Female Faculty of Education Undergraduate Students’ Sexual Harassment Experiences during Work – Placement

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Abstract: The study aimed at finding out the sexual harassment experiences of female undergraduate student teachers during work related learning in secondary schools, who the perpetrators were and the extent to which these experiences were reported. All this being done in order to mitigate sexual harassment incidences during work-placement. The organizational theory of sexual harassment as its focus on how power is abused to sexually harass especially females in organisations informed the study. A qualitative exploratory descriptive design was employed in conducting the study. Convenient sampling technique was used to come up with the study sample. Face to face interviews were carried out with female undergraduate students. These students had experienced sexual harassment and had returned from a year long period of work experience. The interviews were audio taped. A thematic content analysis was used in analysing data. The study found out that female undergraduate students experienced verbal, physical and visual sexual harassment from male perpetrators inclusive of mentors, other qualified teachers and some school heads. Very few students reported their experiences to both school management and faculty of education leaders. Most participants did not report their sexual harassment experiences at all. The main reasons for not reporting were: fear of being victimised by the school community after reporting; having an attitude that nothing will be done about the sexual harassment report; ignorance of where and how to report as well as thinking that it was not very important for sexual harassment victims to report the experiences, among other reasons. Mitigating sexual harassment in practicing schools is possible: when teacher preparation programmes provide training to undergraduate students about sexual harassment in workplaces; when there are quality relationships, safe, supportive and trusting learning environments in the practicing schools.

Key terms: Sexual harassment, work-placement, work-related learning, teaching practice, mentor, practicing school

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Workplace learning is becoming an increasingly common experience for undergraduate students transitioning from formal education into the workplace. Work-placement currently features in most professional degree programmes. In universities, most programmes integrate formal pedagogy with practical work experience. A wide variety of terms are used to describe this experience. These terms include work-placement, work-related learning and teaching practice, among others. In this study, these three terms feature prominently. The overall goal of most placement programmes is to enhance the value of the learning experience through an integration of work and education. A university work placement programme is a way of making graduates more employable after graduation by developing workplace skills sets, complementing academic learning and providing valuable exposure to the working environment (Gardner and Barkus, 2014; Poulter & Smith, 2006).

Deployment of students in secondary schools to do teaching practice is currently a common practice in faculties of Education in Zimbabwe. During work-placement students, especially females, witness and experience sexual harassment (Patrick et al, 2009). It is imperative for universities to prepare students going on placement to identify and respond to sexual harassment. Universities should, of necessity, support students who witness and or experience sexual harassment on placement. Educational institutions also have a duty of taking care to protect female faculty of education students from workplace sexual harassment during the practice of teaching. Universities’ role in supporting students who are sexually harassed during placement has not received much attention. Therefore the purpose of this study was to explore the female undergraduates’ experiences and perceptions of sexual harassment during teaching practice with a view to coming up with ways of mitigating these experiences.

Sexual harassment from an organisational theory perspective

Sexual harassment from an organisational theory point of view is explained through a number of issues inclusive of power and status inequalities in an organisation. Power differences in the organisation can lead to sexual harassment taking place. Power differences help to explain sexual harassment in the sense that in an organisation, men tend to be more powerful than women as they hold decision-making positions. The gender stereotypes that go with power are that men are powerful and aggressive, whilst women are passive, receptive and family oriented. In other words the theory views the hierarchical structure and authority relations obtaining at the workplace as responsible for the incidence of sexual harassment. Tangri and Hayes (1997:118) argue that sexual harassment at organisational level is an abuse of organisation power.
The gender stereotypes that go with power are that men are powerful and aggressive, whilst women are passive, receptive and family oriented. In other words the theory views the hierarchical structure and authority relations obtaining at the workplace as responsible for the incidence of sexual harassment. Tangri and Hayes (1997:118) argue that sexual harassment at organisational level is an abuse of organisation power. In this theory, sexual harassment is attributed to men’s power over women. In the context of this study, the power of the male qualified teacher and mentor, over that of the female student teacher is related to status. The male qualified teacher and mentor have power over the student as a mentor, as well as someone with the ability to enhance as well as diminish the female student’s self-esteem. The mentor assesses the students’ ability to teach and gives feedback on the lesson execution abilities of the student.

