

TEENAGERS' SEXUAL ACTIVITIES ON SCHOOL GROUNDS: A NEED FOR SOCIAL WORK SUPPORT

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This article describes the experiences of teenagers who engaged in sexual activities on school grounds and their need for social work support. The findings were derived from qualitative research done as part of one of a Master's study and was based on ten semi-structured interviews with high school learners in Gauteng province. Findings indicate that sexual activities are either planned or happen spontaneously in various school areas and during different periods. A variety of factors influence teenagers' decision to have sex at school. The participants, who were aware of the consequences of their behaviour identified a need for social work intervention at schools.

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INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of sexual activity and risky sexual behaviour among school-going teenagers is significantly high in South African schools, putting many teenage learners at risk of HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and unwanted or unplanned pregnancy (Lindner, 2010:30; Mutinta, Govender, Gow & George, 2012:355-359). The South African government and various stakeholders have expressed concern about the increasing rate of sexual activity among schoolchildren (Department of Health & Basic Education, 2012:12). Although various intervention strategies, e.g. the integrated health programme and life skills, have been introduced at schools, the problem of teenage sexual activity on school grounds persists and has resulted in a high rate of teenage pregnancy (Braine, 2009:411). According to Marino, Skinner, Doherty, Rosenthal, Robbins and Cannon (2013:1029), pregnancy may occur amongst children as young as 10 or 12, i.e. even prior to the teenage years. In an article titled "Gauteng education needs ideas on curbing teenage pregnancy" Makhubele (2015:1) reports that Gauteng's Education MEC, Panyaza Lesufi, admitted the department had run out of ideas on how to deal with this problem.

Pregnancies among learners of school-going age in South Africa reportedly numbered 20 000 in 2014, while pregnancies among primary school learners accounted for 223 of the total number (Masemola-Yende & Mataboge, 2015:2). The authors further indicated that the highest number of pregnancies occurred in Gauteng (5 209) and the Eastern Cape (3 898), with KT Twala Primary School in Mpumalanga recording 13 pregnancies.

Indulging in sexual activity at school is becoming a popular practice and teens are not shocked about such behaviour. The *Cape Times* (2010:3) quoted Wasserman, then director at LoveLife, as saying that "sex at schools was happening all the time, children of school-going age were having sex and were starting to have sex at an increasingly younger age". Studies indicate that teenagers become sexually active during early puberty. According to a study conducted by LoveLife (2004) among high school learners in South Africa, 42 percent of 15-17 year-old learners were having sex, while 51 per cent had started having sex before the age of 15.

A study by Flisher, Reddy, Muller and Lombard (2003:538) on the sexual behaviour of Cape Town high school students shows that by the age of 14 nearly 23,4 percent of boys and 5,5 per cent of girls had had sexual intercourse. A few years ago a report by *City Press* (2010:4) and other newspapers sparked a debate that drew the country's attention to this issue. They reported on an incident involving three teenagers at Jules High School in Jeppestown, Johannesburg, where a 15-year-old girl and two 14- and 16-year-old boys allegedly had sex during school hours on the school playground. This case and

others have resulted in various stakeholders challenging certain provisions of the Criminal Law: Sexual Offences and Related Matters Act, 32 of 2007.

Sections 15 and 16 of the Sexual Offences Act (which has seen several amendments) made it a criminal offence for children between the ages of 12 and 16 to have sex, even if they consent to it. It also made consensual kissing, heavy petting and oral sex an offence if there is an age difference of more than two years between the minors involved. However, during research for this study two non-profit organisations, the Teddy Bear Clinic and Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (Rapcan), supported by various human rights groups and the Justice Alliance, filed an application with the North Gauteng High Court challenging the provisions of sections 15, 16 and 56 of this Act (Stevens, 2016:1728-1735).

The subsequent judgement emphasised the need to understand teenage sexual development and the challenges facing adolescents. Adolescence is a critical period of psychological change, physical growth and pubertal development. A key component of the healthy development of adolescents is how they proceed through the stages of adolescent sexuality (Fonseca & Greydanus, 2007:277). Evidence from the existing literature indicates that many boys and girls achieve sexual maturity early in adolescence and are sexually active in early puberty (Florsheim, 2003:163). During this period teenagers experience dramatic hormonal and physical changes that influence their behaviour. According to the psychosexual development theory, the biological maturation of the reproductive system in adolescents is characterised by a rapid increase in sexual tension that demands gratification. The adolescents' sexual needs and fantasies become more explicitly concerned with tension release and alter with the sexual union of male and female (Muuss, 1996:32).

