

Sexual Harassment in Schools is not “Routine Adolescence” – A Case Study in the Vryheid School District of South Africa

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Abstract: This article is based on the findings of a recent small scale qualitative case study of sexual harassment in schools in a specific school district in South Africa. The purpose was to explore and describe the notion of sexual harassment in schools in the Vryheid school district in South Africa. The study is framed within an educational, organisational and legal perspective on the phenomenon as set out by Duke (2002). It revealed that the tenets of sexual harassment amongst pupils are imbedded in what constitute a safe and secure school, namely healthy, orderly and caring space; effective leadership and the good conduct of teachers and pupils. The researchers attempted to develop guidelines for the school management from the views expressed by the participants after finding that the situation on the ground is worse than what most education leaders expected and that there is an urgent need for management guidelines to bring about immediate improvement in the lives of pupils. The following guidelines are suggested: Installation of electronic gadgets, body search of pupils, revision of the suspension powers for School Governing Bodies, extension of the feeding scheme to high schools, involvement of community leaders, re-introduction of religious doctrine in schools, invitation to whistle blowers to report incidences.

Keywords: sexual harassment in schools, social justice, Children’s rights, bullying, management guidelines, school safety and security

Introduction

This article is based on the findings of a recent study of sexual harassment incidences in schools in a specific school district in South Africa. The purpose is to explore the notion of sexual harassment in schools in the Vryheid school district in South Africa. It argues, after finding that the situation on the ground is worse than what most education leaders expected, that there is an urgent need for management guidelines to bring about immediate improvement in the lives of pupils. This would contribute to achieving social justice in South Africa as a developing democracy.

The title of this article is derived from a webpage primarily for US women (iVillage 2009). It is in reaction to a Supreme Court's ruling that school districts can be held liable for damages under Federal law for failing to stop sexual harassment among peers in the classroom. Writing for the dissenting minority the judge calls the decision an unwarranted intrusion into "day-to-day classroom logistics" and a judicial overreaction to "the routine problems of adolescence". The webpage continues by pointing out that the classroom the judge knew is no longer the classroom of today.

There is nothing "routine" about the taunting that occurs among peers today. Teasing no longer means pulling pigtails or even snapping a bra strap. What goes on in school hallways today is groping, inappropriate touching, physical abuse towards gays and verbal abuse that would be rated R if used in a movie (iVillage 2009, 1).

On another website the Science Daily affirm the link between sexual harassment and bullying but also expresses a warning that in this link the importance of the challenge of managing sexual harassment in schools must not diminish.

Schools' current focus on bullying prevention may be masking the serious and underestimated health consequences of sexual harassment...although less frequent, sexual harassment has a greater negative impact on teenagers' health than the more common form of victimization, bullying (Science Daily 2009, 1).

Where does it all start – what can the literature tell us?

In the next few paragraphs reference will be made to what we already know about sexual harassment in schools specifically in South Africa by referring to research already conducted and publicised.

Sexual violence and the threat of sexual violence go to the core of pupils' subordination in society. Sexual harassment, depending on the form it takes, violates that right to integrity of the body and personality which belongs to every person and which is protected in the South African legal system both criminally and civilly. When the school becomes unsafe and a violent playground is created, it is important that schools and the government respond appropriately. Authorities should take steps to ensure that pupils have a sense of security and comfort at school or to counsel and discipline pupils who

commit acts of violence. Many pupils leave school because they feel unsafe and are unwilling to remain in an environment that has failed to protect them. A failure to deal with the issue of sexual violence in schools reinforces and legitimizes violence against pupils especially girls and gender inequality. A school environment where sexual violence and harassment is tolerated compromises the right of pupils to enjoy education on equal terms – a lesson that is damaging to all children and in sharp contrast with South Africa's Constitution and its international obligations (RSA 1996a; RSA 1996b)

As a practice, sexual harassment is certainly not new. However, the term itself is relatively new in South African culture. Recently the abuse of children has captured the country's imagination in a way that very few other issues have. In the global report of the International Tribunal for Children's Rights released in 2001, the Tribunal noted that despite the universal ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, twelve years later all indicators are that violence against children is on the rise (Human Rights Watch 2001a).

