

# #MeToo in school: teachers' and young learners' lived experience of verbal sexual harassment as a pedagogical opportunity

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## **#MeToo in school: teachers' and young learners' lived experience of verbal sexual harassment as a pedagogical opportunity**

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### **Introduction**

The #MeToo movement is part of a historical development of democratisation processes and the human struggle for recognition, because 'the desire for the state to recognize one's basic dignity has been at the core of democratic movements since the French revolution' (Fukuyama, 2018, p.49). When referring to the #MeToo movement, Fukuyama pinpoints how it was the lack of respect and feelings of being denied equal status as human beings that ignited a struggle for recognition that has involved millions of women (Fukuyama, 2018).

There are teachers in Norway struggling for recognition of dignity and rights. This can be illustrated by a shocking recent case – a female teacher experienced being filmed underneath her skirt by one of her young male students in an upper secondary school, and her student shared the film with 19 classmates. She pressed charges, and the student was convicted, according to the Norwegian penal code § 266, for violating another person's peace through reckless behaviour. This was unprecedented in Norwegian legal history (Kolsrud, 2020). This female teacher is one of many who have experienced unwanted sexual attention. Statistics Norway has produced a report (With, 2018) on violence, threats, and harassment in different professions, based on a living conditions survey from 2016 (N=8162). According to this report, employees in the educational sector are exposed to violence, threats, and unwanted

sexual attention to a relatively high extent. There are gender differences: fourteen percent of female teachers and six percent of male teachers reported having been exposed to violence, threats, or unwanted sexual attention. However, the emotional dimensions of teachers' experience of sexual harassment in school, and how they deal with this phenomenon, has not been thoroughly explored in the research literature. This article aims to fill this knowledge gap.

It is not just teachers who experience sexual harassment at school. In 2019, the time had come for a Norwegian public media debate that recognised the concerns of young adolescents regarding sexual harassment in school, and how these students perceive teachers' supposed lack of intervention when girls and boys are sexually harassed (Baklund, Aure & Fyhn, 2019). This debate started with an opinion piece in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* - "“Cheap” and “f\*\*\*able” - #Metoo never reached the schoolyard". This article, written by three secondary school girls, shed light on how young girls hear condescending comments such as 'whore', 'cheap' and 'c\*\*t' on an everyday basis in school (Baklund, Aure & Fyhn, 2019). These adolescents say that teachers and other adults trivialise the situation if they report it. The debate continued with other opinion pieces on how boys experience being sexually harassed by girls (Aubert, 2019) and how girls harass each other in school (Andresen, 2019). The Norwegian Minister of Education and Integration at that time, Jan Tore Sanner, publicly responded to their concerns, urging that the text written by the secondary school girls be posted in classrooms throughout the country in order to raise awareness and that 'schools and teachers should emphasise important issues as bullying, sexual harassment, #MeToo and other important matters in education' (Sanner, 2019). Based on interviews with 200 adolescents nationwide, the recent report from the Ombudsperson for Children in Norway (OCN) confirms that:

Adolescents violate each other's boundaries and they are exposed to violations from adults in positions of power. They know too little about what is illegal and only understand to a small degree the consequences of what is going on. The training they receive from kindergarten to upper secondary school does not at all cover their needs. (OCN, 2018, p.5)

As will be discussed in this article, adolescents also infringe adults' sexual boundaries, which makes teaching about and countering sexual harassment in school a rather complex phenomenon. Based on a case study of verbal sexual harassment experienced by a young, female teacher, Ingunn, and her 17-year old student, Mary, in a Norwegian upper secondary school, this article discusses how 'lived injustices' in formal education (Lundy & Sainz, 2018) could provide pedagogical opportunities for education about, through and for human rights. Ingunn is a woman who is victimised by her 17-year-old male students, who are regarded as children under the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989, article 1). Although she is being victimised, Ingunn is also an adult, possessing the privileged power position of a teacher in relation to her own students. Being an adult and a teacher situates Ingunn in a remarkably different power position from that of her young student, Mary. This difference will be further explored. Complementing this case study, we draw upon a survey conducted among secondary students (N=382) of how often young learners report being sexually harassed and how often they experience that an adult intervenes. The research question is: How can teachers' and young learners'

lived experience of verbal sexual harassment provide pedagogical opportunities for transformative human rights education?

### **Sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is forbidden, according to the Norwegian Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act § 13. It is defined as ‘any form of unwanted sexual attention that aims to or is perceived as offending, frightening, hostile, condescending, humiliating or bothersome’ (Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act, 2018).

Elizabeth Meyer (2009) pinpoints how sexual harassment is gendered and that it includes all behaviour that aims to shape and protect the boundaries for traditional gender norms, including (hetero)sexual harassment, harassment based on sexual orientation, and harassment for gender non-conformity (Meyer, 2009, p.2). Bendixen and Kennair (2014) write that *verbal harassment* involves words related to genitals, the body, suggestions or demands for sexual favours, and verbal technological communication with a sexualised content; *non-verbal harassment* entails actions such as sexualised body movements or non-consensual sharing of sexual imagery; *physical harassment* involves non-consensual sexual contact such as unwanted kissing and touching of intimate body parts which is closely related to sexual abuse (Bendixen & Kennair, 2014).