The detrimental effects of sexual activity on the school grounds continue to pose a challenge to parents, educators and authorities alike. It is therefore critical to seek some understanding of teenagers' experiences. When formulating this research question, no recent South African studies examining teenage engagement in sexual activities, specifically on school grounds, could be found. (In this quest, the researchers were assisted by a Unisa librarian who searched the EBSCOhost database). The majority of existing studies pay attention to teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, adolescent sexuality, contraception, sexual coercion among children and dating relationships (Mwahombela, 2004; Ngabaza, 2011; Skosana, 2001; Swart, 2005; Wood, Maepa & Jewkes, 1997). The latter studies often refer to small samples. In contrast to the lack of academic literature, newspapers and television cover the theme of teenage sexuality in school extensively. A second literature search was conducted with the assistance of a librarian from UNISA to check on new literature since the completion of the study in 2013.

This article reports on a detailed investigation of teenagers' sexual activities at school and their need for social work support. Recommendations are made for appropriate practice interventions.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND GOAL

A research question is a concise, interrogative statement developed with a view to directing a study (Grove, Burns & Gray, 2013:708). The research questions that provided a framework and boundaries for this particular inquiry were: *What are the experiences of teenagers who engage in sexual activities at school?* and *What social work support is required by teenagers who engage in sexual activities at school?* The primary purpose, which helped to determine a road map for the study (Creswell, 2013:134), was to develop an in-depth understanding of the experiences of teenagers who had engaged in sexual activities at school and their need for social work support.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers were interested in the experiences of teenagers who had engaged in sexual intercourse/penetration on the school premises rather than the statistical data related to this phenomenon. A qualitative research approach was therefore followed. According to Boeije (2010:11), the purpose of a qualitative approach is to describe and comprehend social phenomena in terms of the meaning people attribute to them. The use of the qualitative research paradigm, with its three designs (explorative, descriptive and contextual), allowed the researchers to explore the participants' experiences of sexual activities at school from their own frame of reference, without imposing views on them or being directive.

In this study eligible participants were high school teenagers between the ages of 14 and 18, from Grades 8-12, with two participants coming from special schools for children with learning difficulties. At the time of the study the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act, 5 of 2015, had not yet been passed and the study population thus included teenagers in Gauteng province who had been charged with engaging in consensual sex while at school. All participants younger than 16 years of age were charged with engaging in consensual sexual penetration, while those older than 16 were charged with statutory rape for "consensual sexual penetration" with children 15 years and younger. The learners had been charged with contravening sections 15 and 16 of the Sexual Offences Act. Because of the sensitive nature of the research study and the ethical principles (legal obligation to report such matters) that could arise during the research project, the researchers focused only on participants who were already in the justice system and had completed the young sex offender diversion programme at the Teddy Bear Clinic.

Because of the sensitivity of the topic, the participants who contributed to the data in this research study were selected through purposive sampling. Polkinghorne (2005:140) states that as qualitative research aims to enrich our understanding of an experience, it is vital to select fertile exemplars of that experience for the study. In the light of the phenomenological nature of this study and the fact that subjective experiences often cannot be reduced to quantifiable information or statistics, the researchers employed face-to-face interviews. Ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants in a quiet environment, so as to provide an atmosphere conducive to confidentiality, where sensitive, personal information could be shared.

During the interviews open-ended questions allowed participants to draw on their own frames of reference when answering – this encouraged spontaneous participation. Questions such as the following were included in the interview guide:

- Tell me about your experience regarding your exposure to sexual activities at school.
- What are your views about teenagers who engage in sexual activities at school?
- What are your needs for support after engaging in sexual activities?
- How would you like to be supported by social workers before and after engaging in sexual activities?

The data acquired from the ten semi-structured interviews were analysed by the researchers and an independent coder (whose findings corresponded with those of the former) using the Tesch framework of data analysis (in Creswell, 2003:192-193; see also Smit, 2002:66). Through Tesch's method the data were interpreted in the basic sense of reflecting on the information to arrive at a better understanding of the themes.

To ensure theoretical validity, a literature control was done once the themes and sub-themes had been identified. The researchers used Guba's model of trustworthiness (Moss, 2004:359-374; Rolfe, 2004:305-309; Shenton, 2004:63-75) for the purpose of data verification – a model that has been well developed and used extensively in qualitative research situations. According to Shenton (2004:63), with Guba's model researchers seek to satisfy four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability and conformability.

Permission to undertake the study was granted by the Research and Ethics Committee of the Department of Social Work at Unisa and The Teddy Bear Clinic. The study followed the general principles regarding ethics in social research, which include written voluntary and informed consent by the selected participants, and an adherence to the principles of anonymity and confidentiality (Grinnell, 1998:79-89). Participants were informed about the nature and purpose of the study, its risks and benefits. Furthermore, the researchers provided clarification on the aim of the study and procedure to be employed. Because of the age of the participants, consent had to be obtained from the participants and their parent/s or legal guardian. To ensure anonymity/confidentiality, names of the participants were not written on tapes, notes and transcripts, but rather pseudonyms/numbers were allocated to them to hide their identity. Participants were encouraged to utilise the debriefing and counselling services which were available at the Teddy Bear Clinic, should the need arise.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All participants were learners from high schools in Gauteng. Criteria for inclusion included both genders, as the researchers hoped to gain a broader understanding of the experiences of teenage sexual activities at school through interviewing both boys and girls. However, the researchers were able to include only one female participant, as girls were reluctant to participate in the study. The age of the participants ranged from 14-18. One 15-year-old

participant was female, one participant was 14 years of age, three were 15 years old, three were 17 years old and three were 18 years old at the time of the study.

