need to learn how to obtain consent effectively	“Mostly likely in a man’s friend group all the time sex would be a good thing but in a woman’s friend group she would be known as a... a bad word.”	Inner city year 8 Inner city year 10 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Gender neutrality</i>	Boys may also experience SVAH and/or have the right to consent, but the risk is heightened for girls	“Obviously everyone has to agree but I think just... I think it would more commonly be girls who would feel pressured”	Co-educational academy Inner-city year 8 Inner-city year 10 Inner-city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12

Table 1 (continued)

Theme	Description	Prototypical Example	Samples Observed In
Othering of SVAH perpetration SVAH perpetration by bad boys and men	Boys who perpetrate SVAH intentionally or carelessly disregard the need for consent	“...it can't be an accident, you know if they're said no and if they're not a hundred per cent sure that either you're just being careless or inconsiderate.”	Co-educational academy Inner city year 8 Inner city year 10 Inner city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Accidental and unintentional violations of consent</i>	Consent may be violated accidentally or without thinking	“... boys can do stupid things”	Inner city year 8 Inner city year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Boys as lacking self-control and emotional literacy</i>	Boys lack the control and emotional literacy required to self-regulate and manage their sexual behaviour	“Sometimes people know what they're doing and then they'll feel bad about it after, but they just didn't have self-control in the moment.”	Inner city year 8 Inner city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Power and grey areas</i> <i>Yes not always directly communicated</i>	Consent and non-consent often communicated indirectly and non-verbally	“... when you're about to have sex, you don't actually just be, like, 'Oh, do you consent to do this?' I mean, like, let's be real, that doesn't happen.”	Inner city year 8 Inner city year 10 Inner city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Yes doesn't always mean yes</i>	Direct and verbal expressions of consent may be given but not genuinely meant and sex may be unwanted or the person may be ambivalent	“I feel like some people can say yes but not really want to and they feel pressured”	Co-educational academy Inner city year 8 Inner city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Refusing and withdrawing consent difficult from a socio-affective perspective</i>	It is awkward to refuse and withdraw consent and may be hurtful to the person	“... sometimes that's why people get forced to say yes, because they know that like the person that asks would feel very sad or would be very annoyed because they said no.”	Co-educational academy Inner city year 8 Inner city year 10 Inner city year 12
<i>Peer pressure</i>	Normative social contexts and expectations may cause people to consent to or pursue unwanted sex	“I feel like you kind of get like peer pressured into doing certain things. Like not just sex, like things in general. Men get peer pressured into doing things to kind of like... I'm not saying impress but kind of like gain the approval of their friendship group”	Co-educational academy Inner city year 8 Inner city year 10 Inner city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Rejection may be difficult but have to take it</i>	Being rejected or 'led on' may be hurtful but cannot pursue sex anyway	“If someone leads you on it's not very nice but... you've just got to take it on the chin.”	Co-educational academy Inner city year 8 Inner city year 10 Inner city year 12



**Table 1** (continued)

Theme	Description	Prototypical Example	Samples Observed In
False accusations of non-consensual sex/SVAH	People (girls) lie about sex being non-consensual if they regret it or people find out	“...it could just be for... like revenge... For example, if someone cheated on someone and then that person... they want to accuse them just to get at them.”	Inner city year 10 Inner city year 12 Independent year 10 Independent year 10/12
<i>Uncertain consent and ambiguous situations</i>	People (girls) may say that sex is non-consensual in ambiguous situations and there can be misunderstandings about whether it was consensual between those involved	“Afterwards, after the incident, whatever they said, they might look back at it and think, “Oh I should’ve said this” or “I should’ve said that.” That’s when it comes like a bit like grey because like they don’t really know which answer to choose, they’re in between, and that can make them like regret the decision that they’ve made.”	Inner city year 10 Elite year 10/12

‘the emotional side... the emotion is right, you will have intercourse’, suggesting that sex was an interpersonal and affective endeavour. The boys in this group said that their perception that sex should ‘just happen’ and is affectively experienced is based on media portrayals of sex and relationships. A boy in the co-educational school described RSHE on consent as more reliable than other depictions and sources of information and said that he ‘prefer[s] to learn it somewhere where there’s rules... and you can understand it and there’s someone who has experience, a teacher, and they can explain it to you rather than just learning through experience yourself.’ There was a sense that consent education rationalised the process of consent and provided the boys with a sense of certainty as to what is required (Gilbert, 2018).

This praise for structured and reliable education seemed related to the sense of responsibility that many of the boys felt for obtaining and establishing consent, with a tutor in the independent school stating that boys want a ‘roadmap to consent’ that they can follow. As discussed below, however, the extent to which a roadmap can smooth the perceived realities of interpreting and establishing consent was unclear. Some boys felt that the ‘facts’ about consent are a starting point and perceived there to be further learning to fully understand consent. A year 8 boy in the inner-city school said they had learnt ‘the basics of things... when to do things, when not to do things.’ When asked what is meant by the ‘basics’, another replied, ‘like how to go up to somebody and ask for consent... that’s the basics.’ Boys in the independent school likewise referred to having learnt the basics in terms of the law. When suggested that this presupposes more to consent than the law, they said that there is a difference between the law and how it is ‘applied in real life.’ The classroom observations suggested that the boys are typically told *what* to do and some boys in the independent school described it as ‘the same people saying the same things’ in terms of ‘not doing anything illegal’, with some year 12 boys in the inner-city school expressing similar sentiments. A sense of tedious repetition was apparent in some of the observed lessons, with, for example, some boys rolling their eyes when the Cup of Tea video was referred to and somewhat of a muted regurgitation of previously learnt facts about consent when asked questions by teachers. Some boys said that they had also received instruction in consent by parents, mostly mothers, which they likewise described as ‘repetitive’ with one boy in the independent school experienced it as ‘nagging’ (and others agreeing with the sentiment).

For most boys, their concerns about the perceived gap between the facts and reality seemed hypothetical and abstract, insofar as they positioned themselves as not yet sexually active. A boy in the independent school, for instance, framed it as a concern ‘for the future’ and a year 12 boy in the inner-city school said, ‘it’s not really useful to me since

I'm not in really any, like, relationships... it doesn't apply to me much but maybe in the future it might very useful.' Another boy in his group agreed that it is useful 'for future reference.' When unpicking their concerns, however, many of the boys expressed sentiments that implied direct, or at least vicarious, experiential, and affective dimensions to their perspectives; sex and, in turn, interpersonal dimensions of consent were very 'real' to them in terms of their developing sociosexual subjectivities. Typically, the perceived utility of learning about consent related to initiating sex and obtaining consent.

