

# Nature of Students' Sexual Abuse

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## Abstract

Student sexual abuse is a reality in our senior high schools and the nature of it is on the rise. To find how grievous sexual abuse in senior high schools is, the study examined the nature of sexual abuse in public senior high schools. The research was conducted in four (4) different public senior high schools in the Mfantseman Municipality in the Central Region of Ghana as one case study. Simple size of 403 students and 20 teachers as participants were employed for the study, simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were used to select the respondents. Structured questionnaires were used to solicit data from the respondents. The data were presented in the form of percentages and frequency tables to facilitate clearer and easier interpretation of results for the presentation of findings. The varying nature of sexual abuse from the respondents for the study indicated that penetrative form of sex may include unwanted oral sex, anal or vaginal intercourse were admitted by the students and teachers as well as non-contact sexual abuse which may include, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual phone calls, unwanted sexual messages, unwanted sexual jokes and frequent request for sexual favours are common in public senior high schools in Ghana. Perhaps, today, our senior high schools present a prime target for perpetrators of sexual abuse because most schools have few, if any protective barriers in place. Strategies like continued examination of counselling services in public senior high schools to give advice on sexual maturation and concerns such as assault, sexual harassment and teenage pregnancy should be provided to female students. Necessary provisions should be made for female students with special needs so that they can care for themselves and become productive resources for the society.

## Keywords

Nature, Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Students, Senior High Schools

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## 1. Introduction and Background

This paper presents the outcome of the nature of sexual abuse in senior high schools in Ghana. The paper is structured into five (5) main sections namely; the Introduction and Background, Review of the Literature, Methodology, Findings and Discussion and the Conclusion. The first section introduces the structure of the paper, the context and aims and objectives of the paper. The literature review section reviews the relevant literature on issues pertaining to

the nature of students' sexual abuse. The methodology section presents a broad description of the methodology and procedures adopted in the conduct of the study on the nature of students' sexual abuse in Ghana. Findings resulting from the study are presented and discussed in the section following the methodology and conclusion, highlighting on some implications of the findings, and recommendations.

Sexual abuse of students is perceived to be a problem by various professional groups including the Police Service, Civil Society Organizations', Criminal Courts, Child Welfare

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Agencies, Teachers, as well as the general public. According to Jones (1996), sexual abuse of children specifically students is morally wrong especially because students have rights, one of which is to be free from maltreatment of a sexual kind. There is also a shared desire to assure the safety of vulnerable people, including students. Sexual abuse has not been systematically addressed because this issue is woefully under-studied. While we have scanty data on incidence and even less on description of predators and targets, newspapers and other media coverage have prodded some school authorities, educators and others to acknowledge that sexual abuse is still occurring.

It must be recognized that there are enough documentations in form of policies, acts and regulations that seek to protect and safeguard students from sexual abuse. These include the 1992 Constitution of Ghana, the Children's Act 1998 (Act 560) of the Republic of Ghana, the Criminal Code (Amendment) Act 1998 (Act 554) and the Code of Professional Conduct of the Ghana Educational Service. Each document defines various aspects of sexual offences and penal measures for offenders. Specifically, the Code of Professional Conduct of the Ghana Educational Service (GES) indicates what can be termed sexual abuse of student within any educational institution. This document makes it clear in section 53 that no employee shall indulge in immoral relationship with a pupil or student in any educational institution. The code further provides the necessary disciplinary measures against those who go contrary to the Code of Professional Conduct of the Ghana Educational Service (GES). Disciplinary measures include: Deferment of increment – that is, postponement of the date on which the next increment is due with corresponding postponement in subsequent years; reduction in rank or of salary; suspension – that is, loss of pay and allowances for a period not exceeding two years; removal from the GES- that is termination of appointment with full or reduced retirement benefits; termination – striking of name from the register of teachers; that is, withdrawal of one's certificate or license to teach with consequent termination of appointment for good (GES, 2000).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 34 (1990), to which Ghana is a signatory, prohibits all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse in any form against children. Ghana has a fair amount of legislative and policy frameworks for promotion of student rights and protection of students in which the corresponding institutions are given mandate to administer. While substantial improvements have been made in recent years with regards to the promotion and protection of the rights of students through child-related legislations, there remains a wide gap between enactment on one hand, and implementation on the other.