Seven themes emerged from the process of data analysis and consensus discussions between the independent coder and researchers. The themes are: sources of participants' information about sex; participants' description of sexual activities at school; factors influencing participants' sexual activities; participants' perceptions of teenagers' sexual activities; feelings expressed by the participants after engaging in sexual activities at school; consequences of the participants' sexual activities at school and participants' perceptions of their needs for support. This article focuses on the two themes with relevant subthemes and categories set out in the table below. These two themes were not documented in the literature and no information on similar studies could be found. As indicated, a literature search was conducted twice, one was prior to 2013 and the second search was conducted in 2017. These themes also appeared to be of interest to the public as they were well documented in the media.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF SELECTED THEMES, SUB-THEMES AND CATEGORIES

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES
1. Participants' description of sexual activities at school	1.1 Kinds of sexual activities at school	1.1.1 Sexual penetration/intercourse at school
		1.1.2 Kissing and touching
	1.2 Places where sexual activities take place at school	1.2.1 Top field
		1.2.2 Toilets
1.2.3 Classrooms		
1.3 Time during which sexual activities take place at school	1.3.1 Before school	
	1.3.2 During class periods	
	1.3.3 During break/after school and exam times	
	1.4 Planning sexual activities	
2. Participants' perceptions of their needs	2.1 Support from parents and educators	
	2.2 Social work support	
	2.3 Need for greater awareness and education	

Theme 1: Participants' description of sexual activities at school

Sub-theme 1.1: Kinds of sexual activity at school

The findings of this study indicate that teenagers engaged in various kinds of sexual activity while on school premises. The participants highlighted that sexual activities at school range from engaging in less intimate behaviour to extremely intimate acts. The majority of participants stated that activities such as kissing, touching, rubbing, mutual

masturbation, penetration (vaginal and anal) and stroking are popular practices among teenagers.

“There are heaps of different types of sexual activities among teenagers.”

“We engaged in all types of sexual activities from touching, kissing and sex.”

“When a guy and girl holds hands”, “sit next to each other”, “kiss on the cheek” and “having sex without using condoms.”

Participants mentioned that in their communities children as young as 6 years of age start experimenting with kissing, inappropriate sexual touching and sexual penetration. A study conducted by Omar (2010:24) confirms the ever-decreasing age of perpetrators of sexual offences. She further states that perpetrators tend to commit their first sexual offence between the ages of 6 and 12. The literature further indicates that young people engage in a spectrum of sexual behaviours ranging from fantasising and self-stimulation to various forms of intercourse (Crockett, Raffaelli & Moilanen, 2003:372). The following categories illustrate the kinds of sexual activities that the participants engaged in at school.

Sexual penetration/intercourse at school

The participants reported that they had engaged in all high-risk sexual behaviours, including sex with penetration without condoms. Although the participants had been informed of the consequences of their sexual behaviour (through sex education at school, LoveLife campaigns and the media), this did not stop them from engaging in further high-risk sexual acts. As observed during the study process, knowledge of HIV/AIDS and STDs did not necessarily translate into adolescents in this sample adopting healthier or safer behaviours. The participants had sexual intercourse without a condom regardless of the knowledge of the risks involved and even when they were in possession of condoms. The following narratives in this regard can be stated:

“I guess when you are a teenager you don’t know much about anything, so when I was told that when you want to have sex your responsibility is to go and test with that person whether they have some sort of STD, STI, HIV or anything like that and as a teenager you find that unnecessary, like aagh please.”

“Sex is superior and more pleasant without a condom, as we could really ‘feel each other’. Condoms limit the pleasure.”

“Some of us are [taking responsibility] but majority of teenagers just wanna go there and do it. Like most teenagers go like [it] is better to have sex without a condom, because if there is a condom then the guy cannot feel it.”

“I had unprotected sex while I had a condom in my pocket.”

The participants’ comments concur with the findings of Richter and Mlambo (2005:65), in whose study male learner participants refused to use condoms during sex, commenting that sex with a condom was not enjoyable. In a study by Mwaba (2000:33) teenage girls expressed a preference for injectable contraceptives and admitted that condoms were not the birth control method of choice.