Helseth and Sletteland (2018, p.28-29) identify three motives for why people sexually harass others; namely, misplaced desire, sexual harassment as a subordination technique, and unintentional harassment. Misplaced desire is what most people associate with sexual harassment. Projecting your emotions and desires onto others may be experienced as unpleasant when it is not reciprocated, as sexual harassment starts when the reciprocity ends (Sletteland & Helseth, 2018, p.30). Furthermore, sex can be associated with shame, but at the same time be a symbol of success, which makes it eligible as a subordination technique (Sletteland & Helseth, 2018, p.30). Unintentional sexual harassment, in which there is no intention of flirting or hurting anyone, could be related to ‘fitting in’ to a certain social context. Sexually harassing comments might be an established way of speaking in certain groups, and in order to belong to that group there might be a perceived need to adhere to such jargon. Students tend to use ‘locker-room talk’ in which being one of ‘the guys’ (or ‘the girls’ for that matter) entails degrading people of the opposite gender and/or homosexuals (Helseth & Sletteland 2018, p.30). This could be a way of consolidating a group identity, a sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ which is linked to ‘Othering’-processes. Kumashiro (2002, p.32) uses the term ‘Other’ to refer to groups that are traditionally degraded or ‘Othered’ in society, including female students, male students who are not perceived as stereotypically masculine, and students who are not perceived to be heterosexual. This does not only apply to students, but to teachers and other school employees as well.

### **The lack of recognition of rights as part of transformative Human Rights Education (HRE)**

In this section, we discuss how the concept of recognition is anchored and given a legal framework in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). We address Audrey Osler’s (2015) approach to anchoring recognition in human rights education; this links teaching for human rights to intersectionality by taking multiple axes of differentiation in order to understand experiences of justice/injustice and equality/inequality in school. To grasp how human beings’

desire for recognition and how experiences of lack of recognition could motivate struggles for social change, we draw upon Axel Honneth's (1995) writings to provide the theoretical underpinnings for analysing how our key informant, Ingunn, took action against being sexually harassed by her own young students. We link teaching about sexual harassment to comprehensive sexuality education (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018) which is based on a human rights education-approach and discuss how teachers' approaches to sexual harassment could contribute to education about, through and for human rights, especially focusing on the rights to freedom from discrimination as enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (United Nations, 1979) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989). Addressing sexual harassment in class is related to Laura Lundy and Gabriela Sainz's (2018) argument of incorporating 'lived experiences of injustice' for a transformative HRE as a way of enhancing children's legal literacy through schooling.

Osler (2015, p.263) points out that the concept of recognition of dignity and rights is essential to the human rights project, according to the preamble and articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948). The preamble promotes 'recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family' (United Nations, 1948, Preamble); article 6 states that 'everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law', and article 7 'affirms this equal recognition extends to equality before the law and protection under the law against discrimination' (United Nations, 1948 in Osler, 2015, p.263). Osler pinpoints that 'legal recognition is insufficient in human rights advocacy and HRE' and recurs to postmodern ethics (e.g. Butler, 2006) in order to address 'power struggles and asymmetrical power relations in which histories and identities are given recognition'. According to our interpretation of Osler's arguments, HRE should include perspectives on the lack of recognition and breaches of rights through teaching, taking into consideration the asymmetrical power relations that are in play in each particular situation (Osler, 2015). In a similar vein, and inspired by Katarina Tomasevski (2001), the first United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education, Lundy and Sainz also argue the need for addressing breaches of rights in formal education and that HRE must:

incorporate 'negative' lived experiences of injustice, exclusion or discrimination as a way to build children's capacity and develop the legal knowledge and skills that will enable them to identify and challenge breaches of their own rights and the rights of others. (Lundy & Sainz, 2018, p.6)

Lundy and Sainz primarily focus on violations of children's rights in formal education, which is related to young learners' experiences of sexual harassment in school. They also include breaches of 'the rights of others', which could be related to how teachers experience sexual harassment at work.

To deepen the understanding of sexual harassment we use intersectionality as an analytical perspective (Crenshaw, 1989, 1994; Davis, 2008; McCall, 2005). Intersectionality is fruitful in understanding 'how categories of race, class and gender are intertwined and mutually constitutive, giving centrality to questions like how race is 'gendered' and how gender is 'racialized', and how both are linked to the continuities and transformations of social class' (Davis, 2008, p.71). Crenshaw's contribution (1989) focuses on women of colour's experience, arguing that looking

at single-axis factors such as race *or* gender is insufficient; she suggests we should take into consideration the intersection of both *race* and *gender*. Crenshaw argues that women of colour experience sexual discrimination and sexual violence differently from white women and she exemplifies this claim by pinpointing how it historically has been unthinkable that a white male be convicted for having raped a woman of colour (Crenshaw, 1989, p.159). As we interpret Crenshaw, she argues that the difference is to be found in the degree of legal recognition; white women's experience of violence has judicially been more recognised than that of women of colour. Her perspective can be extended beyond race and gender, and also take into consideration various axes of differentiation, such as age, which is a factor of great relevance in the discussion of our empirical material. Her intersectional perspective contributes to capturing how sexual harassment is composed of power relations in which multiple axes of differentiation are in play.