## Boys as Initiators

### Boys as Responsible for Consent

Particularly in the inner-city and independent schools, there was an implicit (often explicit) framing of boys as initiators responsible for obtaining consent both among staff and within the lessons, which was reflected in the discussions with the boys. This framing seemed driven by the perceived objectives of consent education shared by the teachers. In the inner-city school, the lead PSHE teacher said that the boys are at risk of perpetrating or being accused of perpetrating SVAH and the intention is to give them the knowledge required to avoid breaking the law. Given the ethnic and social diversity in the school, in which many of the boys seemingly had relatives in prison, the risk was heightened in her view due to discrimination in the justice system. She said that their approach means the boys are simply 'rote learning' the 'right answer' about consent, but she felt that within available time and resources, the priority must be to teach them about their legal responsibilities to 'protect' them and that the school 'cares' a great deal about them. In the independent school, the aim seemed likewise to teach about the law and manage the risks of SVAH although the tutors were concerned that it is 'risk averse' and they would ideally frame it as about 'enjoyable sex.' The Everyone's Invited website seemed to be somewhat driving the approach, with the lead PSHE teacher explaining that it has led to an emphasis on consent because it was one of the schools included in the testimonies.

In contrast, in the co-educational school, while the boys were somewhat positioned as initiators, the lead PSHE teacher said that educating about consent should be about 'values' and 'morals' and she bemoaned transactional models of consent, which, she felt involves 'treating consent like a game... once you've achieved it, that's the green light... you can do what you wish.' She said she tries to teach it as a 'fluid and constant thing... that they are a grown-up and sophisticated and can read other people...'. The deputy head in this school added that it is about teaching boys 'to be loving and kind and thoughtful and respectful with their

partners.' The teachers across the schools seemed to be interested in ideas of gender equity and, at least ideally, would engage with concepts of mutuality and reciprocity; yet they varied in the extent to which they perceived this to be possible for their cohorts considering the wider contexts of risk that they perceived to exist. The lead PSHE teacher in the inner-city school, for example, said that in more 'middle-class, white' schools there is perhaps greater scope to consider matters of mutuality and reciprocity, but this is just 'not possible' in her context. The tutors in the independent school felt that they lack the knowledge, skills, and time required to engage with the different dimensions and normative contexts of sexual interactions and experiences deeply and meaningfully, and that the teaching mostly entails an articulation of what the boys need to know about what constitutes consent and their responsibilities.

### Boys as Active and Desiring Subjects

Boys across the schools appeared to have absorbed the idea of being initiators, in line with findings from previous research (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). In the independent school, for example, some did not recall having been taught about identifying or communicating their own wants or rights to consent. They tended to believe that the assumption is that boys always want sex and are obligated to obtain consent from girls. A year 10 boy in the inner-city school similarly felt that consent is 'the man asking the woman. If she agrees, they do it, but if she doesn't, they don't.' Another boy in his group added that 'it might be the woman coming towards you' but 'as a man, even if she's coming to you, it's right to always ask her multiple times if she's alright with it', with another explaining that it is because 'we're like the dominant... stronger species.' These boys also felt that sex is more reputationally damaging for girls and so it is 'more precious than [it is for] men', with such gender norms discussed further below.

A lack of introspection was apparent among the year 12 inner-city boys, with one feeling that 'you're never ready for something until the moment happens... it's more of a spur of the moment kind of thing.' They said that boys may not enjoy or want something, but one explained that 'what you get taught is that the boy has to ask for consent, we never get taught that the girl can ask for consent as well.' When asked whether they think this reflects reality, one answered, 'that's what it ends up being because that's what they present to us, so you kind of feel you have to do it that way', with another adding that it is 'stereotyping.' This matter of stereotypes was raised in other groups and the boys seemed conflicted about what is real for them as boys compared to stereotypes about boys. These gendered understandings of the dimensions to and dynamics of consent have several potential implications. First, they present consent as something to be

*obtained* as a minimal requirement rather than to be ‘enthusiastically’ established (Beres, 2014); second, they reduce the ability of boys to conceive of themselves as having rights to and needing to engage with their own sexual consent or to make sense of any feelings they have about themselves in these regards as sexual subjects; and, finally, as discussed below, it creates a sense of responsibility, even burden, that may manifest in resistant, even hostile, attitudes.

### Gender Neutrality

There was ambivalence among the boys about whether consent education should be gender neutral. Some boys in the independent school felt that it is important to talk about everyone’s feelings and rights, but also believed that SVAH is more often perpetrated by boys toward girls so this gender dynamic should be explicitly discussed and addressed, in reflection of a consensus around the ‘realities’ of SVAH and the need to focus on boys’ behaviour toward girls (Phipps & Young, 2015; Phipps et al., 2017). Some felt, however, that SVAH towards boys can be seen as a ‘joke’ or ‘no big deal’ and so may not be recognized. A year 12 boy in the inner-city school likewise felt if ‘a woman does actually sexually assault a man, it does get undermined... the stereotypes tell them just to man up or be grateful... it’s not really deemed sexual assault.’ Others in this group recounted stories they had heard online or from peers about boys and men being assaulted but it being disregarded or trivialized. They nevertheless felt that size and strength differences between boys and girls are important, with one stating that ‘girls assaulting a boy is less likely to happen... sometimes you’re [the boy] able to stop it, but when a man assaults a woman it’s like their pushing themselves upon them and it’s not as easy for a woman...’. The tensions for these boys between their gendered perceptions of heterosexual dynamics and the sense of precarity that they expressed as boys in terms of gendered sexual subjectivities continued to unfold through reference to ‘stories’ about the risks and vulnerabilities for boys and men, as discussed further below.