Kissing and touching

Sexual practices such as kissing and touching were more popular and not hidden. Participants confirmed during the interviews that they were more likely to engage in kissing and touching in public, including in classes and in front of their educators. The educators were reported to be annoyed about the participants' sexual behaviour at school, especially kissing and touching. The researchers noted during the data-collection process that school personnel were aware of participants' sexual acts as they took place in their presence, but they did not bother to intervene. The following quotes from the interview data substantiate these statements:

“However, kissing and touching are more popular as one can do that anytime anywhere at school. Whereby now, if I’m kissing and touching, it’s something that I can do in front of other school members, teachers or classmates.”

“But kissing happens even on the school premises whereby the teacher is just at the corner and those people are just kissing there and the teachers don’t care about it anymore, because they are so frustrated, they are tired of running after kids who don’t listen, so they just let them be.”

“I was involved in a lot of kissing and touching because now I had a girlfriend at school that I dated”.

According to the *Cape Times* (2010:11), Isaacs, principal of South Peninsula High in Diep River, said teachers often spotted pupils holding hands or kissing on school grounds and that was immediately stopped before it “got out of hand”. Although the literature could not be found to confirm that teachers are aware of the participants' sexual acts and are frustrated about it, it does substantiate the kinds of sexual behaviour mentioned by participants such as kissing and touching. According to Abraham, Time and Bhai (2000:131), kissing and petting (touching) in Mumbai is a common form of adolescent sexual expression and experimentation, and initiated behaviour that leads to sexual intercourse. The findings of a study by Royer, Keller and Heidrich (2009:395-408) of young adolescents' perceptions of romantic relationships and sexual activity, indicate that adolescents' sexual practices included kissing, French kissing, touching on top and under clothes and sexual intercourse.

Sub-theme 1.2: Places where sexual activities take place at school

The participants in the study described the school as a convenient place to engage in sexual activity, because both girls and boys are present and many areas are unsupervised. All the study participants indicated that sexual activity takes place almost everywhere on the school premises, including on the school's “top field” (i.e. the terrain furthest from the classrooms, where sports such as soccer, cricket and rugby take place), in classrooms and toilets, and behind classrooms.

As indicated above, kissing and touching happened everywhere, even in the presence of teachers. However, some participants deemed sexual intercourse a private matter that was performed in an empty classroom or toilet cubicle. The following statements attest to this:

“Mostly these activities happen at top soccer field, classes, toilets and parks, everywhere at school whenever we get an opportunity or chance.”

“We have sex in the toilets, classes and in the classrooms.”

It was reported that experts were not surprised that children had been caught having sex on school grounds, as there was often no other place available to them; it was therefore natural that they would choose this location (*Cape Times*, 2010:3).

Top field

The majority of participants stated that, although the top field is an open space where they could be spotted from a distance, they still preferred it because of the lack of supervision compared to places such as toilets and classrooms. Four participants had engaged in group sex at the top field after consuming alcohol and smoking dagga with their friends:

“We had sex at top field behind the trees and flowers, actually anywhere at school when we get the opportunity whether there are cameras on not. There is also this new thing of having sex in groups especially at the house party. At school I only did it once with four of my friends at the top field.”

“...there’re actually three fields at my school. There is a bottom field, top field and the back field. So the back field is where everything goes down smoking, drinking, sex, everything. Ooh, and there are cameras at the top field in my school.”

“Ok, one of my friends went to the gate with that girl and then me and my friends we went to go to jump in another side. When we jumped we were at school in the top-field ... Then after my friend finished having sex with her, he called me and said the girl wants me, so I went and had sex with her. Others were watching and taking videos which are later posted on websites and they get paid sometimes.”

Furthermore, the findings show that school children are having sex in full view of the school’s CCTV cameras. While they are having sex at the top field, others are taking videos. This is becoming increasingly common, as seven of the ten participants interviewed had taken cell-phone videos that were later distributed among their peers and posted on social networks. This finding was supported by the media: *Sowetan* (2011:7) reported that “At least 10 Grade 8 pupils stood by and filmed on cell phones their classmates having sex in the school grounds in November last year”.

In an interview (*City Press* 2010:11) which Moaisi, Biyela, Yende, Rampedi and Van Wyk conducted with two Grade 9 and one Grade 10 learners from Empangeni (in KwaZulu-Natal), the East Rand (Gauteng) and Polokwane (Limpopo), the teenagers admitted they like to watch porn to learn new styles and engage in sexual intercourse in groups while at school. They attributed their choice of location to a lack of privacy at home.

Toilets

The participants mentioned that sexual activities were also taking place in the toilets and behind the school buildings. The toilets represented a private place that educators would not enter while cubicles were occupied. The participants indicated that they had used the excuse of right to privacy while in the toilets, thus limiting educators' power to supervise the area. Educators were more likely to supervise boys' toilets if they suspected anti-social behaviour was taking place (e.g. smoking and gambling). The participants therefore had sex in the girls' toilets, where there was usually a lack of supervision.