Sexual harassment can therefore be viewed as a consequence of the bureaucratic structure that allocates power to men within the organisation. Other factors facilitating sexually abusive behaviour in the workplace include an organisational climate that is permissive with workplace ethics, norms and policies that are biased in favour of men.

One positive issue emanating from the theory is that it endeavors to unify numerous organisational factors explaining sexual harassment. Therefore, there is evidence of unifying power in the theory. Furthermore, the theory has been tested and identified to play a crucial role in the occurrence of sexual harassment. This gives the theory strong empirical adequacy and research fertility (Pina, Gannon & Saunders, 2009: 132). Organisational climate is therefore viewed in this theory as a very strong predictor of sexual harassment (Fitzgerald; Welsh, 1999).

All in all, the theory has played a significant role in making researchers and professionals in management positions focus on the need for effective mechanisms to mitigate sexual harassment in the organisation (Willness, Steel & Lee, 2007; Pina et al., 2009).

Sexual harassment from an organisational theory perspective therefore, includes repeated, unwanted and unwelcome sexual comments, looks, or physical contact and is related to sexuality and uneven power. Sexual harassment has the effect of violating the victim’s dignity. It creates an environment that is intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive (Hunt, Davidson, Fielden, & Hoel: 2010).The hostile working environment is created through verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.

Sexual harassment, in the context of this study, is an epidemic that is rife in higher education systems. Its impact on individuals, groups and institutions is profound. Features enabling sexual harassment are summarised by Bondestam and Lundqvist (2020) as including, among others; precarious working conditions, hierarchical organizations, a normalization of gender-based violence, toxic academic masculinities, a culture of silence and a lack of active leadership.

Sexual harassment, therefore is of particular concern in teaching settings, however little is known specifically about female undergraduate students’ sexual harassment experiences during teaching practice in Zimbabwe. There has been little recent research to assess female undergraduate students’ sexual harassment experiences when they go for work related learning in schools.

II. WORK PLACEMENT PROGRAMMES

Work placement programmes claim to bridge the experience in higher education to that of the world of work. Furthermore work placements have been used to help students develop transferable and work-related skills in ‘real’ work-places. Vaezi-Nejad (2009: 282) describes a particular work-placement programme that was designed by London Metropolitan University. Called “Work Placement for Professional Experience”, the programme has the following objectives:

- Gain a useful experience of the working environment;
- Undertake a work-based project appropriate to their academic level;
- Enhance and extend their learning experience by applying and building on their academic skills and capabilities by tackling real life problems in the work place;
- Become aware of the culture and structure of a work environment;
- Develop new capabilities and skills.

Work placement reflects the philosophy that integrating practical work experience with formal education can produce meaningful benefits (Gardner and Barktus, 2014:42).

Universities’ role

The need to educate students for work with sexual harassment comes from the thinking that universities by their nature have legal, moral and pedagogical responsibilities to support students who are sexually harassed during work-placement (Barlow and Hall, 2007; Cooper and Briggs, 2000). Universities also have a responsibility to prepare ‘work-ready’ graduates who are capable and motivated to prevent and respond to sexual harassment in the workplace (Emslie, 2010).

Students have a fundamental right to learn in safe and supportive environments as well as to be treated with respect, including when they are on placement. The need to promote and provide a conducive learning environment is an essential function of universities (The Student Learning and Support Services Taskforce, 2003). The adverse consequences of being sexually harassed include distress, fear and self-blame. This can lead to health and relationship problems. If this occurs during placement it may disrupt their learning, and
subsequently their career development and future employment. This can be avoided if the students’ safety and support is adequately addressed. If delivering quality educational opportunities through hands-on learning in universities is taken seriously, then students’ safety and wellbeing when on placement should not be taken for granted. Sexual harassment is an experience that can compromise safety in field placements or interfere with student learning (Wood and Moylan, 2016).