In the co-educational academy, a boy felt that ‘it would more commonly be girls who feel pressured... that whole thing of like a male-dominated society... gender inequality.’ However, reflecting the emphasis on mutuality that the PSHE teacher said she tries to convey, another said that ‘in the end, not really [are there differences between boys and girls regarding consent] because what most people want from a relationship is a nice relationship’ and another added that ‘it depends on the person, not necessarily their gender.’ It seemed that these boys wanted to advance a masculine relational and sexual subjectivity that reworks the idea that boys are inherently dominant over girls and, instead, positions them as also desiring intimate connection and meaningful relationships (see Smiler, 2008; Smiler & Heasley,

2016). The PSHE teacher in the school said that she tries ‘hard not to gender stuff, but at the same time, we need to acknowledge that male violence, male harassment, and sexual assault is way more common than the other way around and I’m not going to shy away from that fact.’ There was, therefore, a tension between the perceived disparate rates of SVAH affecting boys and girls and associated power dynamics, and a concern about the reification of boys as initiators across the schools. Yet, as discussed further below, the use of ‘flipped scenarios’ involving female initiators of sex in the classrooms was often met with some resistance from the boys.

As well as precluding a more in-depth exploration of boys’ sociosexual subjectivities, a legalistic framing of boys as initiators may risk reinforcing some of the contextual underpinnings of SVAH. For example, in the independent school, the nurse told the boys that storing an explicit image of a minor on their phone is illegal. She told them that if they are sent an image, say of a naked girl by their friends, they may want to ‘take a cheeky look’ but must then delete it to avoid getting into trouble. Such messaging reinforces the misogynistic cultural trivialization of image-based sexual abuse and normalizes the consumption of girls’ bodies for male sexual pleasure and bonding (see Setty et al., 2022). It nevertheless provides the boys with the knowledge they need to protect themselves legally. This example raises the need to consider the normative contexts in which SVAH takes place and the community-level processes through which SVAH occurs and is given meaning (see Graham et al., 2021; Wells & Fotheringham, 2021).

### The Othering’ of SVAH Perpetration

#### SVAH Perpetration by Bad Boys and Men

Many boys told us that they would never want to violate someone’s consent and, in turn, that they would not commit SVAH. They often othered SVAH to irresponsible ‘bad’ boys and men who know what they are doing and do not care about the other person. Some in the independent school said that such boys are ‘unaware’ and ‘uncaring’, suggesting perceptions of a risky masculine sexual subjectivity organised around conscious or unconscious disregard for others, which they sought to resist by claiming a more considerate orientation. In the co-educational school, one said that ‘some people choose to ignore it [consent]’, another said they do so out of ‘desperation’, and another added that ‘they don’t really care what the other person thinks. It’s like, I want this, this is what’s going to happen.’ One boy described them ‘as the kind of people you have to watch out for in all situations because they’re not the good people.’ The year 8 boys in the inner-city school described it as about ‘control’ over the other person and an inability to ‘wait for the right time’,

the right time presumably being when consent is present. One said, however, that while it is ‘for your own pleasure’, it may be done ‘without really thinking.’ There was thus a perception that power, control, and intentionality co-existed alongside poor self-awareness and self-regulation.

Reflecting the desire to reject and distance themselves from these constructs, in the independent school, Everyone’s Invited was praised by some boys for raising awareness about serious issues that had previously been ‘swept under the carpet’, but many were uncomfortable with the notion that it is a school-wide cultural problem. One boy said that the school had been blamed ‘in entirety’ when it is about personal responsibility and choice. This boy was unhappy with the ‘stigma’ that he felt he now faces following Everyone’s Invited whereby girls (and others) view him as dangerous because he goes to the ‘rape school.’ While perhaps an expression of masculine entitlement, he seemed more concerned about the ramifications for his interactions with girls, whereby he is unsure how to develop relationships if he is already being ‘judged.’ The issue, therefore, seemed to be about how to reconcile his developing sexual subjectivity with the perceptions he believed others may have of him in terms of the wider cultural discourses about his school context and boys within that context.

### Accidental and Unintentional Violations of Consent

A distinction emerged in the discussions, however, between intentional violations of consent and the confusion or uncertainty that they perceived to exist that affect them all as boys. Some in the independent school, for example, said they are not ‘bad’ and would not want to hurt someone but may ‘accidentally’ do so. One boy thought it was ‘rare’ that a boy would go out with ‘the objective of hurting a girl’ but that in the moment ‘things may happen.’ Expressions of uncertainty were often quickly shut down in the focus groups, with boys responding with statements such as, ‘it can’t be an accident... if they’ve said no’ or without a ‘clear yes, it’s not okay so you shouldn’t do it in the first place.’ While there were widespread perceptions that ‘yes may not always mean yes’, one boy described pressure to have sex as typically applied by ‘someone who’s like older or that you know is going to hurt you if you don’t say [yes]’, again reflecting the idea of intentionality and ‘bad’ boys and men. There was a sense of inevitability about these others, with boys across the groups referring to how many boys at school will disengage from RSHE, including in relation to consent, and see it as an ‘irrelevant’ and ‘easy’ lesson that they do not need to take seriously. Many felt that while they personally had absorbed an understanding of consent, these other boys may not have done so. In the lessons, we observed varying levels of engagement among the boys, with some looking away or having side conversations, and active participation

occurred unevenly across the boys. A deeper consideration, however, of whether these boys are ‘bad’ or whether the education is not sufficiently engaging or meaningful to them is required (Allen, 2005; Hilton, 2007). Participation in the focus groups was based on self-selection and the boys who participated were interested in the topic and so an available frame may have been that ‘other’ boys are uninterested and, therefore, are risky sexual actors compared to them.

Intoxication through alcohol was, however, believed by many to raise the risk of inadvertently perpetrating SVAH and this was discussed in terms of the cognitive and affective dimensions to consent. A boy in the co-educational school said that ‘you’re not necessarily thinking straight... You basically go off your emotions when you’re drunk, so if your emotion is to have sex with a woman... you will both do it without thinking.’ When the boys in the independent school expressed similar sentiments about alcohol, we asked whether what they have been taught and their perceptions regarding the risks of intoxication meant that people do not have sex if they are drunk. They all responded ‘no.’ Having sex at parties and when intoxicated, including ‘casual’ sex, was a normalised, albeit risky ‘reality’ in their perceived sexual cultures (Demant & Heinskou, 2011; Setty, 2020). A boy in the co-educational academy added that the risk is heightened for those ‘going to parties with the sole intention of just having intercourse with a person... that’s where you have to draw the line and may like stop going to parties...’. Others agreed that such intentionality means, ‘you’re just finding people who aren’t in the right state of mind to use them for sex and that’s not a good thing’, ‘you’re purposely taking advantage’, ‘which is literally rape’, suggesting, again, that it was perceived to be a matter of intentionally bad people.