In regard to teaching for human rights, Osler addresses how the concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) could 'enable us to better interpret the complex ways learners experience justice/injustice and equality/inequality', acknowledging multiple axes of differentiation such as economic, political, cultural and experiential (Osler, 2015, p.261). Multiple axes of differentiation also apply to how *teachers* experience justice/injustice or equality/inequality in school. This can be linked to Elisabeth Meyer's (2008) discussion of the factors that influence how teachers respond to incidents of sexual harassment among young peers in school. Based on qualitative interviews with teachers in Canadian secondary schools, she addresses how each teacher 'brings a set of identities and experiences to his/her teaching':

All of the participants talked about their experiences of having felt marginalized in society due to their identities as gay, bisexual, women, or people of colour. These experiences in their own schooling and professional life acted as very strong motivators to act out against discriminatory behaviour that they witnessed as teachers. (Meyer, 2008, p.10)

While Meyer addresses how teachers' own life experiences of being discriminated against motivate taking action against incidents of harassment among young peers, we see that this is also of relevance when discussing the motivational basis for taking action when teachers themselves experience being sexually harassed in school by their students.

Why would personal experience trigger a struggle for dignity, recognition and justice? To answer this question, it is fruitful to recur to Honneth's contribution regarding recognition. Honneth (1995) describes how human beings develop a positive sense of self and personal identity through being recognised – being given a certain status as a subject with rights, wishes and desires – by other individuals. We develop our self-esteem, self-respect and sense of worth through the recognition we receive, or fail to receive, from others. Being sexually harassed might involve feeling insulted or humiliated, which is linked to being denied recognition. When grasping how social struggles occur, Honneth affirms that 'the negative emotional reactions accompanying the experience of disrespect could represent precisely the affective motivational basis in which the struggle for recognition is anchored' (Honneth, 1995, p.135). As such, negative emotions – feelings of disrespect, discrimination and lack of recognition – can motivate both teachers and young learners to counter injustice through taking action, which involves exerting agency in sexually harassing

situations. However, the extent to which each individual's struggle is recognised by others could be informed by the power position that the individual possesses. As the following case analysis indicates, a 17-year-old girl in upper secondary school does not necessarily have the same privileged power position to push back on sexual harassment and be heard as the female teacher, although both of them in theory should be protected from this kind of misbehaviour through international human rights conventions.

One of the international human rights conventions of particular importance for the discussion in this article is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (United Nations, 1979). CEDAW defines discrimination against women as:

any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field. (United Nations, 1979, article 1)

CEDAW specifically urges state parties to take 'all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the field of employment' (United Nations, 1979, article 11). According to the general recommendations adopted by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1992), the definition of discrimination in article 1 includes gender-based violence, which refers to 'violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately'. When referring to article 11, the Committee confirms that equality in employment can be seriously compromised when women are subjected to sexual harassment in the workplace and that such misconduct is discriminatory when it, among other things, creates a hostile working environment (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, 1992 p.3). Thus, when women experience sexual harassment in the workplace, it is a breach of women's rights to freedom from discrimination as enshrined in CEDAW. Norway ratified this convention in 1981.

The other convention of great relevance for this article is the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (United Nations, 1989) – which Norway ratified in 1991. There are several relevant articles for the discussion of the case study; namely, article 2 on children's rights to freedom from discrimination, article 12 on children's rights to be heard in matters that affect their lives, article 28 on the right to education, which includes the right to comprehensive sexuality education, and article 29 regarding how education should enhance sexual equality. Article 29 is perhaps the most important one in the present context; it confirms that:

States parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:  
d) The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, *equality of sexes* [emphasis added] and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin (United Nations, 1989, article 29, d)

Countering sexual harassment when it occurs in the school setting could be considered an essential step towards ensuring sexual equality in education. However, countering sexual harassment involves taking children's voices seriously when they report being sexually harassed, which is clearly linked to UNCRC article 12 on the right to be heard in matters that affect their lives. The importance of article 12 in this regard is also pinpointed in the OCN report (2018, p.5). Sexual harassment is a problem among young people and research shows that in Norway 29 % of girls and 7% of boys aged 18-19 years have experienced it in various forms (Mossige & Stefansen 2016). Furthermore, sexual harassment is often not reacted to or taken seriously (Kvello, 2015; Søftestad, 2018; OCN, 2018).

Teaching about sexual harassment is in line with UNESCO's technical guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), which is 'a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality' (UNESCO, 2018, p.16). An essential element of CSE is to enable young learners' understandings of their fundamental human rights, which can provide a basis for making them capable of ensuring both their own rights, and the rights of others, throughout their lives. Thus, comprehensive sexuality education is linked to human rights education, which consists of education and training *about*, *through* and *for* human rights (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights [OHCHR] 2011, article 2).

With regard to sexual harassment, education *about* human rights entails teaching about the right to freedom from discrimination. Education *through* human rights would require upholding these rights in practice through intervening in all forms of sexual harassment inside and outside of the classroom, as well as inside and outside of school, when teachers become aware of such misconduct. Through actively intervening in such situations of sexual harassment, the teacher might contribute to changing the behavioural pattern of learners who harass. Such interventions can contribute to education *for* human rights, because it could enhance young students' legal literacy regarding how to respect and recognise both their own and other people's human worth and rights to freedom from sexual harassment. Legal literacy can be understood as a set of capabilities related to 'understanding the law and its relevant instruments, as well as the possible legal pathways to take' (Lundy & Sainz, 2018, p.17). Lundy and Sainz argue that legal literacy is essential for HRE to be transformative, as 'only legally-literate individuals and communities will have the capacity to transform breaches and violations of rights – including children's rights in education – into actionable principles for their protection' (Lundy & Sainz, 2018, p.17). It is a paradox that teachers, who are looked upon as potential agents for strengthening children's rights through education, at times get their own rights infringed by the children whose legal literacy they are supposed to enhance. Nevertheless, such incidents can be of great pedagogical value, because it is likely that children can develop legal literacy by becoming aware of how they are citizens who possess the power to either uphold or infringe other human beings' rights.