Being sexually harassed can also negatively affect the quality of students’ work performance, which could have detrimental implications for the people they are working with (Stanley and Goddard, 2002). Therefore attention has to be given to teaching practices and learning experiences if institutions are to equip teacher graduates capable of protecting themselves and their pupils. Educators therefore have a responsibility to come up with interventions when supporting students who have been sexually harassed while on placement.

**Higher Education students’ experiences of sexual harassment during work-placement**

There have not been many studies carried out in Zimbabwe on sexual harassment during work-placement. The only study carried out was by Zireva and Makura (2013). The study was on the extent to which sexual harassment was prevalent among student teachers during teaching practice in primary schools in Zimbabwe. The study sought to unpack the sexual harassment phenomenon as lived and expressed by student teacher victims on teaching practice in schools. The study revealed that, regardless of gender, student teachers experienced sexual harassment of various forms from their subordinates. The prevalence of sexual harassment of student teachers was such that one in every three student teachers was sexually harassed. There was no difference in the prevalence of sexual harassment perpetrated against male and female student teachers. The acts of harassment ranged from subtle or non-physical forms such as lustful stares that make the victim uncomfortable and forced compliance with assertive acts that constitute the abuse of professional status. The study also revealed that there has been no formal reporting of sexual harassment perhaps due to fear of reprisals by the perpetrator, who in this case wielded position power (Zireva & Makura, 2013: 313, 320).

Generally students report witnessing and experiencing sexual harassment while doing work related learning. A significant percentage of sexual harassment against university students occurred in a workplace in which they were placed as a part of their university studies. (Barlow and Hall, 2007; Mama, 2001; The Australian Human Rights Commission’s 2017 National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities).

In the studies conducted sexual harassment experiences by students from workers and service users in general included: workers talking about their sex lives; making sexually offensive comments; ogling young women; inappropriately commenting on female service users’ physical experience; being harassed to go out on dates and provide their contact details by service users (Emslie, 2009).

Australian Human Rights Commission (2008a) identified 22 per cent of women experiencing sexual harassment while in the field. The major problem is that most female students harassed do not disclose as they give reasons like: it was not serious enough; lack of faith in the complaints process; lack of knowledge about what constitutes sexual harassment (Ramrathan, 2005). The bottom line is that research points to a significant number of female students experiencing unwelcome sexual conduct during work-placement.

During teaching practice, female students may be considered as a high-risk group of sexual harassment. Therefore it is necessary to investigate and provide safe environments for teaching practice to students. It also necessary for university lecturers in the Faculties of Education to put the effort into preventing the damages of sexual harassment. It is also necessary for practising schools to put effort into preventing the damages of sexual harassment.

There is still little known about the experiences of female students’ experiences and the impact that sexual harassment has on them personally and professionally. The purpose of this study was to fill this gap in knowledge. The research aimed to find out sexual harassment experiences by female undergraduate students during teaching practice with a view to making recommendations to improve future teaching practice experiences for students during the practice of teaching.

The specific research questions guiding the study were:

- What are the sexual harassment experiences encountered by female undergraduates during teaching practice?
- Who are the perpetrators of sexual harassment towards female undergraduate students?
- Are the sexual harassment experiences reported to the powers that be?
- What can be done to mitigate sexual harassment experiences during work-related learning?

**III. METHOD**

Conducted between February and September 2019, the research mainly focused upon collating qualitative data that exposes female undergraduate students’ sexual harassment experiences during placement. A qualitative exploratory descriptive design was used in conducting the study as it allowed understanding of the experiences of female undergraduate students on teaching practice. Convenience sampling technique was utilised in collecting data. Recruitment of female faculty of education students who had completed three terms on teaching practice and who had experienced or had seen someone being sexually harassed in the field constituted the sample. A total of 18 unmarried female undergraduates took part and interviews were
documented through the use of a structured questionnaire. The students sampled were at level 4 semester 1 in the Faculty of Education. To ensure that study participants had sufficient time in the field to be able to answer the questions. Data was also collected through a semi-structured interview guide and was analysed manually. A thematic content analysis was used in analysing data. The research was based on face-to-face semi-structured interviews with undergraduate female students who had recently returned from a period of work experience.