### Boys as Lacking Self-Control and Emotional Literacy

While boys were seen as having power and control over girls, the issue of self-control and regulation was further discussed by some in the inner-city school. The year 8 boys, for example, said boys are ‘impulsive’ and ‘can do stupid things.’ A year 12 boy said that some boys may ‘feel bad about it after, but they just didn’t have self-control in the moment’ and others agreed that ‘they can’t control their [sexual] urges’ and ‘they’re a slave to their desires.’ One felt that the difficulty in controlling one’s urges is because ‘they don’t have anyone to speak to’ and that speaking to someone ‘helps you get rid of that desire... but if you’re by yourself... you might start forcing it on the other person.’ Another added that it involves ‘acknowledging you have a problem... see if you can solve the problem.’ For these boys, alcohol exacerbated the problem of self-control. Some boys in the independent school said that the ‘solution’ includes better self-awareness and a preparedness to take

a ‘step back’ and assess the situation. They felt that it can be difficult to recognise the consequences of one’s actions ‘in the moment’ and it is important to ‘read the situation’, ‘resist peer pressure’, and ‘deal with arousal.’ While many boys attributed non-consensual sex to those they felt could not ‘care less’ (year 12, inner-city), there seemed to be an available heuristic through which to express their anxieties about consent in terms of a masculine sexual subjectivity of being sex driven and impulsive and having poor emotional literacy. They seemed to feel responsible for managing these concerns and developing skills in self-control as boys.

## **Power and ‘Grey Areas’ – ‘Yes May Not Always Mean Yes’**

### **Yes Not Always Directly Communicated**

Some of the teaching about consent that we observed in the lessons indicated that it may not always be clear-cut. For example, in the inner-city school, a teacher said that ‘parties’, ‘casual sex’, and ‘alcohol’ are risky because the ‘signals’ are not always clear. He recommended being careful, attending to body language, and not assuming consent, which suggests that consent may not always involve clear and direct communication (or even when it does, it may be contradicted by other non-verbal or behavioural cues of discomfort). The point about being mindful was raised in several lessons. There was seemingly less time for or emphasis on exactly *how* to communicate and interpret consent and the objective seemed to inform pupils about *what* they had to do. Several boys raised the issue of ‘grey areas.’ While, as above, many expressed sentiments such as, consent is ‘set in stone, whereby if it’s not yes, it’s a no’, others felt, for example, that ‘in practice, sometimes people aren’t really able to be clear about what their intention is... so while consent might be black and white... there is a lot of grey areas in my opinion’ and another added that these grey areas may ‘lead you into trouble’ (year 12, inner-city). A boy in the independent school said that he used to think consent is ‘as simple as just the need to hear a ‘yes,’ but now he is more unsure because it seems more complicated than ‘yes means yes,’ contrary to what was said above by in the inner-city school about having learnt that consent is about obtaining a ‘yes.’ Perhaps they have learnt that it is a ‘yes’ but, seemingly, ‘yes’ may not always be present or a verifiable indication of genuine consent. Alcohol was considered by many to be a particular problem because, for example, ‘sometimes the person cannot be thinking straight’ or ‘could be like drunk... so could be saying yes’ (year 8, inner-city), but as explored above, it was considered normative to have sex when drunk. Many distinguished between sex where one person is more drunk than the other (and the latter would be responsible) and when both are similarly drunk, in which they felt it would not be SVAH and would just be a matter

of ‘regret,’ although there was a great deal of uncertainty about whether the latter also involves a risk of getting into trouble. There were two primary concerns apparent: that consent may not always be directly communicated and that ‘yes’ may not always mean ‘yes’ (due to intoxication or, proximal or distal, pressure).

Many felt that the nature of the relationship between the parties is important to how and if consent is requested and provided. In the independent school, some said that while alcohol and sex may not ‘mix’ in terms of capacity, they see their parents drink together and one asked, ‘would that be rape?’. They felt that it would not and that levels of ‘trust’ and ‘intimacy’ matter to consent. Some of the scenarios in the lessons addressed these distinctions and ‘casual’ sex at parties was depicted as risky because of intoxication and the lack of ‘intimacy’ (year 8, inner-city), again suggesting that the boys were framing sexual interactions as, at least in part, about relationality and connection not just as a pursuit or accomplishment. The year 12 boys in the inner-city school also felt that establishing consent with new partners is difficult because it may be ‘awkward,’ and you may be ‘nervous,’ challenging the idea of knowability and control as central to masculine sexual subjectivity. They said that consent is typically established through ‘signals’; for example, one recounted a friend who started having sex with a girl after ‘watching a show... and a sex scene came up... that was a signal for both of them and they just started having sex.’ These boys said that sex may build from ‘touching and kissing and then a little bit of foreplay’ and that direct communication does not always happen, instead the girl may ‘push your hand away’ but ‘the most important thing is before... you put your penis in her vagina, you ask them, are you sure you want to do this?’, notwithstanding having been told in lessons that all sexual activity requires direct consent, including in a staged approach to obtaining consent for each activity.

### **Yes May Not Always Mean Yes**

Even when there is a direct ‘yes’, some boys were concerned about whether it constitutes ‘genuine’ consent. A boy in the co-educational school said that ‘some people can say yes but not really want to and they feel pressured’ and similar sentiments were expressed by others across the schools. Ambivalence was also perceived to be an issue, with a year 10 boy in the inner-city school saying that ‘it becomes a bit like grey because they don’t really know which answer [yes or no] to choose, they’re in between, and that can make them regret the decision they’ve made.’ Some of the year 12 inner-city boys felt that establishing the parameters in advance is important. For example, one said that ‘if she’s invited you over to her house... establish... whether they actually feel inclined to do something’ and ‘make the purposes

clear before you get onto the action’, suggesting again that the boy’s role in ambiguous interpersonal sexual contexts is to identify and establish consent. These parameters also pertained to the expectations of the interaction, for example whether the person wants ‘an emotional attachment’ or ‘you just want to pleasure each other and carry on with your lives.’