### **A mixed methods approach combining a case study and a survey**

Our key informant, Ingunn, took part in a phone-survey of 64 social science teachers in 2018. This survey is part of a wider research project exploring Norwegian social science teachers' practice regarding sensitive issues related to sexuality, sexual harassment and abuse in upper secondary school (for an overview of this survey, see Goldschmidt-Gjerløw, 2019). Although it was not originally part of the structured



phone survey to map teachers' own experiences of being sexually harassed, Ingunn shared her experience of being sexually harassed by students who were taking a vocational course. Goldschmidt-Gjerløw found Ingunn's case intriguing because it was her own personal experience that *triggered* teaching about sexual harassment – it was not the curriculum or the media or other factors. Goldschmidt-Gjerløw conducted an additional in-depth interview with Ingunn in person a few months after the phone-survey. This time the interview was semi-structured, only focusing on her experience of being sexually harassed by her students and how she dealt with this incident.

Two decades ago, in his much-cited book *Changing Teachers, Changing Times*, Andy Hargreaves described how teaching involves emotional dimensions, and that there is not enough knowledge about 'the emotions and desires which motivate and moderate teachers' work' (Hargreaves, 1994, p.141). He asserted that the research that had been done at that time stemmed from researchers' own theoretical lenses 'with concepts like pride, commitment, uncertainty, creativity and satisfaction', and that researchers tended to ask interview questions or interpret data in relation to such constructs instead of focusing on how 'teachers themselves talk about the emotional dimensions of their work' (Hargreaves, 1994, p.141). Following the tracks laid down by Hargreaves (1994), the case study portrays how Ingunn herself talks about the emotional dimensions of her work in relation to her being sexually harassed and dealing with it in the classroom.

The interview was transcribed, and we conducted an analysis of the content inspired by Gorski and Pothini's (2014) seven step-process to analyse educational cases (discussed in more detail later). It is not our intention to generalise from Ingunn's case, but rather to draw upon her experience as an empirical point of departure to discuss how personal experiences of 'lived injustices' might influence teaching practice and serve as a resource in the classroom.

The case portrays two incidents of verbal sexual harassment; a 17-year old girl in Ingunn's class, Mary, had received sexualised phone messages, and Ingunn herself was exposed to questions related to sexual information by the boys in her vocational class. Ingunn's experience will be emphasised in the empirical discussion since she is the key informant and Mary was no longer a school student at the time of the interview. Therefore, the discussion of Mary's experience is limited, since her voice is mediated through Ingunn. Ingunn's narrative of Mary's story does not provide a rich account of how Mary experienced the situation yet it is of value to include her voice in the discussion, because Mary's story epitomises teachers' lack of response when young learners are sexually harassed. To ensure anonymity, the names Ingunn and Mary are pseudonyms and the location of the school is not provided. Paul Gorski affirms that the case method, consisting of an analysis of real-life scenarios based on actual events, is fruitful for educators in order to apply theoretical ideas to professional practice (Gorski 2014).

Gorski & Pothini offer a seven-step process of 'identifying, examining, reflecting on, and taking concrete steps to resolve challenges related to diversity and equity in schools' (Gorski & Pothini, 2013; Gorski 2014). This process could be a toolkit for educators faced with issues of such as racism, sexism, homophobia and class inequities; it can be used in working to bring about greater justice in learning environments. Figure 1 is based on Gorski and Pothini (2013).