IV. RESULTS

The study sought to explore sexual harassment experiences of female undergraduates during work related learning, who the perpetrators were, whether victims reported these experiences. The study findings leading to recommending ways of mitigating sexual harassment in practicing schools.

Sexual harassment experiences

The eighteen participants were asked whether they had been sexually harassed in the past year while on teaching practice. Thirteen of the students affirmed this experience. Only 5 students claimed they had not experienced sexual harassment. Only one out of the 18 participants had witnessed sexual harassment of another female student teacher. The sexual harassment experiences were verbal, physical and visual in form.

Verbal sexual harassment experiences

Verbal sexual harassment experiences from the female undergraduate respondents are captured in the excerpts below:

My mentor remarked 'your skirt is too tight' on one occasion. On another occasion he remarked 'you look sexy today'. 'I felt both angry and fearful' (Interviewee 1)

I had a sexist remark directed at me by one of the qualified teachers at the school. I felt embarrassed (Interviewee3)

The male mentor and a qualified male teacher at the school made remarks of a sexual nature that were unwelcome and unwanted.

I experienced an unwanted verbal request for intimate physical contact by the senior male teacher. I felt humiliated indeed (Interviewee5)

At assembly one qualified male teacher talked to me about sexual issues and I felt very uneasy (Interviewee8)

The participants felt uneasy when they experienced verbal sexual harassment from the two qualified teachers at the practicing schools

Excerpts from the participants above revealed that they were verbally harassed with harassers largely describing them as being sexy; commenting about the female student’s too tight skirts; verbal request for intimate physical contact among other sexual remarks. These sexual remarks were made by a mentor, a qualified male teacher and a senior male teacher. What should be noted here is that these verbal sexual remarks and requests are offending and traumatizing.

Physical sexual harassment experiences

Physical sexual harassment experiences as revealed by the participants took the following forms:

My male mentor touched my back and my thigh several times. This was unjust treatment to say the list (Interviewee2)

My male mentor grabbed me a couple of times on Mondays when we were coming from weekends. I did not like it. I was disappointed and I did not tell anyone about it (Interviewee6)

Unwanted and unwelcome touching of the participants’ back and thigh as well as grabbing are experiences that are dehumanising to say the least.

We were two student teachers from the same university. During break time we used to sit close to each other in the staff room. There was a qualified male teacher who came to sit between the two of us and started to scratch my back. I did not like it. Anxiety caught up with me. I told him to stop it. I was offended but I did not report it. (Interviewee10)

I was kissed without my consent by my male mentor when we were in the office we shared. I lost confidence of him as my mentor (Interviewee9).

Scratching of the female student’s back and being kissed without one’s consent go to show how male teachers at these practicing schools reduced the female students to sex objects.

I was called by the school head to his office on one occasion. He hugged me. I did not want it but could not report. I asked myself ‘To who could I report this?’ ‘Who could believe me if I were to report this sexual harassment experience?’ I felt inadequate and confused. Interviewee (11)

The physical sexual harassment experiences of the female students ranged from unwanted touching of the thigh and back, unwanted scratching of the back, being kissed without consent to unwanted hugging. These experiences indicate that sexual harassment was taking place in schools where students were doing work related learning.

Visual sexual harassment experiences

Visual sexual harassment experiences were evident in the following excerpts from the participants:

Male qualified teachers used to stir at my hips, my breasts and my skirt a lot. I felt uncomfortable about it. (Interviewee13)

I was shown pornographic material in the form of sexually suggestive pictures by my male mentor. The material was on his cellphone. I did not like it at all. I felt embarrassed. (Interviewee15)
Being stirred at on specific parts of the body and being shown pornographic material when it is unwelcome and unwanted is embarrassing and humiliating.