The study would approach the phenomenon of sexual harassment in schools amongst pupils from an educational perspective (how does it affect learning?), an organisational perspective (how does the leadership respond to it?) and a legal (how is it done within a specific a human rights legal framework?) fully acknowledging that there are also other conversations going on such as the psychological, political and cultural (Duke 2002).

Definitions

Harassment is defined by the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (RSA 2000) as:

unwanted conduct which is persistent or serious and demeans, humiliates or creates a hostile or intimidating environment or is calculated to induce submission by actual or threatened adverse consequences and which is related to

- (a) sex, gender or sexual orientation
- (b) a person's membership or presumed membership of a group identified by one or more of the prohibited grounds or a characteristic associated with such groups.

Sexual harassment is harassment or unwelcome attention of a sexual nature. It includes a range of behaviour from mild transgressions and annoyances to serious abuses, which can even involve forced sexual activity (Dziech & Weiner 1990; Boland 2002). Sexual harassment is considered a form of illegal discrimination in many countries, and is a form of abuse (sexual and psychological), and bullying.

Sexual harassment is discriminatory as it infringes the dignity of an employee or learner and constitutes a barrier to equality in the workplace. It is defined in the Code of Good Practice on the Handling of Sexual Harassment Cases as “unwanted conduct of a sexual nature”. The unwanted nature of sexual harassment distinguishes it from behaviour that is welcome and mutual. The Code is attached to the Labour Relations Act (RSA 1995).

Sexual harassment in schools is defined by Oosthuizen as:

“...any unwanted and unwelcome verbal or non-verbal conduct of a sexual nature, or conduct based on sex, gender or sexual orientation, which is persistent or serious and which is demeaning or humiliating, or creates a hostile, offensive or intimidating environment or is intended to induce submission by actual or threatened adverse consequences (2004, 76)”.

The Prevalence and Impact of Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence

The latest and most in-depth study to date detailing the prevalence and impact of sexual harassment and sexual violence against pupils is that conducted by Human Rights Watch in 2000. Human Rights Watch investigated cases of alleged rape, sexual abuse, and harassment involving school-girls in South Africa. It found that sexual abuse and harassment of, in particular girl-pupils is widespread in South Africa.

The report looked at the impact of sexual harassment and sexual violence on pupils and found that it erected a discriminatory barrier for young women and girls seeking an education. That is, the report found that sexual harassment and sexual violence had a profoundly destabilising effect on the education of-girl children. All the rape survivors interviewed reported that their school performance suffered and it was

harder to concentrate on their work after their assaults. Some of the girls reported losing interest in school altogether, some of the girls transferred to new schools, other simply left school entirely (Human Rights Watch 2001b).

The report found furthermore that there were ineffective mechanisms within schools to respond to the problem of harassment and violence. The management guidelines to handle sexual abuse are absent and rarely do school authorities take steps to ensure that girls have a sense of security and comfort at school or to counsel and discipline boys who commit acts of violence. Many girls leave school altogether, because they feel unsafe and are unwilling to remain in an environment that has failed to protect them (Human Rights Watch 2001a7).

Thus, the report found that the State's failure to protect girl pupils and respond effectively to violence violated their bodily integrity and their right to education. The report urged the Department of Education to develop a National Action Plan to address the issue of sexual harassment and sexual violence, and to develop and disseminate procedural guidelines governing how schools are to address allegations of sexual violence and harassment, specifically detailing how schools should treat victims of violence and those who are alleged to have committed such acts.

In a study done by De Wet (2005) in the Potchefstroom area, it was indicated that 71 out of the 2414 respondents have been indecently abused by a peer at least once, 16% of the respondents have experienced sexual bribery from a peer, 1.5% of the respondents have been raped by a peer once or more. In the same study (De Wet 2003) it showed that pupils are reluctant to report peer sexual harassment to someone at the school. A reason might be the fear of secondary harassment, stigmatization, or a belief that it will not make a difference to report since nothing will be done to stop the harassment (Human Rights Watch 2001b, Masuku 1999, 60; De Wet 2003; Khoza 2002).

What forms does sexual violence take in schools?

On a daily basis, the greatest threat of sexual violence in schools is to girls who receive sexual advances from older male pupils. Sexual advances by teachers may be fewer in number but they are more shocking because of the abuse of trust involved. Such behaviour by teachers offers a dangerous role model to male pupils and has a negative

impact on both pupils and parents; a single case in a community may discourage parents from sending their daughters to school. Although female pupils are most frequently the targets of sexual violence, it may also be directed at male pupils, female teachers and those who have same-sex preferences. Some forms of sexual violence are specific to certain cultures, e.g., acid attacks on girls in South Asia or jack rolling (gang rape) in South Africa.