In spite of these efforts, there are massive human rights abuses within senior high schools in Ghana that have resulted in the deprivation and the marginalization of students in our educational institutions, denying them of their basic rights to a life of dignity. Public senior high school students are faced with sexual abuses in some form within the educational setup and this phenomenon continues to inflict perpetual wounds on students. The little information available is fragmented and variable. It was in this regard, the researchers conducted a study in student sexual abuse in public senior high schools in the Mfantseman Municipality. The purpose of the study was to explore the nature of sexual abuse in senior high schools.

## 2. Review of the Literature on Nature of Students' Sexual Abuse

From the literature, sexual abuse in schools occurs in several forms. A study of the literature shows that the practice of sexual abuse, according to Basile and Saltzman (2002), occurs in three different forms. These are non-contact sexual abuse, contact sexual abuse and penetrative sexual abuse. Another set of categories of sexual abuse is based on the legal classification. In the view of Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre (1997), they suggested that, in the legal school of thought, sexual abuses are grouped under *Quid Pro and Quo* (something for something sexual abuse) and *Poisoned Educational Environment* sexual abuse.

According to Richter and Higson-Smith (2004), this form of sexual abuse includes forcing or manipulating student into watching pornography; having student watch adult sexual activity and voyeuristically encouraging student to masturbate and photographing student under these circumstances. The authors further argue that despite that very little research has been undertaken on the consequences of students of non-contact sexual abuse (with the exception of sexual harassment in educational settings), these activities deserve more attention because of their potentially damaging consequences and because they are often a forerunner of other forms of Sexual abuse. A thorough reflection of non-contact sexual abuse among teachers and students leads the researcher into non-verbal abuse (without words) which may include leering (staring), or sexual gesturing (movements). It may also include unwelcome exposure to materials that is sexually suggestive such as pornographic photos, jokes, drawing or graffiti.

According to Basile et al. (2002), non-contact sexual abuse includes verbal sexual harassment, such as sexual innuendo and derogatory remarks about students' bodies, exposing

genitalia, unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favours and other physical conduct of a sexual nature. Stavropoulos (2006) has also noted that non-contact sexual abuse encompasses a range of acts, including inappropriate sexual solicitation and indecent exposure. Stavropoulos (2006) goes further to suggest that non-contact sexual abuse describes behaviour such as verbal sexual harassment, exhibitionism, or emotional incest, which does not involve genital contact. It could be inferred from these two assertions on non-contact sexual abuse that this form of sexual abuse is more of verbal sexual propositions or harassment (such as making lewd comments about students' body against his or her consent and looking at students sexually without the consent of the student). In a study conducted in Malawi, "peeping" as a form of sexual abuse was reported by the students involved, with boys most often being the perpetrators, usually in the toilets or by using mirrors placed on the floor to look up their skirts when girls stood up in class (DevTech Systems, Inc. & Centre for Educational Research and Training, 2007). Perhaps, this form of sexual abuse in senior high schools could also be described as a Covert form of sexual abuse which involves non-verbal sexual abuse. This affirms that regular practice of non-contact sexual activities leads to Contact sexual abuse in schools

Contact sexual abuse, according to Castle and Diallo (2008), involves sexual contact between a victim and perpetrator, and can include unwanted touching of the sexual organs, breast and buttocks. Castle et al. (2008) go further to indicate that contact sexual abuse may include unwanted touching of students genitals or private parts for sexual purposes, making a student touch someone else's genitals or play sexual games and put objects or body parts (like fingers, tongue or penis) inside the vagina, in the mouth or in the anus of a student for sexual purposes.