_ I was sent text messages of a sexually suggestive nature on a number of instances by one of the married male teachers (Interviewee4)_

The excerpts above indicate that female students on work-placement experienced verbal, visual and physical forms of sexual harassment. The harassment was perpetrated by male teachers in the practicing schools. Most participants experienced unwanted sexual harassment. There is no doubt that all these sexual harassment experiences are dehumanising to say the least.

**Perpetrators of sexual harassment**

Participants were asked about the source of sexual harassment, through a list of those members of staff they would have contact with in the practicing schools. It is evident from their excerpts above that mentors, interacting with female students on a regular basis were the main sources of such distress. Sexual harassment was perpetrated mainly in offices. Other male qualified teachers, senior male teachers and a school head were involved in causing the distress of female student teachers. These perpetrators created a hostile school environment for practicing female student teachers.

**Reporting of sexual harassment experiences**

Given that earlier research studies had indicated that most of the harassed are reluctant to report, participants were asked whether they reported the sexual harassment experiences they encountered. Excerpts below indicate participants’ responses to the question and justification for either reporting or not reporting.

_When I was harassed by my male mentor, I went to the female school head to report and the school head’s response was that I had caused the sexual harassment. When I was sexually harassed again but this time by one of the qualified teachers I did not report. I no longer had the courage to report. I thought nothing would be done after I have reported (Interviewee7)_

It becomes very difficult for a student who has reported to a school head and is told that you did something that led to your harassment.

_You are sexually harassed by a male, married and qualified teacher, you do not report because you do not want to destroy his marriage. (Interviewee4)_

_In the absence of evidence it is difficult to report. In my case it occurred whilst there was no witness. It was the two of us. Furthermore I did not want to be judged as a woman of loose morals (Interviewee2)_

Fear of destroying marriage of the harasser and absence of evidence of harassment militated against reporting in the two excerpts above.

_I was afraid of reporting the sexual harassment incident given that if I was to report it, I was going to be worried about being gossiped at work. The school community was likely to become hostile to me from then on (Interviewee5)_

_I was afraid of not being believed by the school community after reporting (Interviewee11)_

Worry about being gossiped at work and the thinking that her report would not be taken seriously by the school community were reasons given for not reporting in the two excerpts above.

_When I was sexually harassed, I told my fellow student teacher and he dismissed it as a creation out of nothing. He even accused me of being too friendly to the male mentor (Interviewee9)_

The one who reported incidences of sexual harassment reported to school management. She was promised that the culprit will be approached. She did not get any feedback on her report. The one who reported to the female school head ended up being accused of having started it all. None of the participants reported to the university.

Those who did not report incidences of sexual harassment indicated: fear of being victimised; thinking that nothing will be done about it; not knowing where and how to report and thinking that it was not important enough for them to report. They were worrying about the consequences such as being scared of getting a bad work-placement report as well as fearing that the whole school staff would turn against them. Others felt that it was best to just ignore it. Their reasons to a large extent resonated with what Hunter (2006) and McLaughlin et al (2012) had also found out. They could even see it as a part of the job and not reporting it in order to maintain good working relationships with colleagues (Chamberlain et al. 2008; Stainback et al 2011).

**Mitigating sexual harassment**

On ways to mitigate sexual harassment participants were asked to suggest ways and means of doing so. The suggestions were in two parts, that is, the role of the students and the role of the school and university in mitigating sexual harassment during work related learning.

_Female undergraduate students’ role in mitigating sexual harassment_  

The harmful effects of sexual harassment can be mediated and mitigated by appropriate quality interventions. In this study participants proffered the following ways:

_Dressing in a professional way at work during placement, avoiding mini-skirts. In other words dressing decently and adhering to the professional code of dressing (Interviewee1)_

_If advances of a sexual nature are made and I am not interested I tell the person in the face that I do not want. If the harasser persists I report him immediately to school authorities. (Interviewee3)_
Tell the harasser I do not like it – be firm. If you say no it should be no (Interviewee 5)

You have to be assertive, - tell the harasser in the face that you do not want to be harassed (Interviewee 6)

When the sexual harasser threatened sexual assault on me I wanted to report him to the police but I was worried of souring relations and had to keep quiet since I was about to finish teaching practice (Interviewee 11)

Most participants suggested that sexual harassment to be curbed there should be a healthy work related learning environment. It was also suggested that the harassers should be given stiff penalties.