### Refusing and Withdrawing Consent Difficult from a Socio-Affective Perspective

Some boys spoke about the need to create a ‘safe space’ for girls to be honest about what they want and not to feel pressure, underscoring the idea that they are responsible as initiators. There was concern that saying no and ‘rejecting’ someone is interpersonally ‘awkward.’ For example, a year 8 inner-city boy said that ‘that’s why people feel forced to say yes, because they know that the person that asks would feel very sad or would be very annoyed if they say no’, suggesting that pressure was perceived to exist on an interpersonal level regarding anticipating and managing one another’s feelings and emotional responses. While it was considered necessary for boys to learn how to ‘seductively’ ask for consent in ways that ‘do not ruin the mood’ (year 10, inner-city), rejection may also be difficult because it may ‘hurt their feelings’ (year 8, inner-city), suggesting that boys are to be competent desiring subjects but also as having to deal with emotionality. A boy in the co-educational school felt that teachers ‘haven’t really spoken about how to deal with [emotions], just that [they] exist’ and another added that they have ‘talked too much about how they are just there and not enough how to deal with them’, suggesting that they felt somewhat unmoored when navigating these aspects of gendered sexual subjectivity.

### Rejection May Be Difficult But Have To Take It

Boys at the inner-city and independent schools felt that girls may struggle to deal with rejection more than boys, because girls would interpret a boy’s rejection as personal (because, supposedly, boys always want sex) while a boy would interpret a girl’s rejection as a lack of readiness and so not as personal, suggesting that cultural norms about gender and sexuality are infusing the ways in which individuals make sense of interpersonal experiences (Meenagh, 2021). The boys in the co-educational school were more gender-neutral but typically framed themselves as having to cope with rejection, with one stating that ‘if someone says no, then listen to them’ and another ‘you’ve just got to give up on it.’ For some year 12 boys in the inner-city school, any emotionality entailed in dealing with rejection was expressed through disparaging sentiments regarding how girls may ‘play with you’ or try to ‘pull you in’ ‘because they like attention’,

which they described as ‘manipulation’, ‘baiting’, ‘not very nice’ and ‘damaging to their mental health’ but something they have ‘got to just take... on the chin.’ These boys were, therefore, both framing themselves as having an inner emotional life and subjectivity and constructing the interpersonal dynamic between boys and girls as the problem, which was perhaps an available frame through which to articulate the dilemmas they face in negotiating interpersonal sexual interactions as competent masculine actors while also managing their own feelings.

### Peer Pressure

Peer pressure and expectations were also perceived to constrain consent, including for boys. A boy in the co-educational school said that boys have sex ‘to be cool, to get attention’ and a year 12 boy in the inner-city school said that ‘from a boy’s point of view, sex is something that’s like bigged up... it’s a must... if you have sex more often, you can be boss...’, suggesting cognisance of a cultural norm and reward structure around hegemonic masculinity regarding sexual pursuit and accomplishment. Boys across the schools said that sex is typically discussed in male peer groups in the form of ‘banter’ and ‘jokes.’ They felt that peer dynamics may lead boys to pressure girls and to have sex that they do not personally want themselves, suggesting that the problem was not just about the perpetration of SVAH but also about their own consent (Krahé et al., 2015; Miller et al., 2021; O’Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Vannier & O’Sullivan, 2010). A boy in the independent school said that boys feel pressure to be ‘dominant’ and may ‘follow along with sex’, suggesting an organising frame of hegemonic masculinity (Chambers et al., 2004; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Holland & Thomson, 2010). These perceived normative contexts also intertwined with the uncertainties they felt as supposed initiators. Sentiments were expressed regarding the need to interpret ‘signals’, ‘not ruin the mood’, and ‘feel the vibe’, as knowing subjects, yet how to do so was unclear to the boys and was not explored in the lessons.

Some boys in the independent school reflected on what this wider context means for SVAH with one pointing out that while it may be ‘easy’ to say, ‘not all men’ in response to claims about the disproportionate involvement of boys and men in SVAH perpetration, they are all responsible for the ‘cultural issue... because of the pressures they place on each other to have sex and the way they all celebrate sex’, suggesting that ‘complicity’ needs to be addressed with boys (see Burrell, 2021). In lessons across the schools, teachers sometimes raised and challenged social norms, including in response to comments made by pupils. Yet, typically less time was spent on *why* a particular normative belief or assumption is problematic or *why* a person may hold or express it (including regarding the way in which some boys in the classroom seemed to ‘perform’ a

masculine subjectivity through ‘joking’ about the content), referring more to the fact that it is unacceptable. In turn, the ways in which this was done during the lessons seemed dependent on the teacher’s outlook. This meant that sometimes the boys were not always convinced of a given problem. For example, in the independent school some boys said that concerns about low-level gendered language (e.g., implorations to ‘man up’) are ‘unrealistic’ and ‘exaggerated.’ The tutors in this school felt that they are ill-equipped to meaningfully tackle the ‘complex societal and systemic’ causes of SVAH regarding gender and sexual norms in ways that would resonate with the boys. The lead PSHE teacher in the inner-city school, meanwhile, said that she would ‘love’ to create ‘consent cultures’ based on gender equity with the boys, but likewise felt limited in terms of what was possible. The teachers in the inner-city and co-educational school both described themselves as having a reputation for being a ‘feminist’ and for critically challenging all forms of sexism but felt that this may be antagonistic or alienating for some boys, seemingly, perhaps, because it takes the form of didactic lecturing.

The distinctions between *what* is a problem and *how* to challenge normative contexts emerged in discussions about healthy relationships and ‘bystander intervention.’ In the co-educational school, boys said they had learnt ‘what is good and okay and what isn’t’ regarding behaviours and traits in relationships (and this was observed in the lessons) but when asked if they still see young people having ‘unhealthy’ relationships, many said yes. One said that they ‘understand what’s happening, we just haven’t really done anything about it’ and another added that ‘they don’t really teach you specifically how to deal with it or how you can talk to people about it...’ Another said that it is a matter of ‘confidence’ to intervene but ‘you don’t really do anything in case you feel like you’re not going to have any friends.’ He explained that ‘people still want a friend, even if they’re a bad friend’ and the group agreed that unhealthy relationships were better than no relationships, suggesting a need to engage with the socio-affective dimensions to interpersonal subjectivity and relationships, beyond just an articulation of what is and is not acceptable. Boys in the independent school spoke specifically about intervening in risky sexual situations, which they have been told they should do. They said that sometimes they may see something happening, for example at a party, but are worried that they may have misread the situation or may be accused of ‘cock-blocking.’ Some said that they have tried to say something before but both parties tell them to ‘go away’, reflecting the idea that the ability to act in peer social contexts is shaped by perceived and expressed imperatives within those contexts. The lead PSHE in the co-educational school recognised the barriers pertaining to ‘status and power’ and how to intervene without ‘making yourself vulnerable.’ Vulnerability seemed to emerge from

the meaning of sex and relationships within peer culture and the need to negotiate these meanings through decisions about whether and how to intervene on an interpersonal level (see Hirsch et al., 2019).