It is clear that sexual activity that involves body contact between victim and the perpetrator which may include prolonged kissing, cuddling and excessive touching, fondling or kissing student genitals, making a student fondle genitals either under coercive tendencies or against his or her will all constitutes contact sexual abuse.

A critical inference from Castle et al. (2008) form of contact sexual abuse has informed the researcher about the ingredients that forms sexual assault. In other words, the researcher is of the view that sexual assault has the same ingredients as the contact sexual abuse. It is therefore possible to conclude that sexual assault is any type of sexual contact or behaviour that occurs without the explicit consent of the recipient. Moreover, falling under the definition of sexual assault are sexual activities as forced sexual intercourse, fondling or torching of private parts and

attempted rape, grabbing or pinching. The researcher is of the view that sexual assault is unwelcomed conduct of a sexual nature and, more specifically, forced unwelcomed sexual advances and unwelcomed physical conduct of a sexual nature. Moreover, sexual assault may include physical violence or threatening acts or gestures which make a person fear for his or her safety. This implies that the prolong practice of sexual contact leads to penetration of sexual abuses in schools.

According to Shakeshaft (2002), penetrative sexual abuse includes oral, anal or vaginal intercourse. Shakeshaft (2002) goes further to suggest that penetrative sexual abuse generally includes the use of physical force or coercion to penetrate the vulva or anus, using a penis, other body parts or an object. In the views of Shakeshaft (2002), students themselves have highlighted that they are often subjected to intense psychological or economic pressures to submit to sexual demand of the perpetrators without their consent. Some writers according to Shakeshaft (2002) have used the term "forced sex" for any penetrative sexual abuse that includes oral, anal or vaginal intercourse. Advancing an argument from the above form of sexual abuse indicates that behaviour involving penetration sexual abuse may include vaginal or anal intercourse and oral sex. This simply means that non-consent sexual activity that is directed towards the student's physical body which involves the use of the vagina, penis and materials either in the form of anal intercourse or oral sex may come under penetrative sexual abuse.

According to Shakeshaft (2002), vaginal intercourse which falls under penetrative sexual abuse includes rape and defilement. In both cases they usually involve sexual intercourse, which is initiated by one or more persons without that victim's consent. The explanation by Shakeshaft suggests that the act of rape and defilement may be carried out by physical force, coercion, abuse of authority or with a person who is incapable of valid consent, such as one who is unconscious, incapacitated, or below the legal age of consent. According to Merrill (2004), the definition of rape and defilement varies both in different parts of the world and at different times in history. Merrill goes further to indicate that rape is defined in many jurisdictions as sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual penetration of one person by another person without the consent of the victim. For instance, The South African Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act 2007 (known as the Sexual Offences Act) defines rape as the unlawful and intentional commission of an act of sexual penetration with a complainant without his or her consent (Government of the Republic of South Africa. Criminal Law, 2007, Amendment Act2007, number 32, section 3).

The ingredients that were identified by Shakeshaft (2002)

and Merrill (2004) are buttressed by the criminal code of Ghana (Amendment) Act 1998 (554), section 98. Though the details of the definition may vary by state and educational institution, sexual abuse is generally understood as unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature and, more specifically, forced unwelcome sexual advances and unwelcome physical conduct of a sexual nature. The same idea is suggested by the Kenyan law which defines defilement as an act that causes penetration with a child, while rape is defined as the intentional and unlawful penetration of the genitals of a person without his/her consent or with consent obtained by threats or coercion (Government of the Republic of Kenya, The sexual offences Act, number 3, section 8, 2006). Both documents indicate that an intentional and unlawful act is defined as one obtained in any coercive circumstance, under false pretences or by fraudulent means or against a person who is incapable of appreciating the nature of an act which causes the offence.