“At schools in ladies toilets teachers don't normally go there, they always go to the guys' toilets because they know that guys smoke, they gamble in toilets. We're better off doing it in the girls' toilets because if we are in the classes there is no walking around, you can just go out of your class and I just go out of my class and we enter the toilets. We know exactly that by this time the period will be ending and by that time we will be finished.”

“Some of them [sexual activities] happen in the back of the school, some happens in the toilets because now these days a teacher can't go in children's toilets because they say it's their own privacy. So now if you enter at the toilet as a teacher, you find me closing the door and you knock and I say I'm busy, that's my privacy. I know that if I'm in the toilet that's my privacy. Whatever I do it's my privacy.”

Classrooms

According to the participants, sexual activities took place in class because of a lack of supervision on the part of educators. The participants reported that in many instances they were left in class with nothing to do, while their educators sat in their offices. The participants stated that they used empty classrooms, classrooms that were in use and even storerooms to engage in sex:

“Some of the teachers are attending other classes. Let's say at school there is first and second floor, maybe other teachers are attending first floor and you're in your class, anywhere there are empty classes. Sometimes we go into those classes [to have sex]. Some of the teachers are in the staffroom sitting but they are supposed to be supervising their classes.”

The participants indicated that they gave each other “blow jobs” (oral sex) under the desks in class. This kind of behaviour was seen as influencing and pressurising those who are not sexually active to be sexually active.

“Sometimes we have sex in classes in the presence of other children and teachers. I once got a blow job from my girlfriend in class during the period. We shared a table and she just went under while the teacher was busy but because I sit at the corner others did not see us.”

Through the interviews the researchers discovered that sexual acts were taking place during class time, in classrooms, in the presence of educators and other learners: female

learners would give male learners a blow job/oral sex under the desk while the educator was teaching a class – this happened especially during the Life Orientation course, without educators being aware of it.

Sub-theme 1.3: Time during which sexual activities take place at school

Although sexual activities happened at various sites on the school premises, there were specific periods/times during which these activities would occur (sexual intercourse in particular). The majority of participants stated that sexual activities happened in the morning before class, during class/break and after school, on the school premises or in the bus on their way home after school.

Before school

The participants attributed the sexual acts that took place before school to a lack of activities at school, especially in the morning, and a lack of supervision by educators. During this period participants were more likely to use the toilets to engage in sexual acts (specifically sexual intercourse/penetration) when most educators and learners were either at assembly or in class.

“In the morning when learners pretend like they are going to school they get in the schoolyard, but don’t go to the classes, they go to toilets [to engage in sexual acts]. During those times the teachers are teaching in the classes and no one is in the toilets.”

“In February also I was engaged in sexual activities. I remember it was in the morning when a girl I use to call “Shorty” came and greet me.”

One participant mentioned that sexual activities were more likely to happen during exam times, when learners did not have much to do at school:

“This happens more often after school or exam times. The exam times you know you come early, 8 o’clock you write 10 o’clock you are finish and the teachers take the papers to their staffroom and it will be school out. It’s early, at home they are expecting you at 2 o’clock, so you doing that [sex] at that time while the teachers are in the staffroom marking papers. So it happens a lot during the exam times.”

Such behaviour was viewed as having a negative influence on those who were sexually inactive. In 2010 *The Sowetan* (2010:4) reported that two boys aged 12, from Pugishe Primary School in Shangaan Hill, allegedly raped a girl in class. One boy, who had been asked to help overpower the girl, reported this to his teachers. To date media coverage of teen sexual activity has revealed that increasing numbers of young people are engaging in sexual intercourse on school premises during school hours. This is confirmed by an article titled “Sex before school shock” (*Sowetan*, 2011:2). In this article more than 60 per cent of female learners at Mavalni Secondary School in Giyani, Limpopo, were reported to be waking up at their boyfriends’ homes and readying themselves for school. The newspaper further reported that 57 learners at this school were pregnant in one month, with the youngest girl being 13 years of age.

During class periods

The participants stated that sometimes they would ask to be excused as if they are going to the toilet during class periods and the girl or boy would ask to be excused and follow, then they would go to the toilets or empty classes to have sex. The participants further indicated that if they had a partner in a separate class they communicated via SMS, Facebook, Twitter or WhatsApp and excused themselves from class, then met somewhere on the school premises to have sex or indulge in other sexual activities. Although learners were not permitted to carry cell phones, they smuggled them in.

“When it’s due to different classes, I will say you know there is these social networks ... Twitter or WhatsApp. Well, because now at schools we use phones, technology. I know that if you are in the other class and I’m in this class, I could just send you a text message and just say, you know what, let’s meet at this certain place.”

“The teachers are in class, that’s the whole aim. We wait for the teachers to be in class, when we see that the teachers are in class I will ask to be excused as my way to go to the toilet with the girl and do those sexual activities.”