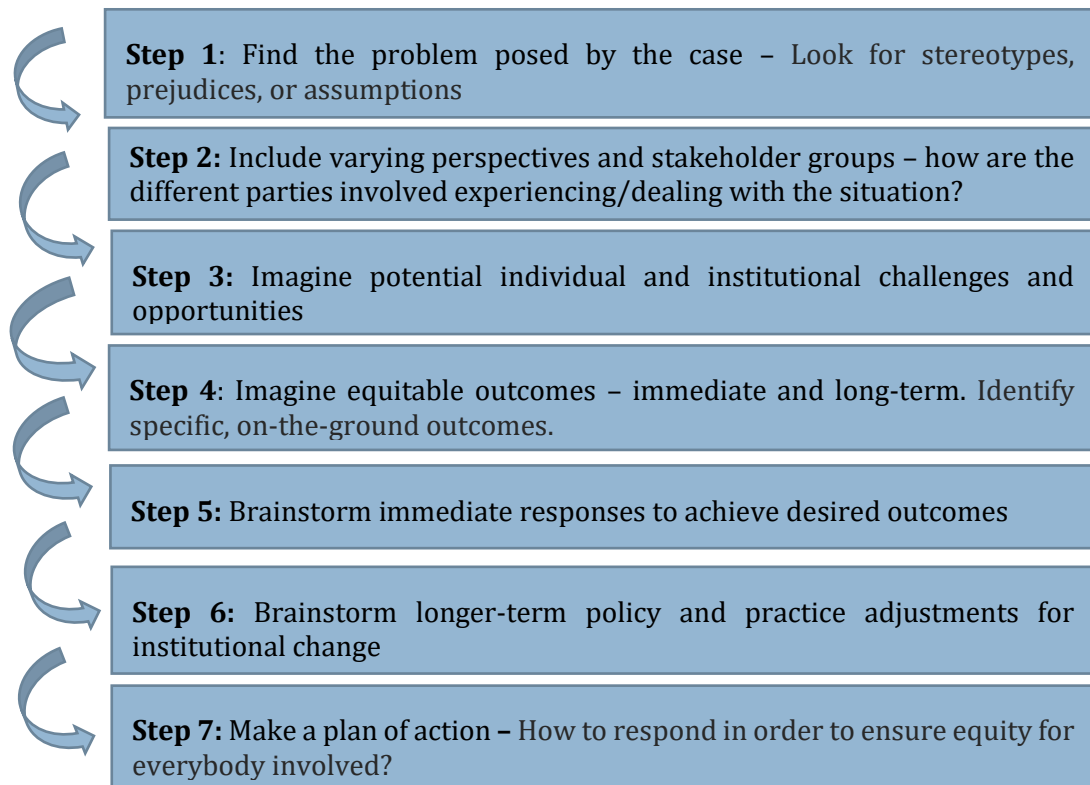


Figure 1: Seven-step process of analysing educational case studies on diversity and social justice, based on Gorski & Pothini (2013).

This analytical process is also useful for educational researchers when analysing teachers' approaches to injustice in general. In the case of Ingunn, it can be related to her experience of sexual harassment. Inspired by some of the steps in this process, the following analysis of Ingunn's case identifies a number of issues: the sexual harassment itself; how Ingunn feels about it; individual and institutional challenges and opportunities for countering sexual harassment in class; the specific action taken; and the on-the-ground outcomes according to her subjective experience.

It is worth emphasizing that the second step in this analytical process includes taking into consideration how different stakeholder groups experience the situation in question. We consider students to be essential stakeholders, and in order to strengthen the student perspective in our discussion, we complement the case study by including one survey of secondary students (N=382). This survey considered how often young learners report being sexually harassed and how often they experience that an adult intervenes in the situation.

This article is therefore inspired by a mixed methods approach, which we apply 'for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding' (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007, p.123). There are several reasons for choosing mixed methods, and Greene's concept of *complementarity* is an important rationale for this study (Greene, 2007, pp.95 -111; Creswell & Clark, 2018, pp.100-103). Greene considers that:

Results from the different methods serve to elaborate, enhance, deepen, and broaden the overall interpretations and inferences from the study. It is because most social phenomena are complex and multi-faceted that a complementarity mixed methods purpose fits many inquiry contexts. (Greene, 2007, p.101)

The qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other to give a wider understanding of the phenomenon of sexual harassment and teaching about it in school, and we include the voices of complementary stakeholder groups; both teachers and young learners.

The digital survey we draw upon was conducted by Irene Trysnes and Katja Skjølberg in 2018 among secondary school students (N=382) in Southern Norway as part of a wider research project, 'Classroom studies – in social science education'. This project examined how learners experience different aspects of social science education. One part of this survey focuses on young learners' perceptions of how often they are sexually harassed and how often they experience any intervention from adults. We use this specific part of the survey in the discussion of the case study of verbal sexual harassment to provide a context for 17-year-old Mary's experience of being sexually harassed by her peers.

### **Discussion of the case study**

In spring 2017, Ingunn, an upper secondary teacher in her thirties, was teaching a class of 17-year-old students from a vocational study programme specialising in construction. The class only had one girl student. The boys had a pre-established group culture of harassing each other, which developed into an 'Othering'-process that first targeted the young girl, Mary, and then Ingunn.

Ingunn says that she is not as strict in her vocational study classes as in the general study class, because 'I tolerate a bit more, joke a bit more and I'm less serious [...] Thus, I do not think they understood where the limit went in regard to teasing me'. When the boys went too far with comments towards each other that she characterises as 'too much', Ingunn says she stopped it by joking rather than in a 'harsh kind of way'. She opted to use a sense of humour, which was less emotionally demanding than confronting them. However, it did not turn out to be an effective strategy.

Trysnes' survey of secondary students (N=382) finds that sexually harassing words such as 'gay', 'lesbian', 'f\*\*\*\*t' and 'whore' are the most common abusive words young learners hear; 47% of the respondents report that they hear these words being used every day or every week (see Figure 1).

<i>How often have you heard:</i>	<b>Every day</b>	<b>Every week</b>	<b>Every month</b>	<b>More seldom</b>	<b>Never</b>
<i>the use of abusive words such as - f***ing 'gay', 'lesbian', 'f****t' or 'whore'?</i>	18%	29%	16%	24%	13%
<i>the use of abusive words such as - f***ing 'Christian'?</i>	3%	7%	8%	25%	57%
<i>the use of abusive words such as - f***ing 'Jew', 'Muslim', 'Penis' or "N****r"?</i>	13%	20%	15%	30%	21%
<i>that teachers have said something that you experience as racist or harassing to other students?</i>	1%	3%	5%	33%	58%
<i>that students have said something that you experience as racist or harassing to other students?</i>	10%	27%	14%	33%	16%

Table 1. Overview of secondary students' perceptions (N=382) on their experience of abusive words.

According to this survey, 37% of the learners are exposed to racist or other kinds of harassing comments by other students on a daily or weekly basis. The results show that students most often hear abusive words from other students. However, 3% percent report that they hear abusive words *from teachers* on a weekly basis. This constitutes a clear breach of the legal educational frameworks, such as the Norwegian Education Act §9, and we will get back to this. To explore how sexual harassment among young peers is constructed and dealt with, we will now discuss 17-year-old Mary's experience.