### ‘False Accusations’ of Non-Consensual Sex/SVAH

The message being conveyed to and interpreted by boys was that they are responsible for establishing consent and that anything less than a ‘yes’ is unacceptable. Coupled with the above-discussed perceptions regarding how a ‘yes’ may not always be present or, if it is, ‘genuine’, many were concerned about perpetrating or being accused of perpetrating non-consensual sex/SVAH even if they insisted that they would never intentionally want to do so. These concerns were often expressed through the construct of ‘false accusations.’ It became apparent, however, that false accusations pertained to a range of circumstances in which uncertainty, ambivalence, misunderstanding, and ‘regret’ may be present.

### Intentional Lies or Malicious Allegations

Some year 10 inner-city boys said that false accusations may involve an intentional lie, for example for ‘revenge... just to get at them.’ When asked if they think this is a big problem, all nodded their agreement and felt that they are disadvantaged. One said that ‘when that happens and the girl is found out to be lying, nothing really happens for her... it is going to affect the man more...’. One boy said that some referenced stories and videos seen online about accusations shows ‘it does happen to many people.’ Another added that ‘the woman is more powerful... because everyone will believe what she’s said... she could agree to have consent but later on disagree... and it would be considered rape.’ They felt that boys must be ‘careful’, ‘make sure over and over’, ‘get it clear’, and even ‘record them saying they have consent.’ For one, the perceived risk meant ‘you can postpone sex for a long time because you’re scared of being accused of rape’ and another said, ‘it sets a different tone with girls because you will think it [an accusation] could happen at any point...’. Parties were seen as particularly risky because consent may be given when ‘drunk’ but ‘then later when she realises she done it, she files for a rape case.’ The PSHE teacher in the inner-city school said the boys can often frame girls as dangerous and untrustworthy and she has heard them express sentiments such as ‘don’t trust bitches’, which, she said, comes from lyrics in songs they listen to. The risks entailed in being initiators were, therefore, constructed in response to educational messages about what constitutes consent that were taken up and interpreted through wider cultural reference points, which, in this example, may exacerbate misogyny and hostility toward girls as the *cause* of the perceived problems that boys face.

## Uncertain Consent and Ambiguous Situations

Other boys spoke about false accusations more in terms of misunderstandings. For example, boys in the independent school said a person may change their mind and believe that they have indicated this change with their cues, but the cues have not been picked up on by the boy, reflective of a ‘miscommunication’ model of consent in which unwanted sex is normalised in terms of the supposed inevitable difficulties in interpreting what someone wants (despite evidence that indirect cues are well understood by all parties; Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). They felt that sometimes a person may lie, for example if they regret it or their parents find out, but that girls are not necessarily believed, and the process is damaging to ‘both people.’ They also mentioned the possibility of recording consent but said that doing so would not help given the right to change one’s mind and withdraw consent. Some year 8 boys in the inner-city school felt that ‘changing your mind’ does not mean it is not consensual and one compared it to ‘buying things like at shops. Say like you want to buy like a few clothes and then after you buy it you go home and then you try it one and say you don’t like it, that can happen.’ They said that the same can happen with sex, so ‘people should think before they say the answer’, and then ‘if they didn’t enjoy it then they have to say to the person that they didn’t enjoy it and they probably don’t want to do it again’ but should not claim that it was not consensual.

There seemed to be a general sense that it is difficult to know or understand what girls are thinking and feeling among the boys in both boys’ schools. Some inner-city year 10 boys felt that same-sex interactions entail ‘more trust’ because they are the same gender and ‘you know their emotions, but when it’s a woman, you don’t know what she’s feeling.’ One said that ‘another problem that arises is a female on her period... you don’t really know how she’s feeling... female emotions, they’re kind of... inconsistent... she might be feeling like she really, really wants you and then... she’s really regretting it, or she really doesn’t want to.’ One said he would like to know more about ‘how to determine what a woman’s feeling, like what signs she will give us if she wants to have sex or not’, again suggesting a relational dimension to interpersonal sexual situations that they want to learn how to interpret and manage. Another added that he would like a ‘chart, like what a woman is feeling so we don’t end up in that situation. So, this means this, this means that...’, perhaps underscoring the above point about wanting certainty. Similar sentiments were expressed about girls in the independent school, with some explaining that they feel they have little regular day-to-day contact with girls and that their interactions with girls are mostly about pursuing romantic relationships. They wanted to engage with and develop the skills and experience required to understand the affective dimensions of sex and consent, and in turn develop

emotional literacy; yet these perspectives were constructed in terms of gendered claims about girls’ supposed affective subjectivities, suggesting a conceptualisation of boys’ sexual subjectivities in terms of girls (i.e., masculinity as relative to femininity).

The boys in the co-educational school did not talk about false accusations specifically but the PSHE lead said that the issue has been raised in lessons by pupils and that she considers it important to correct any misperceptions regarding the extent of false accusations: ‘it’s... to be acknowledged, but I just try and counter it with the statistics.’ Whether data can be used to ‘correct’ the concerns that the boys expressed, which seemed rooted in individual, interpersonal, and cultural socio-affective processes and gender norms, is questionable.

## Discussion

This research aimed to understand boys’ perspectives on consent education and the extent to which their perspectives on consent cultures and sexual subjectivities aligned with teachers’ objectives and the messages contained in consent education. We found that the schools were teaching the boys about consent predominantly through informing them about their legal rights and responsibilities and conveying the principles of affirmative consent as fundamental to how they should conceptualise and approach consent in interpersonal sexual contexts (see Gilbert, 2018; Whittington & Thompson, 2017). It was variously phrased in ‘sex positive’ terms regarding the scope for positive and legitimate sexual interactions and in terms of risk and harm reduction through emphasising the need to avoid the socio-emotional harms of non-consensual sex and the risks of legal censure and punishment. Abstractly, most of the boys found these lessons helpful and as providing a straightforward set of strictures for them to follow. Yet, it seemed they were oftentimes framed and conceived of themselves as initiators of sex and it was clear that they struggled with some of the tensions and dilemmas that they face, as initiators, to secure consent from a sexual partner. Their perspectives on these matters were shaped by an intersection between cultural norms and meanings about sex, gender, and consent (including as conveyed to them in consent education) and the ways in which they created meaning about and enacted a gendered sexual subjectivity as boys, including how they responded to and resisted the constructs of hegemonic masculinity. The findings have implications both for understanding how boys relate to and interpret consent education, and about the interplay between cultural, interpersonal, and individual levels of meaning and experience regarding sociosexual life and subjectivity for these boys.