Sexual violence is only one form of school-based violence; others include bullying, corporal punishment (widespread in many countries even when officially banned), verbal abuse, and psychological and emotional abuse (such as denying a pupil access to resources or support, threatening exam failure or beatings). Most types of violence have a gender dimension and so schools become a breeding ground for potentially damaging gendered practices that remain with pupils into adult life. This is a violation of a child's right to an adequate education in a safe environment, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Much of the violence experienced in schools involves males affirming their dominance over females, for example, a boy cornering a girl, touching, pinching, groping, and shouting obscenities to demean or humiliate her; a male teacher touching a girl's breasts while pretending to read her exercise book in class, ordering a girl to come to his office and then molesting her. For many girls, this invasion of their private space is an unavoidable part of school life. In some instances, teachers offer girls higher grades in exams in exchange for sex (Leach and Machakanja 2003).

Why does it exist in schools?

Sexual violence originates in the imbalance in power between males and females and in socially accepted views of what constitutes male and female behaviour. The school is a prime site for the construction of male and female identity and at this formative age, adolescents can learn that masculine identity is associated with aggressive, dominant behaviour and feminine identity with submissive, dependent behaviour. And so boys act out their beliefs of what it means to be male, while girls learn to make themselves attractive to boys.

Pupils who do not conform to accepted gender behaviour may be bullied or attacked. The peer culture plays an important role in this socialisation process. Peer pressure may require that older boys aggressively demand girls' attention since their status in the group may depend on having one or more girlfriends and competing over girls. If a girl turns a boy's proposal down, she may well risk being assaulted or subjected to sexually explicit verbal abuse. In this way young people are encouraged, and sometimes forced, into sexual relationships, often with multiple partners. This pressure to conform influences sexual practice and so serves to increase young people's exposure to the risk of HIV infection, other STIs and unwanted pregnancy (Leach and Machakanja 2003).

To bring all this closer to the title we find in all of the studies (Leach and Machakanja 2003; Masuku 1999, 60; De Wet 2005; Khoza 2002) that sexual harassment in schools is viewed as routine adolescence. Where violence is allowed to flourish and is not discouraged by disciplinary action, it becomes an integral and institutionalised part of school life, something "normal" or "inevitable". Indeed, many teachers view aggressive and intimidating behaviour by boys as part of "growing up" and not to be taken seriously. By tolerating violence, the authorities are implicitly sanctioning its practice.

Sexual Harassment in Schools – An Empirical Investigation

The Design

A small scale case study was undertaken in a specific school district in South Africa. The sample was taken from the schools in the district employing the following criteria for selection – schools closest to the field worker were chosen to save cost and to limit the time in the field. Two schools (one rural and the other in the so-called black township) with a good track record for handling sexual harassment incidences were chosen. Two other schools (one located in an urban area and one specifically located in a previous white suburb) with high incidence and incessant record of mismanagement of sexual harassment incidences. The fifth school was chosen because it was in an informal settlement and notorious for sexual harassment incidences going on without any intervention from the management. From these schools four focus group interviews were conducted. In each group participants of all five schools were present. The four groups were principals, educators, pupils and members of the school governing body (mostly

parents) not represented in one of the other groups. The minimum per group was five and the maximum 12. The interview protocol constituted only three questions:

What are your views on sexual harassment amongst pupils?

How do your school manage it?

How would you like the school to manage it?

The research design was ethically cleared by the Faculty Ethics Committee of the university and allowed for written participation consent and assent (minors) and the right to withdraw from the interview at any time. Some sections were conducted in the vernacular and translated to the other members of the group by the interviewer. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. In addition the field worker made field notes from what he observed before, during and after the interviews.

The interviews were analysed by the researchers using the Constant Comparative Method (CCM) (Maykut & Morehouse 1994; Merriam 1998; Lincoln & Guba 2000; Merriam & Simpson 1995; Mertens 1998). It followed the steps described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, 135), coding and simultaneous comparing of units of meaning across categories, refinement of categories, exploring of relationships and patterns across categories, and integrating data yielding and understanding of the phenomenon, the people and the settings being studied.