Mary had received sexualised messages on her mobile phone from some of the boys in class, asking her to 'come over so that we can have group sex with you'. This epitomises how females are more likely to experience sexual harassment when entering non-traditional fields of study or employment (Bogart & Stein, 1987). When Ingunn was asked how she found out, she answered:

I don't know whether she told me or if it was one of her teachers, I don't remember. I had in the back of my mind that this was not OK, that maybe their jargon had gone too far. You cross the limit for harassment, I think, when you send a message like that. What the consequences were, I don't know. (Interview in March, 2019)

For this young girl, being sexually harassed could have serious consequences for her development of a positive sense of self, self-esteem and sense of worth, resulting in her not wanting to go to school or dropping out. It could deprive her of

the opportunity of exercising her right to go to school and getting an education on equal terms with the rest of the class; it could deprive her of the right to become a citizen with equal status (Cornell, 1995). This sexual harassment is linked to the intersecting axes of gender, perceived heterosexuality and youth, as well as to the fact that she was the only girl in a male-dominated class. Bendixen, Daveronis and Kennair (2018) find that being exposed to peer verbal sexual harassment is associated with lower scores on indicators of well-being and that unwanted sexual behaviour negatively affects adolescents’ mental health; an effect that is stronger for girls than boys.

Ingunn does not remember how she found out about these messages – whether Mary herself had told her or if it was one of her other teachers. There are asymmetrical power relations in play here – teachers have a privileged power position in school (although being sexually harassed themselves might alter these power relations). Ingunn and Mary’s other teachers were in a position to protect her from such unwanted behaviour by recognising her experience of injustice and taking necessary measures to prevent the perpetuation of this behaviour; such action would be in tune with education *through* human rights (OHCHR, 2011, article 2). According to Meyer (2008), there can be several *barriers* in play that may prevent teachers from intervening when sexual harassment occurs: lack of institutional support from administrators; lack of formal education on the issue; an inconsistent response from colleagues; fear of parental backlash; and a negative community response. As such, the lack of response to Mary’s experience of sexual harassment could be considered an institutional barrier to transformative human rights education.

Mary’s experience of being harassed without anyone taking action is not unique. According to Trysnes and Skjølberg’s survey (see Table 2) of students in secondary school (N=382), sixty-eight percent report having experienced harassing comments from teachers or students. Out of these 260 students, 38% of the respondents answer that people *never or rarely intervene*. This can be connected to the bystander effect and a fear of being involved in conflicts (Darley and Latane, 1968) and may further be related to a weak school bond (Sprott, Jenkins & Doob, 2005). A Canadian longitudinal study finds that a strong school bond plays an important role in preventing risk behaviour such as violent and non-violent offending (Sprott et. al. 2005).

	Always	Almost every time	Occasionally	Rarely	Never	I have not experienced harassing comments
<i>If you have heard or experienced harassing comments from teachers or students, has anyone intervened to stop this?</i>	7%	12%	23%	17%	9%	32%

Table 2. Overview of students' perceptions (N=382) on how often they experience that teachers or students intervene in sexually harassing situations in the school setting. To find the percentage of those who replied that they rarely or never experience that anyone intervenes among those who have heard such comments, we calculated  $100/68*26=38$ .

This resembles what the Norwegian secondary school girls wrote about in *Aftenposten*, when they described how teachers and other adults tend to trivialise the situation if they report being sexually harassed (Baklund, Aure & Fyhn, 2019). The OCN report (2018) also addresses young adolescents' concerns about not being taken seriously in this regard. Adults' failure to recognise how young learners' experiences of sexual harassment constitutes a violation of children's rights, and their subsequent lack of action to prevent the continuation of such harassment does not comply with international standards and national legal education frameworks. Children have the right to be listened to when they are sexually harassed, a right that is enshrined both in UNCRC article 2 on non-discrimination and article 12 (UN, 1989). If their voices are not heard, this constitutes a severe impediment to the aim of achieving sexual equality in education (UN, 1989, article 29). The General Principles for Norwegian Education confirm that 'education should be in concordance with the UNCRC' (Ministry of Education and Research, 2017, p.5), and the Norwegian Education Act §9 A-4 affirms that 'all school employees should be aware of students' school environment, and take action against offenses as bullying, violence, discrimination and harassment if possible' (Education Act, 1998, §9a-4). However, there appears to be a great gap between theory and practice, and this points to a lack of recognition of rights.

Even though Ingunn did not directly follow up Mary's messages, they were one of the reasons why she chose to address the verbal sexual harassment in class:

Ingunn: I got the comment about whether *I was any good at giving blowjobs* [emphasis added], and then when I knew they had been sending those kinds of messages to her [Mary], I thought that...

Beate: Something had to happen?

Ingunn: Yes.

This was the final straw for Ingunn. She had to deal with emotional challenges in deciding how to resolve this incident. She was concerned about how the students' lack of respect for her was damaging the teacher-student relationship and worried about how they would react when she confronted them with their unwanted sexual behaviour. Ingunn thought that she 'had lost that class, that things would not be OK again'. Simultaneously, Ingunn's negative emotions of having experienced injustice and knowing what Mary had been exposed to, became the impetus for action. This resonates with Honneth's description of how 'the negative emotional reactions accompanying the experience of disrespect could represent precisely the affective motivational basis in which the struggle for recognition is anchored' (Honneth, 1995, p.135). As previously discussed, Meyer (2008) also considers how teachers' experience of injustice can serve as a *motivator* for intervention.