“When we are in the classes there is no walking around, you can just go out of your class and I just go out of my class and we enter the toilets. We know exactly that by this time the period will be ending and by that time we will be finished [having sex].”

During break/after school and exam times

Instead of having lunch or relaxing during break, participants used the time to have sex somewhere on the school premises before the bell rang. The participants indicated that if they missed the break period, there was still an opportunity to engage in sexual activity after school, while waiting for their transport. Some participants indicated that they had kissed and touched another learner between classes or during break. They also informed the researchers that sex was more likely to be after school and during exam times, when they finished writing exams early.

“Ok, the touching and whatever usually we do it everywhere in between classes, during break or after school, but when it comes to sex is mostly after school when everybody is gone and that’s when everything happens.”

“This happens more often after school or exam times. The exam times you know you come early 8 o’clock, you write 10 o’clock, you are finish and the teachers take the papers to their staffroom and it will be school out. It’s early, at home they are expecting you at 2 o’clock, so you doing that [sex] at that time while the teachers are in the staffroom marking papers. So it happens a lot during the exams times.”

“So now if we decide that, we know that our transport normally comes at 3 o’clock and I’m writing at 9 o’clock 9:30 I’m already finish writing that whole time from 9:30 to 3 o’clock I must have something to do. So now if I have been led to do whatever I want to do that’s where it leads me.”

Sub-theme 1.4: Planning sexual activities

The participants' sexual acts at school were either planned or happened spontaneously. The participants mentioned that sexual activities were mostly planned during school hours, although in some instances they occurred spontaneously. The participants' sexual activities were often planned in the early morning during assembly or in class prior to the arrival of the educators. As indicated earlier, some planned their sexual activities in the presence of educators, using social networks. According to the participants, if teenagers plan to do something, no one will stand in their way or distract them from their plans. They conceded that the school should not be blamed for learners' sexual behaviour, stating that they would have sex regardless of any interference by one of their own, by educators or by cleaners at school:

"We don't have to put the blame on the school because when teenagers plan their own thing it's very hard to disorganise what they have planned. It's very rare to find teacher trying to disorganise what teenagers have planned."

"I had sex during school hours because I could not wait for after school and anyway the girl was been fetched by her father always after school and we could not have an opportunity to meet as she does not stay in the same area with me. Any opportunity you get while at school you grab and use it."

"Sometimes you plan, sometimes you don't it just happens. We plan it outside the school but do it at school. We plan because we don't stay in the same area but school together and most of the time we meet at school."

"Ya! Some of the times you plan, some of the time it's just happens eventually. But now when it's planned, I could tell you as a girl that you know what? At this period you know that this teacher doesn't teach I will just ask to be excused then you ask to be excused. You go to the toilet and I will find you there."

Researchers in other disciplines often view teen sexual activity as spontaneous and irrational, so that teen pregnancies are considered "mistakes" (Levine, 2000:1). According to Moore *et al.* (cited in Levine, 2000:16), there is abundant evidence that teenage sex is irrational in the sense that it is often not planned, but impulsive. This is especially true for first sexual experiences. The participants of this study thus confirm the findings noted in the literature that teen sexual activity can be both spontaneous and irrational. No evidence was found in the literature to support the notion that teen sexual activity is planned in detail.

Theme 2: Participants' perceptions of their needs for support

The participants emphasised the need for assistance/support in dealing with their sexual behaviour in and outside of the school environment. The participants also described their perception of factors that could assist them in dealing with or preventing/delaying further sexual activities at their age. The following sub-themes were identified.

Sub-theme 2.1: Support from parents and educators

The findings of this study identified a lack of communication, support and information from parents as a risk factor for teenage sexual behaviour. Talking about sexuality in the

family was considered taboo, therefore sex topics were often avoided. They indicated that there was a lack of support from their parents and often could not discuss sexual issues with their parents.

Findings also indicated that the participants' preferred that their parents should be the primary sex educators. They needed support mostly after engaging in sexual activities and emphasised the need for open discussions with parents about sex. They stated that they did not get support from their parents; however, a few indicated that their parents supported them during the diversion programme. The following comments from the interviews indicate that their parents did not have open discussions with them about sex; they did not get the support they needed and for others sex discussion was considered taboo:

"I guess most teenagers do it [sex] for fun and just to have a feeling of what it is like because most of our parents deprive us of that. They try as hard as they can to block it from our eyes and I guess as a child you want to see what they are blocking away from you, then you go out and explore. Anyway it's like a taboo to talk to them."

"During that time when everything was happening I did not get any support from anyone, especially my parent, because everybody was hurt, everybody was dealing with their own emotion and how they felt and they didn't care about how I felt, what happen, how the whole thing [having sex at school] affected me. I didn't get much support."

"I guess I would have needed, even if it was just a hug or my parents to talk to me at home, because I didn't have any friends at that time and nobody spoke to me at all except for this one person [friend] because I have been there for her too."