## The Boys' Understandings of Consent as Initiators

Educational discourses about what consent is and why it matters was not just abstract but interweaved with and both shaped and was shaped by the boys' understandings of themselves as developing sexual subjects both on an individual and normative level. There was widespread awareness of a normative context to gendered sexual subjectivity; they perceived a wider cultural narrative that boys are active initiators of sex and felt that the education implicitly or explicitly frames them as such. As initiators, the boys were taught, and were internalising, the idea that sex is only lawful if it is consensual, regarding capacity and free and informed choice (Gilbert, 2018; Whittington & Thompson, 2017). The teaching often explored the 'grey areas' surrounding the formulation, articulation, and interpretation of consent (Hirsch et al., 2019; Powell, 2008), but typically, the message was that consent should be established through clear, verbal, and direct communication. The overwhelming consensus among the boys was that 'yes means yes' and anything less does not constitute consent.

## Navigating Sexual Consent Cultures as Masculine Subjects

Yet, there were hints of, and oftentimes clear statements about, the perceived reality of interpersonal negotiations of consent regarding the absence of clear and direct communication and that, even if a yes is communicated, it may not be indicative of genuine agreement because of various interpersonal and social pressures. The boys went to great lengths to emphasize that they did not support SVAH, and many articulated a masculine sexual subjectivity characterized by care and regard for their (often hypothetical) sexual partner and as being motivated to have sex for relational purposes (Flood, 2009; Smiler, 2008; Smiler & Heasley, 2016). They distanced themselves from what were seemingly well-known sociocultural constructs of masculinity regarding power, dominance, and the pursuit of sex irrespective of the wishes of girls. Yet, there was evidence that they struggled with the idea that they are meant to be knowing and in control (see Smiler, 2014). These concerns manifested in terms of the supposed skills for obtaining consent, whereby it must be sought without 'ruining the mood' and is oftentimes based on subtle and indirect cues that may change at any moment. While their masculine subjectivities were more variable than stereotypically believed, and many of the boys bemoaned these stereotypes, there was a sense that they felt compelled to adhere to the notion of knowing masculine sexual competence in the field of sexual consent.

There were tensions within the normative definitions of masculine sexual subjectivity; including being in control, dominating, powerful, and concerned with sexual

pleasure while also lacking emotional introspection, self-knowledge, control, and regulation (Smiler & Heasley, 2016). Normatively, boys were supposedly at risk because they want sex and are more powerful as masculine subjects yet lack the ability to regulate their emotions and desires and, in turn, their sexual behaviours. There was also a sense that the boys struggled with the affective dimensions of interpersonal and individual sexual experiences and subjectivity. While they claimed that boys responsible for SVAH may have problems with impulse control and self-regulation—reflecting the 'rape myth' of out-of-control masculine sexuality—many boys articulated a personal lack of emotional literacy and self-knowledge. They perceived a lack of space to engage with and explore their inner emotional life and the ways in which emotion infuse—or, at least, they believed it infuses—interpersonal sexual interactions (Smiler & Heasley, 2016). They were being told that they are responsible for ensuring that emotional harm is not caused through non-consensual sex and that it is incumbent on them to create safe spaces where the socio-affective barriers to refusing and withdrawing consent are ameliorated, yet they perceived little opportunity to work through the emotions and social pressures at play, particularly as experienced by them as boys. They perceived little recognition of the ways in which they as boys may experience non-consensual sex and the ways in which such experiences are given meaning and responded to both by themselves and others.

## Understanding Boys' Anxieties about Consent

Resultantly, despite their desire to distance themselves from those they deemed responsible for intentionally perpetrating SVAH, they did not seem confident or comfortable with consent as applied within interpersonal contexts beyond just abstract understandings of consent in theory. For some, their concerns were organized around an available heuristic of 'false accusations', which seemed, ultimately, not to just be about a lie per se but also the supposed likely, or at least possible, outcome of a failure to manage the interplay between cultural norms and scripts for sex and the subjectivities that individuals bring to the interpersonal encounter. While apparent across the schools, these narratives were particularly heightened in the inner-city school, whereby cultural reference points and longstanding perceptions regarding injustice affecting black and minority ethnic males perhaps gave credence or structure to these views. Following Everyone's Invited, boys in the independent school were arguably also 'at risk', yet perhaps concerns with reputation management and 'respectability' shaped their articulation of their concerns through wanting to be seen as 'good men' (see Burrell, 2021) despite the stigma some perceived of going to an 'Everyone's Invited school.'

The above interpretations are not intended to lend weight to the ‘miscommunication model’ of consent whereby SVAH is attributed to misunderstandings about what is and is not agreed on between perpetrators and victims (see Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). Instead, endorsements of ‘rape myths’ around out-of-control sexuality, the inability of girls to communicate clearly about what they want, and the likelihood that girls will lie about non-consensual sex seemed to point to a desire among boys to express feelings of vulnerability. Such vulnerability may need to be critically deconstructed at the socio-cultural level of norms and meanings about heterosexual power dynamics including misogynistic and gender inequitable attitudes and beliefs (Burrell, 2021; Flood, 2011; Jewkes et al., 2014). Yet, it also needs to be resolved through acknowledging the tensions that exist for boys as they seek to both adhere to and resist the oppressive demands of hegemonic masculinity which were perceived to create opportunity and reward structures (at the peer group level regarding the celebration of sexual pursuit and accomplishment) but also risks of perpetrating SVAH. The boys wanted to be cautious and considerate yet also felt under pressure to enact a legible masculine sexual subjectivity within their wider peer contexts, which they perceived to be widespread and normative even as they sought to challenge it. The boys thus faced a dilemma with their hopes for their sexual subjectivities, and these dilemmas were oftentimes articulated, albeit with ambivalence, through available cultural narratives about masculine and feminine sexual subjectivity.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

The boys who participated in this study, as well as the lessons that were observed and the teachers who were interviewed, are inevitably not reflective of all perspectives and experiences regarding consent education, consent culture, and gendered sexual subjectivity. Furthermore, SVAH operates along a continuum that includes so-called ‘low level’ behaviours that may be normalized and are not always characterized by overt dynamics of consent and non-consent. This paper specifically focused on the behaviours and experiences whereby consent was deemed relevant and so broader framings are required to capture the continuum of SVAH. Consent cultures and education also exist beyond the classroom and school; the boys themselves raised different reference points and triangulating methods does not mean that all points have been identified and included (Hammersley, 2008). The teachers felt that extra-school factors (e.g., media, parents, etc.) are an important part of the picture and further research could entail a broader frame of reference. Finally, a strength of this research was capturing the perspectives of differently situated boys and schools but there would be value in including other samples, for example LGBT youth. While this study was specifically interested in boys’ perspectives and purposely wanted to centre these perspectives, it is also important to explore how girls’ feel about

the issues raised in this research and for them to offer their perspectives on the dynamics and cultures of sexual consent as perceived and experienced by them.