Trustworthiness was ensured by clearly articulating the purpose of the study, triangulating the data from the four interviews and existing literature, recording a traceable audit trail, going back for member checking, reflecting on our biases and allowing peer examination throughout the study.

Discussion of the Findings

In analysing the data, the purpose of the study, to explore the notion of sexual harassment in schools in the Vryheid school district, guided the researchers in the process of categorising and sub-categorising the findings. The researchers will first present the opinions, views and voices of the participants on how they characterised sexual harassment in their schools (interview question one). This will be followed by the

meaning they make of sexual harassment. Lastly a few management guidelines in the form of recommendations will be developed (interview questions two and three).

All the participating schools acknowledged that they have a policy (policies), usually called something like Discipline, Safety and Security Policy and Code of Conduct for Pupils in place to manage any sexual harassment incidences amongst pupils in their schools. What they however also acknowledge that having these policies did not help to reduce the incidences of sexual harassment amongst pupils.

It is pertinent to state that the five schools include schools that would be classified as historically white, historically Indian and historically black. One of the chilling discoveries is that racial and cultural differences are still endemic. The poor acceptance of each others' races and culture plays a major role in breeding trouble associated with sexual harassment incidences. Polarisation along colour lines supersedes any ethical issue surrounding an incidence. Words like the following crop up during sexual harassment investigations, this is a black thing you will not understand or this is a white thing you will not understand or this is an Indian thing you will not understand. Full details of the analysis are broken down into categories and sub-categories to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon.

The first main category (from the participants' comments to questions 1 and 2 in the interview protocol) is labelled **the safe and secure school**. The following gives us an indication of how the participants view a safe and secure school as it relates to sexual harassment. The first sub-category that emerged is that a safe and secure school is a **healthy, orderly and caring space**.

...as healthy and caring places because there is peace and order. (The specific interview, page and line reference is available in the case of all verbatim quotation)

It is healthy because such a school protects learners...

The meaning I attach to school safety and security stems from the fact that schools are centres for teaching and learning. I can say effective teaching and learning in an environment free from intimidation. A safe school is where you learn without experiencing ...intimidation.

I think it means safe from being harmed because there is security checks in and out of the school gate so that law and order prevail.

Safe and secure school not only guarantees effective teaching and learning to

learners but also gives educators the nerve to concentrate on the job of teaching.

I think it means a place where learners are free from the anxiety of the questions, what will happen next in the toilet, corridors and in the play ground, because there is supervision all over the school premises to maintain law and order.

I can say...it is...it is stopping boys from raping our girls at school and on our way to and from school...

It includes checking on how learners behave in the toilets ...

This metaphorical use of health to describe a safe and secure school stems from the fact that healthy schools manage successfully with disruptive behaviour within the school that threatens the ethical bond between pupils (Hill & Hill 1994; Berger 2002; Bender 1999). Characterising schools in this way matches the definition given by Miles, “A healthy school is one that survives not only in its environment, but continue to cope adequately over the long haul, develops, and expands its coping abilities (1994: 378)”. In a healthy school the vulnerable are not only protected, but they are also cared for adequately, socially and academically.

The second sub-category that was revealed by the data is that of **effective leadership** which is regarded as essential for schools to be safe and secure spaces. The voices of the participants are self evident.

Our school is continuously aiming to fulfil our vision; by that I mean our philosophy. The emphasis in our vision is not only practical, but also in accordance with our beliefs and values. Decisions are, therefore, not only taken to reach our goals, but also in accordance with our Christian values and principles, resulting not only on why we do things the way we are, but also on how we are planning to reach our goals.

Jee, I can't imagine this school without this charismatic principal being as orderly as he is because in the past ...aish!

The general performance of the school will go down...down...down the drain, over the years if a principal is inefficient

The leadership should face the problems of over-aged learners who claim

constitutional rights of admission but will not match their rights with obligations, Currently because of that we are experiencing problems of dagga and drunkenness.

We have a different problem which comes from elderly learners. They influence we young ones and pressure us to do bad things like ...proposing love (an euphemism for sex - authors)

They (management) ought to understand that we are growing in the post Apartheid Era of South Africa, and therefore involving our input is necessary so that at the end of the day school goals match our needs, after all it is about us and not them.