Research indicates that South African adolescents have poor communication with their parents about sexual matters and claim that their parents refuse to talk to them, only giving them vague snippets rather than proper information and may even punish them for raising the subject (Dias, 2007:204). According to Rhodes (2007:204), teenagers tend to perceive parental discussions about sex as restrictive, as the emphasis is usually on the risk of sexuality. The author further emphasises the importance of parental support and open discussions with children about sex, as parents have more experience and can help their children protect themselves in future situations. Furthermore, research studies consistently show that parent-child communication is associated with delayed onset of sexual activity and increased contraceptive use (Lagus, Bernat, Bearinger, Resnick & Eisenberg, 2010:2).

Sub-theme 2.2: Social work support

Participants were not aware of social work services in their schools or community. They indicated that social workers did in fact assist them after they had been caught having sex at school, i.e. after they had been referred to diversion programmes. Naidoo's (2006:124) study of 11 Grade 10 learners from two secondary schools and nine

educators from a combined school on the North Coast of KwaZulu-Natal indicates the need for social workers to visit schools in order to address teenage sexuality.

The participants reported that they had not received immediate social work intervention services following the sexual acts they performed at school. As a result, they felt unsupported and regarded this aspect as a need to be addressed. Focusing on the need for social work support, the participants further mentioned that they would rather discuss their sexual issues with social workers than with educators, because certain educators were dating learners.

According to the participants, the input of social workers at school as counsellors could assist in delaying learners from having sex at a young age. They believed that social workers' intervention could minimise sexual activity at schools, as these practitioners are open and sympathetic towards teenagers. According to the participants, educators were not open about sexuality and had not handled "teenage sex at school" well during investigations into the sexual incidents referred to here. They felt that social workers would address these issues from an individual and a family perspective, taking into consideration both the familial and societal factors that influence teen sexual behaviour. They also emphasised the need for social workers to render preventive rather than statutory services (i.e. they should not wait for children to come to them or to be arrested, but they should go out and assess teenagers at schools).

"They [social workers] were supportive and the things they teach us is important because it helps me to make better decisions and learn to help other children who might be in the same situations."

"If social workers are available full-time at school it will help because we can access them anytime rather than to come when there is a problem. What they are helping us with is serious. I can now also assist my friends who are in the same situation through the help I got from social workers."

"We need someone to talk to, who will talk to us and us been open to them, how can I be open to my teacher while I know my teacher would want to do the very same thing that I told him that someone is doing to me. I can't be open to my teacher because when I tell them my problems they want to be my boyfriend or girlfriend because there is no longer been an adult or young person."

Social workers help communities function. Some work directly with individuals, conducting needs assessments and making referrals to resources in the community. Others assess needs on a larger scale. They may plan and administer programmes (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012:4). With many adolescents engaging in sexual behaviour at school, it is implied that social workers may take on diverse roles in addressing the problem. Any social worker working with young people will likely address the decisions concerning, and the consequences of, early sexual activity. According to Kirst-Ashman (2003:399), social workers at schools strive to improve the overall functioning of learners, educators, the school system and communities. They provide clinical support services such as counselling for learners with behavioural problems or those who are experiencing family difficulties.

Learners need social work intervention from both an educational and a therapeutic perspective, to prevent early sexual intercourse or to provide information on contraceptive use for those who are sexually active. Two aspects that suffer when adolescents experience social and emotional problems are school performance and attendance. Learners require support to maintain a life balance after engaging in sexual intercourse at school (Kirst-Ashman, 2003:399).

Sub-theme 2.3: Need for greater awareness and education

The participants indicated that they have access to countless avenues of information, some of which may not be correct and can lead to mistakes or making uninformed decisions. Awareness and education about sex can dispel many rumours and lies about sex and provide a realistic view of sex and reproduction. While many young people will have sex regardless of the information and because of peer pressure, the media and substance abuse, the participants still felt that the education about sex may make them safer and alert them to the consequences and dangers of sex. Data from this study indicate that with young people attempting to achieve an acceptable balance between modern-day societal standards and their own sexual requirements, the need for sexual education is greater. While preparing children for parenthood communities and the school setting in particular would need to provide sexuality education to prevent teenage pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and early onset sexual intercourse.

The participants' responses indicated that they would like social workers to be more involved at the level of increasing awareness about sex, rights, responsibility, contraception use and consequences of sexual activities. Although emphasis was placed on social workers creating awareness and running campaigns, other participants felt that this should start at home and parents must take full responsibility to educate their children on issues of sexuality. The statements below make this evident:

“Social workers should also campaign for awareness of sexual activities at school. However, it begins at home and the parents should take responsibility for their children.”

“Children need to be supported, we need to be educated about these issues [sexuality]. The social workers are there but the children are not right. Social workers should go out there and assess the needs of the school rather than wait for the children to come to them. They must go to the assembly and make awareness to the children.”