### Practice Implications

The findings lend support to a sustained, holistic, and integrated approach to SVAH prevention through consent education addressing social norms and gendered sexual subjectivity (Flood & Pease, 2009; Jewkes et al., 2014). First, it is necessary for professionals working with boys and engaged in SVAH prevention efforts to identify and deconstruct, rather than reinforce, the normative contexts that shape perceptions and attitudes about what is expected from gendered sexual subjectivity and how that is believed to manifest in interpersonal dynamics. It requires professional knowledge and expertise regarding these normative contexts and how to disentangle them with boys in ways that does not alienate boys further. While it is laudable, or at least commonsensical, to seek to challenge expressions of stereotypical and misogynistic beliefs in lessons, it is also important to address *why* these beliefs are problematic and *why* someone may hold, express, or act upon these beliefs. Likewise, not just stating that pressure or assumed consent, for example, is wrong, but exploring *why* a person may pressure another person or assume they consent, and the sociocultural underpinnings to these processes. Education must, therefore, not just ‘shut down’ the unacceptable but draw it out and identify the causes of beliefs and their expression within different settings. Some of the more troubling sentiments expressed in this research, for instance, often seemed shaped by an overarching uncertainty and lack of confidence that will not go away just because the expression of the belief is censored and may, resultantly, be given credence in other settings (e.g., in some online communities).

Second, and relatedly, it is necessary to make space for more fluid and diverse forms of masculinity, both in terms of boys’ current subjectivities and what is possible for them as developing gendered sexual subjects. Rather than framing boys as needing to be knowledgeable and competent actors in the field of sexual consent (in terms of simultaneously ‘reading the signals’, ‘maintaining the mood’, ‘creating safe spaces’, and ‘regulating their emotions’), mutuality and reciprocity could be emphasized as a way of creating space for boys to articulate different socio-affective orientations to sex, gender, and consent and, in turn, develop and improve their emotional literacy and self-awareness.

While doing so may be seen as challenging, a heightened concern about establishing boys’ legal responsibilities and the conflation between legal and affirmative standards for consent may be problematic. First, it incentivises boys to prioritize obtaining a ‘yes’ and, second, suspicion and hostility may arise in heterosexual dynamics because of the

framing of risk (Ólafsdóttir & Kjaran, 2019). The PSHE lead in the co-educational school was more directly critical of the risks of transactional models of consent that frame agreement as a ‘prize’ and boys across the schools were aware of the constraints that operate on free choice within sexual interactions. Resultantly, a framing of *choice* may be vital to more deeply unpacking SVAH and what it means for sexual interactions to be ethical and respectful beyond what can be arbitrated by the law (Cossman, 2018; Phipps, 2018). Through emphasising choice, the presence or absence of a ‘yes’ is less pertinent than the conditions (proximal and distal) in which a sexual interaction unfolds and would create space to explore with young people (boys, girls, heterosexual, same-sex attracted, etc.) *how* exactly to create the conditions required for individuals to exercise rights to free choice. Rather than defining different sexual contexts as inherently more or less legitimate, the emphasis could be on identifying how constrained choice operates across contexts and developing and practicing the skills (not just presupposing or stating what those skills are) to create spaces of free choice. This process may help create the conditions required for boys to cope with critical deconstruction of power and norms at the socio-cultural level, and for boys to develop and practice the socio-emotional literacy required to act as ethical and reflexive sexual actors regarding their own and others’ rights to free and informed choice in sexual interactions.

Additionally, while some of the teachers valued the use of analogies to convey the principles about consent, it is apparent from this research that the normative contextual contingencies surrounding *sexual* consent must be specifically addressed. Doing so may be possible through comparing sexual and non-sexual scenarios and interactions, and/or through examining sexual consent as a unique issue that raises vital concerns about bodily and sexual integrity, autonomy, and rights.

## Conclusion

The findings from this research lend support to the argument that factual knowledge about what constitutes consent from a legal and affirmative perspective may not automatically translate into ethical and equitable sexual consent cultures, as argued by Hirsch et al. (2019). The potentialities seem jettisoned by distinctions between what the boys have been told they *should* do and what they felt *able* to do, alongside an ongoing normalization of heteronormative gender inequities and power dynamics and of risky, but normative, potentially rewarding, ‘casual’ and ‘intoxicated’ sex (Demant & Heinskou, 2011; Setty, 2020). They may be able to identify the problems but did not necessarily feel able to address them, suggesting that the rationalization of consent makes sense on an abstract level but not when applied to ‘real life’

(Gilbert, 2018). The positioning of boys as responsible as initiators—while perhaps appearing progressive because it challenges the longstanding emphasis on girls to protect themselves against SVAH—may risk creating anxiety, suspicion, and/or hostility if boys consider themselves as at risk of being accused of SVAH (that they claim they would never intend to commit) because of gender dynamics and consent cultures that they feel they cannot control, alongside a lack of emotional literacy and space to explore their own wants about sex away from gendered expectations. These frameworks also exclude same-sex and queer dynamics of consent (de Heer et al., 2021) and, in turn, reify the boy-girl dynamics as uniquely and inherently risky and, potentially, exploitative.

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings from this study are available from the corresponding author on request.

## Declarations

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study, including parental consent for young people aged under 16.

**Research Involving Human Participants** The study was conducted in accordance with professional ethical obligations for research involving human subjects. Favourable Ethical Opinion was received from the University of Surrey Ethics Committee (FASS 21-22 012 EGA).

**Competing Interests** The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to declare.

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