However, other sexual abuses goes on in schools but authorities have turned blind eyes to them, according to Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre (1997), legal environment has recognized two types of sexual abuse: "Quid Pro Quo" (something for something) and "Poisoned Educational Environment". Bouchard (1994) observes that "Quid Pro Quo" is the easiest type of sexual abuse to recognize and it occurs when sexual demands are made upon a person in exchange for something. A critical analysis of this form of sexual abuse indicates a situation where a student is forced to make a choice between giving in to the sexual demands and receiving favours. For example, a situation where those in authority may demand sexual favours in exchange for a good mark from a student. This is so because of the power and control differential that exists between the student and the teacher as well as the age of the student and the consent nature of the sexual activity.

According to Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre (1997), "Poisoned Educational Environment" is one of the forms of sexual abuse that legal scholars have considered. According to Arjun (1992), this type of sexual abuse is less obvious and occurs over a long period of time and it creates an offensive, intimidating educational environment. Arjun (1992) goes on to indicate that this sexual abuse occurs when the school environment becomes unpleasant or unbearable because of a pattern of sexual pictures and figures painted around in the school. This form of sexual abuse indicates that a poisoned educational environment only occurs when there is unequal treatment for one student or group of students to encounter sexual drawings and figures as well as writings that makes them uncomfortable within that given school environment. For instance, a student or a teacher draws rude sexual cartoons in a washroom or classroom. The cartoons have

some names written underneath them, one feels humiliated and embarrassed. Although one has complained to the authority, the graffiti has remained on the wall. The presence of such cartoons creates a poisoned educational environment for students, teachers and others for using the classrooms and washrooms.

In conclusion, life experiences, observations and conversations with other people who some of them are students and teachers and reflections on the nature of sexual abuse have convinced the researcher that we need to expand our definitions on all forms or categories of sexual abuse (i.e. Non-Contact Sexual Abuse, Contact Sexual Abuse, Penetrative Sexual Abuse, Quid Pro and Quo Sexual Abuse, and Poisoned Educational Environment Sexual Abuse etc). Therefore, in expanding the definitions of sexual abuse in order to develop a consistent ethic that respects personal boundaries and autonomy, legal and research definitions of students' sexual abuse must include these two elements: sexual activities involving a student and the abusive conditions.

### 3. Methodology

The study was carried out in four Senior High Schools in the Mfantseman Municipality in Central Region of Ghana as one case study. The data were used together to form one case. Stake (2006) suggests that multiple case research should involve between four and ten cases for maximum benefit. This number of cases will help researchers to not only gather enough data to provide a rich description of each case, but careful analysis of the similarities and differences between the cases can also help them gain an in-depth understanding of their focus phenomenon. The case study offered richness and in-depth of information which is not usually offered by other methods (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007).

The population for this study comprised four hundred and three (403) students and twenty (20) teachers from all the four public senior high schools in the Mfantseman Municipality. The study employed the simple random sampling and purposive sampling techniques to select the participants for the study. Simple random sampling technique was used to select student participants from each class of a given academic programme from the four selected senior high schools in Mfantseman Municipality. The purposive sampling technique was used to select 20 teachers for the study. Purposive sampling technique was used because the researchers wanted a sample of teachers who hold accurate responses on the information on sexual abuse in the school as a result of their long service and position they hold in each of the schools and experiences in the teaching service profession. A structured questionnaire was used to collect

data for the study. The questions that formed the questionnaires were close-ended and answers were outlined, giving respondents the opportunity to respond to these simple dichotomous questions (questions that require 'yes' or 'no'). The data were presented in the form of percentages and frequency tables to facilitate clearer and easier interpretation of results for the presentation of findings based of themes.

## 4. Results and Discussion on Forms of Students Sexual Abuse in Senior High Schools

This study aimed at identifying the nature of sexual abuse in public senior high schools in the Mfantsiman Municipality. The findings and results relating to research question are presented in Tables 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

**Table 1.** Sexual Harassment and Unwelcomed Sexual Advances.

Responses	Students		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	224	55.6	17	85.0
No	179	44.4	3	15.0
Total	403	100.0	20	100.0

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics on non-contact sexual abuse students' encounter in senior high schools. From Table 1, large majority of 224 students (55.6%) and 17 teachers (85%) noted in their responses that students encounter sexual harassment and unwelcomed sexual advances from the perpetrators of sexual abuse.