“Other children are not aware of the consequences of having sex at school or sex in general, so social workers can help them by teaching them and make them aware of the consequences.”

According to Wodarski and Wodarski (1995:15), sex education has to be integral to a young person's personal development and has to begin before or during puberty. Every child ought to receive sex education in school at an appropriate age. In addition to the basic anatomical and biological information, young people also need to know how to prevent unwanted pregnancy and avoid sexually transmitted diseases. In a nationwide

assessment of model programmes, Kirby (2001:74) found that sex education increased students' knowledge, but had little or no effect on the timing of sexual behaviour, on contraceptive use or on pregnancy rates. However, those exposed to sex education were more likely to practice contraception and less likely to become pregnant.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Teenage sexual behaviour in schools is a complex phenomenon. The findings contribute to a better understanding of teenagers' experiences of the sexual activities taking place at schools, as well as the need for social work support. It is important to take into account that the study participants formed part of a population of teenagers in Gauteng province who had been charged with engaging in consensual sex while on the school premises. The practices described thus reflect the experiences of this particular group of learners and cannot be generalised to all teenagers in South African schools.

From the responses of the participants, it is evident that sexual activities such as kissing, touching, rubbing, mutual masturbation, stroking and penetration (vaginal and anal) are happening at schools in various locations (in toilets and classrooms and on sports terrains). The results of this study indicate that schools have become highly sexualised locales. The findings show that learners are having sex at school, even in full view of CCTV cameras. Filmed group sex is also becoming increasingly common, as seven in a group of ten teenage onlookers took cell-phone videos that were later distributed among their peers and posted on social networks. It is also evident that sexual activity in schools is often planned among teens, although sometimes it happens spontaneously. The participants usually knew when, where and how these acts would take place.

The participants' responses indicate that sexual activities at school occur during school hours: in the morning before class, during break, after school or on their way home while using school transport. Access to a cell phone made planning trysts easier during school hours, as participants could chat with their boy/girlfriends via various social media networks or forums using SMS, Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp. All the participants in this study had engaged in consensual sex while at school, and only two participants had used condoms. They all had misconceptions about condom use, and one participant had had unprotected sex despite having a condom in his pocket.

The study identified a lack of communication, support and information from parents on sexual issues, as well as teenagers dismissing teachers' ability to prevent or intervene in sexual activities at school. The participants felt that social workers are better equipped to listen to learners who are involved in sexual activities at school, without judging or blaming them. They would have preferred that a social worker become involved immediately after their sexual transgression to support them from the start.

Prevention efforts as well as crisis interventions must be tailored to the specific needs of teenagers who have differing sexual experiences and expectations, and must address the social and psychological context in which sexual experiences occur. The participants' responses indicate that many educators lack skills in terms of guidance and counselling, as in their view, serious sexual incidents were not handled correctly. Educators do not

always know how to manage incidents of consensual sexual activity at school and are not well trained in counselling. The participants identified a need to speak to someone with whom they will feel safe and comfortable when discussing their personal problems – ideally, a social worker. It is important to make educators aware of learners' experiences of sexual activities at school, including the types of activities learners engage in, the places where and periods during which sexual activities occur, as well as the planning and even recording of these consensual sexual activities.

The Department of Basic Education, working together with the Department of Social Development, is deploying social workers at schools. However, these practitioners are not yet at schools on a full-time basis and most schools – especially in townships – do not make use of social workers at all. Deploying these practitioners at schools will provide quick and easy access to social work services, following incidents of anti-social sexual behaviour. With the various roles assumed by social workers, they can help adolescents and their families cope with incidents where learners have sex at school.

Social workers can also collaborate by formulating prevention and counselling programmes which will assist in improving parent-child communication about sex as well as providing guidelines. As this study included teenagers who had been convicted and had already attended a diversion programme, it is recommended that future research examine the sexual activities, on school grounds of teenagers who have not been convicted and have not participated in such a programme. Such research will shed further light on this complex and critical phenomenon. Of importance for future research is to consider a study on teenagers' experiences of social work intervention following anti-social behaviour at school. in particular sexual acts.

The Department of Basic Education has various policies and legislation in place on the management of sexual harassment at schools that focuses solely on sexual violence. In this study participants engaged in consensual sex; this poses a challenge for existing policies. There is a need to develop guidelines or amend existing guidelines on the management of sexual behaviour at schools to include measures and procedures to be followed when children engage in consensual sexual activities.

Research published in the field of teenage sexuality in South Africa mostly focuses on the experiences of teenage pregnancies, adolescent sexuality, contraception, sexual coercion among children and dating relationships. This research, providing an honest glimpse into teenagers' sexual activities on school grounds and of their need for social work intervention, can thus make a unique and valuable contribution to social work.

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