The role of the University in mitigating sexual harassment

On what the university and the practicing school could do the participants came up with a number of suggestions.

There should be awareness campaigns at university aimed at conscientising students about sexual harassment. In other words acquisition of knowledge of what this phenomenon is all about given that knowledge is power (Interviewee 2)

Reporting mechanisms in event of being sexually harassed have to be very clear (Interviewee 8)

Awareness campaigns have to be mounted by university. Reporting mechanisms have to be clear to the students in event of them being harassed.

There is need for sexual harassment policy awareness in the schools were students do their work related learning. The university has to talk to schools where students go to do their work related learning about the phenomenon (Interviewee 15)

As students on work related learning we should be encouraged by the university to report to school authorities if we are sexually harassed (Interviewee 4)

Schools need to be aware of the sexual harassment phenomenon with a view to maintaining an environment conducive for students to do their practice. Students on the other hand have to be empowered to report in event of being sexually harassed.

The harmful effects of sexual harassment can be mediated and mitigated through appropriate quality interventions by both the practicing school and the university as proffered above.

V. DISCUSSION

The discussion of the study revolves around female students’ experiences of sexual harassment; who the perpetrators are; reporting of sexual harassment incidences and possible ways of mitigating sexual harassment.

The verbal, physical and visual sexual harassment experiences by female student teachers as revealed by this study are a cause for concern. Student teachers spend three terms in school settings and most participants in this study reported that they had experienced sexual harassment behaviours. The sexual harassment experiences the participants encountered resulted in a negative impact on their personal feelings during work related learning. This centred mainly on feeling anxious, inadequate, or angry. Others reported feeling embarrassed or humiliated, confused, depressed or fearful. Feelings described included frustration, disappointment, and loss of confidence at unjust treatment, leading to questioning their preferred area of practice or even whether teaching was really a field they wanted to work in. These were dehumanising experiences to say the list.

Although participants showed that they generally were aware of the need to report when sexually harassed sexual harassment behaviours. Given the power that qualified teachers have over student teachers on work placement, it is not surprising that school management may not take students’ reports as serious and in the process they may not provide the support required. The case in point is when a school head sexually harassed a female student in this study. Where could the student go to report this abuse? She kept it to herself.

Students are usually very vulnerable and most of the time feel powerless to question qualified teachers about sexual harassment behaviours. Given the power that qualified teachers have over student teachers on work placement, it is not surprising that school management may not take students’ reports as serious and in the process they may not provide the support required. The case in point is when a school head sexually harassed a female student in this study. Where could the student go to report this abuse? She kept it to herself.

Unfortunately, there are implicit pressures not to report, influenced by the student’s status, and students may therefore fear that there will be repercussions for making a report. The above excerpts reveal that the issue of sexual harassment is delicate, and students want to talk to someone they trust and who will support them in finding appropriate and professional ways of handling incidents of sexual harassment.

Instead of reporting in a formal way most of the sexually harassed female students choose instead to talk with fellow student teachers.