After this inappropriate comment in class, Ingunn contacted the school principal, Eva. Eva responded in accordance with the Norwegian Working Environment Act paragraph 4.3 by reacting immediately, asking 'if she should go and

speak to them’ as a way to ensure that ‘employees shall not be subjected to harassment or other improper conduct’ (Working Environment Act, 2006). The school principal’s reaction was part of the institutional framework that influenced the outcome of this incident; Ingunn’s symbolic quest for recognition as a subject with rights was respectfully honoured by the principal, and Eva’s action probably enabled her to fight back against the sexual harassment. If the principal had reacted otherwise, by for example excusing the boys’ behaviour and not taking her experience seriously, this could have been considered as an institutional barrier (Meyer, 2008). In this case, the school management played an important role in countering injustice, and this could be considered as an institutional strength.

After discussing how to approach this incident with the school principal, Ingunn decided to dedicate the following social science lesson to a dialogue on sexual harassment, drawing upon her own personal experience of ‘lived injustice’. She based the lesson on her personal narrative and emotions regarding how she felt about being sexually harassed by her own students:

Ingunn: Before class, I went up to the room and I took away all the desks and gathered the chairs in a circle, so that no one could hide behind anything. And then we had the conversation about sexual harassment. It is probably wise to teach about it, because *it was as if they were illuminated* [emphasis added] [by knowing] the consequences of saying such things and behaving the way they had.

Beate: Do you remember how you started the lesson?

Ingunn: I just used *myself as an example* and told them that *I was very upset*. I just said it the way it was, that we had had a good time, but now the limit was reached, because *that kind of comment is not OK for me and it is actually not legal* [emphasis added]. (Interview in March, 2019)

During the lesson, she made the students take turns in commenting on her perspective of the incident, making them engage in the dialogue. By sharing her negative emotions regarding how she experienced this unwanted sexual comment, she enabled them to put themselves in her shoes. In this way, she gained recognition as a subject with rights that she wanted to be respected. It is likely that this triggered their critical reflexivity of their own behaviour, because she says ‘it was as if they had been illuminated’ when she shared her perspective on the incident. She believes that the outcome of the lesson would not have been the same if they had not had that pre-history in class, because the content was directly linked to their everyday lives at school. The outcome of confronting that class became the opposite of what she had imagined in advance, and instead of damaging their relations, Ingunn says that she rather strengthened her relationship with them and that ‘they became more aware that there is a limit for what you can joke about and what you cannot’. She did not address how her rights to freedom from sexual harassment at the workplace are enshrined in the CEDAW (United Nations, 1979) nor did she make references to the Norwegian Equality and Anti-Discrimination Act § 13 (2018), which she could have done to further strengthen her students’ legal literacy. Still, she emphasised that their comment ‘is actually not legal’ during the teaching lesson, which at least appears to have made them more conscious of what they had done.

Ingunn reflects upon her own privileged power position of having agency to push back on sexual harassment in relation to that of Mary:

Beate: Did you feel that you 'won them over' by sharing your feelings?

Ingunn: Mmmh [confirming]. But I could do that, because I am an adult and that comment was quite innocent, they had not caused me any harm. But for the 17-year-old girl who had received messages concerning group-sex, it wouldn't have been easy for her to say something like that.

Ingunn did not address Mary's experience directly with the boys, and it is highly problematic that this was not dealt with. This failure is a clear breach of Mary's rights to protection from sexual discrimination as well as a breach of UNCRC article 29 (United Nations, 1989), concerning how education should promote sexual equality. However, our impression is that Ingunn somehow sought to protect Mary by using herself as an example, hoping that this could raise the boys' awareness of appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour. Drawing upon personal experience is not unproblematic and depends greatly on the context; If Ingunn were to discuss Mary's experience of receiving sexualised phone messages in class, this should only be done in accordance with Mary herself, because drawing upon her experience as a point of departure for teaching could make her feel even more vulnerable, especially if she is not consulted in advance. In Mary's case, it could be wiser for the involved student and her teacher to firstly address the matter in the school principal's office. When Ingunn was asked whether she knew if Mary had graduated, she answered 'I think she quit school'. Since we have not been able to interview Mary, we do not know if the sexual harassment she experienced influenced her decision to quit school. However, given the severity of her experience and the lack of protection and recognition of her rights, we believe that it is likely to have played a role. More research is needed on the potential links between experiences of sexual harassment and upper secondary school drop-out.

### **Concluding remarks**

The reasons behind the boys' sexual harassment of Mary and Ingunn are probably to be found in a combination of several intentional or unintentional motives. These range from a misplaced sexual desire to a way of cultivating a sense of group identity and belonging 'to the guys' through sexualised language or by stirring up power relations in class by challenging the young female teacher's privileged power position. One limitation of this study is that we only have Ingunn's perspective.

Could the harassment have been avoided if Ingunn had enforced strict rules in the classroom instead of preferring joking to strictness when the boys went 'too far'? And could it therefore be that the harassment was the result of a lack of leadership? The boys in class could be considered as marginalised youth at risk of early offending. Teacher-student relations are critical for influencing students' attitudes, especially when it is a matter of protecting at-risk teenagers from early offending (Spratt et.al, 2005), and these young men could have benefitted from clear guidance from their teacher on appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour. Then again, this reasoning could lead to a type of 'victim-blaming' – a situation in which the victim is blamed for being at the wrong place at the wrong time or having somehow provoked the sexual offence (Skilbrei & Stefansen, 2018). We have not entertained such thoughts in this discussion.