The third sub-category under the safe and secure school relates to the **conduct of teachers and the pupils**. It emerged from the interviews that a school where teachers and pupils demonstrate good conduct the school are perceived as a safe and secure space.

I think there should be good educators and learner conduct in the school, without which the school cannot function effectively because the functions of the two are intrinsically linked together.

Peer pressure and intimidation are rampant. For instance a boy who proposed to me and I refused, told me that my deadline to either submit to his sexual advances or take my life is today, adding that the choice is mine. In another incident a boy showed me a set of sharp knives to frighten me and show of power while proposing to me.

A remark like the following to learners, boys and girls, is heard daily in my school and it upsets most learners. You must use what is between your legs or otherwise you are going to lose it.

Some learners are so poor they would do it behind the staircase for a sandwich or 50c

The second main category relates to the third question in the interview protocol, namely how would you like the school to manage it? This category also links up with the second sub-category under the first main category; the healthy, safe and secure school, namely leadership and is labelled: **Management of sexual harassment incidences**. Seven clear sub-categories emerged from the data.

Installation of Electronic Gadgets

It is beefing up security with new technologies, using metal detectors to pick up knives and other metals which learners are likely to use in their acts of sexual harassment.

This they can do by installing CC TV cameras in schools so as to effectively monitor obscure places where security can be breached. This will give all round security to the school both at the front gate and behind the gate.

Body search of Pupils

The security should search us, (particularly the girls because boys ay give weapons to their girlfriends to hide for them) at the school gate before we are allowed into the school premises because many of us come to school with sharp objects like nails, knives etc.

Revised of the Suspension Powers for School Governing Bodies

The participants from the School Governing Bodies were adamant that the government made them ‘toothless bull dogs’ by providing them with the power to suspend indiscipline pupils for not more than five days. This allows pupils to continue with their low key sexual harassment (remarks, tapping buttocks, etc) without really being punished.

Extension of the Feeding Scheme to High Schools

Participants also agreed that it is not enough to implement a feeding scheme in primary schools only; the scheme should be extended to the high schools to assist the poorest of the poor not to engage in sexual activities for food.

Involvement of Community Leaders

Another finding from this inquiry is that problems in the community, from youth gangs to drugs, spill over into the school.

Involvement of the community leaders, such as Indunas, local chiefs, business leaders, and parents, will raise the awareness of learners to the problem of sexual harassment.

I strongly believe in the involvement of the entire community even those who deal with law and order such as the South African Police Services. There should be gatherings or meetings where contributions are invited across the entire community

because the problem may rest in us.

Re-Introduction of Religious Doctrine in Schools

In the past religion, particularly in the missionary schools, played a vital role in moulding the moral fibre of the society.

The Government is encroaching in almost all the schools' affairs, religion and religious studies are relegated to the background in the guise of democratic rights.

Schools which are regarded as centres for learning and developing good moral fibre are now turned into centres for learning criminality and abuse and the only way to turn this around is to go back to basics – inviting various religious leaders to schools on a regular basis to give moral and religious lessons to learners.

Invitation to Whistle Blowers to Report Incidences

Similarly, participants suggested making use of a whistle blower to spy learner who secretly reports to the management on events as they happen) in the school to alert management of the goings-on in the school premises.

Perhaps making use of a whistle blower will help in the situation.

We encourage educators and learners to support their principals in collectively managing the school and to keep each other informed about what is going on.

Conclusion

The study set out to explore and describe the notion of sexual harassment as it manifests itself in a specific school district in South Africa. The views of different sets of participants were elicited by way of focus group interviews which were analyzed using the Constant Comparative Method of analysis within the conceptual framework set out in the work of Duke (2002). Three complementary perspectives were employed namely, educational, organizational and legal in the analysis. In the description of the notion as described by the participants an attempt was made to develop guidelines for the management of the phenomenon in the specific setting of the research.

The title indicated that there are practitioners that want to play the problem down to something routinely in the lives of adolescents – the majority members of a high school. The evidence presented however points towards a widespread presence of the phenomenon but not 'routine adolescence' in nature.

School leadership should acknowledge the seriousness of the problem and take the necessary steps to prevent or at least reduce these incidences of sexual harassment to take place within schools. This study attempted to make a small contribution towards understanding and managing this phenomenon.

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