However, incidents of sexual harassment need to be properly managed and those who sexually harass others need to be held accountable for their behaviour and prevented from repeating the harassment. Hence Emslie (2009) is of the view that efforts to end sexual harassment should be coupled with well-developed policy, legislation and programmes dedicated to addressing broader cultures of violence and sexual harassment as well as the cultural values and social attitudes that can contribute to such behaviour.
Any activity of a sexual harassment nature is unacceptable, particularly towards those more vulnerable to its effects and less well positioned to defend themselves or respond effectively. It is concerning to note that perpetrators of sexual harassment in this study, mentors and school heads, are in positions of power, authority and influence. Female students are vulnerable when confronted with unacceptable behaviour from male mentors who are in positions of authority and power and who are supposed to nurture them to become efficient and effective classroom practitioners. This becomes so given that a mentor who is always in constant contact with the student on work related learning, is expected by universities and the nation to be the student’s advocate, mentor, protector and role model in teaching and learning. However, given that female students pointed out that mentors were the main perpetrators of sexual harassment raises serious questions for teacher education providers in universities relating to how these mentors are prepared for mentoring students on work related learning.

Sadly, many students indicated they did not report sexual harassment because they were frightened of possible negative consequences instituted by mentors and other harassers in the schools. Therefore it can be concluded that the incidence of sexual harassment experienced by female student teachers is underreported and the findings presented in this paper may indicate a worse problem than it appears.

The study is the first of its type to explore the experiences of sexual harassment of female student teachers in Zimbabwe from a national perspective. The findings provide a snapshot of the treatment experienced by some female students in teaching practice settings. The issues raised by this study are concerning for the teaching profession and have implications for education providers, faculties of education and policy makers among other stakeholders.

The way forward

Universities’ Faculties of Education and practicing schools should endeavour to make learning environments safe for female students to access and achieve their educational potential. Faculty educators have a responsibility to adequately equip and appropriately support students so they can effectively identify and respond to sexual harassment during work-placement. This is because students learn best in safe and violence-free environments. Therefore a number of recommendations are made to address the issues identified in this study.

Teacher preparation programmes should provide training to undergraduate students about sexual harassment in work-placements. This preparation entails making students familiar with policies and procedures that aim to promote students’ welfare and to manage this critical problem. Universities also need to develop transparent policies and procedures to manage this critical problem.

In event of female student teachers falling victim to sexual harassment, reports they make need to be managed (Birks, Budden, Stewart, & Chapman, 2014) in a way that addresses the requisite duty of care and protects students (Bowlan, 2015). These are the responsibilities and obligations of practicing schools and Faculties of Education.

Quality relationships and safe, supportive and trusting learning environments are critical in mitigating incidences of sexual harassment. Therefore adequate preparation of school mentors is equally critical. School mentors should be the first point of contact for students requiring support, rather than being part of the problem, as has been reported in this study.

Last but not least, further research is required to identify just how many students experience sexual harassment during work related learning and what schools could do and are doing to support female students doing teaching practice in their schools.

Limitations

The study has limitations. Case study research is conducted to gain a deep understanding of a particular sample, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings (Merriam, 1998). In this study, the sample was small, limited to one faculty in an institution, and recruiting criteria included only female participants who had experienced sexual harassment during work placement. The sample comprised female students in the faculty of Education only. It is likely therefore that the sexual harassment experiences of participants in the present study may under-represent sexual harassment experiences of undergraduate female students on work-placement across faculties in the university.

It is possible that the study attracted participants who felt they had an experience to report, therefore biasing the sample. Furthermore, the study may have left out those who were sexually harassed but did not wish to revisit a prior negative experience by taking part in the study. Further research could be carried out to address the identified limitations and extend the findings of this study. Future research may investigate how the issue of gender influences the frequency and type of sexual harassment experienced by student teachers.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is clear that periods in the workplace do help all students, and more specifically female students to make sense of future career possibilities, become flexible learners able to learn in a wide range of situations, and ideally be better placed to translate their work-related experiences into academic development as alluded to by McConnell (2008). However, over and above all this, Faulty of Education female students’ experienced sexual harassment in practicing schools. The sexual abuses as exposed in this study are a barrier to the realisation of the benefits of work placement. Failure to report the sexual abuses to both school and university management makes the practice environment hostile. The behavior of harassers is unacceptable and unprofessional. The
need to mitigate sexual harassment by both the practicing school and the university cannot be overemphasized. In fact zero tolerance to work-place sexual harassment should be the norm.

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