As mentioned earlier, there are different types of sexual harassment. We categorise both what Ingunn and Mary experienced as verbal sexual harassment. For



Mary, the verbal sexual harassment was mediated through phone messages from the boys, which shows one technological dimension of communication with unwanted sexualised content (Bendixen & Kennair, 2014). We consider that verbal sexual harassment and, to a certain extent, non-verbal sexual harassment such as sexualised body language and non-consensual sharing of sexual imagery could be the subject of pedagogical intervention when young learners are exposed to and expose each other to such misbehaviour in the school setting. However, this would require that the parties involved agree to discuss the matter openly. In cases of physical sexual harassment among peers in the school setting, which is even more severe, we consider that other measures should be taken.

Ingunn and Mary's other teachers could have intervened when Mary was sexually harassed by her classmates, but they did not. This constitutes a clear breach of the UNCRC. We must take children's voices seriously and recognise their inherent human rights if they are sexually harassed. This duty is enshrined both in article 2 on non-discrimination and article 12, on being heard in matters that affect their lives. A failure to carry out this duty is a severe impediment to the goal of achieving sexual equality in education (United Nations, 1989, article 29). Unfortunately, Mary's experience of not getting support to defend her rights in practice when being sexually harassed by classmates is far from unique. The Norwegian media debate on #MeToo in school bears witness to this, as does Trysnes and Skjølberg's survey of secondary school students' perceptions of how often anyone intervenes when they are sexually harassed. Ingunn said that Mary quit school, and we do not know if her experience of harassment influenced that decision. More research is needed on the potential links between experiences of sexual harassment and high school drop-out.

From an intersectional perspective, our empirical material indicates that the extent to which one's experience of sexual harassment is recognised by others as a legal offense is influenced by multiple axes of differentiation, including one's age – when young learners, regardless of gender, experience sexual harassment, there appears to be little intervention or support for protecting their rights in practice. Ingunn's experience, on the other hand, was fully recognised by the school principal. If we compare what happened to Ingunn and Mary, it could be argued that Mary's experience of receiving sexualised phone messages was the more severe experience. She was 17 years old and the only girl in class, and her ordeal could have greater consequences for her human development than Ingunn's experience of being asked if she was 'any good at giving blow-jobs'. The boys' harassment of Mary deprived her of getting an education on equal terms with the rest of the class. Nevertheless, being sexually harassed at work by her students also deprived Ingunn of her right to be a teacher on equal terms with the rest of her colleagues.

Ingunn's case illustrates that the nature of the harassment had to become very personal before she took action. When the power relations shifted and the male student humiliated her, she was either forced to take action or to lose her authority as a teacher. This case also shows that through taking action, the teacher can contribute to social change through dialogue with students. Sharing her negative emotions regarding how she experienced being sexually harassed and making clear that such misconduct is illegal, became transformative for that class. It was the honest conversation about the lack of recognition of rights and how their harassment made her feel that became the transformative human rights education for the boys. She felt that the class environment was greatly improved, and she did not experience similar incidents afterwards. Ingunn does not know if the boys stopped harassing

Mary, but it could be that her classroom dialogue made them think twice about sending sexualised messages.

The way she handled this situation pinpoints how the norms and expectations regarding the performance of gender and sexuality can be influenced through classroom dialogue. Ingunn's intervention could be considered as a way to strengthen positive school bonds which can benefit young people at risk of early offending (Sprott et.al. 2005). This case is not meant as just another example of how some young boys do not know how to behave but is rather meant to illustrate the importance of countering sexual harassment through dialogue based on real-life scenarios for transformative human rights education. It shows the short-term outcome of countering sexual harassment in class, and more research is needed to investigate the longer-term consequences of addressing this issue. Still, when sexual harassment occurs in school, it is useful to look at it as a *pedagogical opportunity*, which can potentially open up a space for critically addressing such issues. This is a constructive alternative to looking at sexual harassment in school as something inevitable and biologically determined that one cannot stop.

What should schools do in terms of discipline when facing issues of sexual harassment? Draugedalen (2020) discusses the fact that Norwegian primary schools vary greatly in their response to harmful sexual behaviour and calls for a more systematic approach based on national guidelines. The OCN (2018, p.39) recommends that the Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training develop a tool for 'schools' preventive and systematic work for a good school environment according to the Norwegian Education Act § 9A', and that this tool should emphasise 'schools' responsibility for zero tolerance on sexual offenses'. Coming back to the incident in the introductory paragraphs concerning the 'upskirting' of the female teacher, the student in question was suspended from school for one day. Suspending the students who harassed Mary and Ingunn might have been one way of demonstrating the severity of sexual harassment, yet it is uncertain whether this would have had a positive impact on their sexual behaviour. Pedagogical approaches such as Ingunn's very personal approach most likely 'spoke to the heart' of her students and is probably something they will remember for a long time, even though we do not know the long-term effect of her approach.

If education is to ensure sexual equality, teaching about sexual harassment and actively countering such misconduct is crucial, both when it targets teachers as well as young learners. In this way, education can play an essential role in consolidating democratisation processes in society at large that aim to ensure human beings' dignity and recognition of rights not only for current generations of citizens, but also for the generations of citizens to come.

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