The finding of the study is congruent with the assertion made by Basile *et al.* (2002) that verbal sexual harassment such as sexual innuendoes and derogatory remarks about a student body and unwelcomed sexual advances are common among students.

**Table 2.** Unwanted Stare in a Sexual Manner, Unwanted Sexual Jokes and Request for Sexual Favours.

Responses	Students		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	269	66.7	17	85.0
No	134	33.3	3	15.0
Total	403	100.0	20	100.0

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of another category of sexual activities that comes under non-contact sexual abuse. Table 2 depicts that 269 students (66.7%) and 17 teachers (85%) of respondents accept that, non-contact sexual abuse, which includes unwanted stare in a sexual manner, unwanted sexual jokes and request for sexual favours are rampant in senior high school. Meanwhile, there were 134 students (33.3%) and 3 teaches (15%) of the respondents who hold opposite view of the statement.

The finding of the study is that the majority of the respondents have perception that non-contact sexual abuse is common in schools. With respect to the request for sexual favours the admissions of the respondents confirms the submission of Bouchard (1994) that the idea of "quid pro quo" occurs when sexual demands are made upon a person in exchange for something. The perception of the respondents has made it clear in the study that unwanted sexual stare and unwanted sexual jokes are rampant.

**Table 3.** Unwanted Sexual Messages and Unwanted Sexual Phone Calls.

Responses	Students		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	224	60.5	17	85.0
No	159	39.5	3	15.0
Total	403	100.0	20	100.0

The students' and teachers' responses to unwanted sexual messages and unwanted sexual phone calls have been shown in Table 3. Table 3 depicts that 224 students (60.5%) and 17 teachers (85%) of respondents admitted that this form of abuse occurs in schools. On other hand, 159 students (39.5%) and 3 teachers (15%) of the respondents hold opposite view of the statement. In other words, the large majority of the respondents have perception that unwanted sexual messages and unwanted sexual phone calls which is one of the forms of non-contact sexual abuse also happens in public senior high schools.

**Table 4.** Sexual Assault, Attempted Rape and Rape.

Responses	Students		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	55	13.6	9	45.0
No	348	86.4	11	55.0
Total	403	100.0	20	100.0

Table 4 shows the contact form of sexual abuse that goes on in public senior high schools. Students' and teachers' responses to sexual assault, attempted rape and rape are clearly shown on the Table 4. Under "Yes" response, 55 students (13.6%) and 9 teachers (45%) respondents are of opinion that this form of sexual abuse occurs in public senior high schools. On other hand, large majority of 348 students (86.4 %) and 11 teachers (55%) respondents were of the view that this category of sexual abuse does not happen in public senior high schools.

The admissions of the respondents are that sexual assault, attempted rape and actual rape are not common in public senior high schools. This opinion is not consistent with the recent literature by Castle *et al.* (2008). The researcher is of the view that the contradiction is clear because Castle *et al.* (2008) collected their data on contact sexual abuse without including sexual assault, attempted rape and rape as items in their work. Rather they collected the data based on other items of contact form of sexual abuse which included



unwanted touching of breast, buttocks, the use of object or body part for sexual gratification. Even though some aspects of these sexual actions could be classified under sexual assault and attempted rape because the data collected did not specify the exact items of sexual abuse, the respondents could be confused in understanding these forms of sexual abuse to be under sexual assault and attempted rape.

**Table 5.** Unwanted Oral Sex, Unwanted Anal and Vaginal Intercourse.

Responses	Students		Teachers	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Yes	333	82.6	12	60.0
No	70	17.4	8	40.0
Total	403	100.0	20	100.0

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics of unwanted sex which is under penetrative sexual abuse and includes unwanted oral, anal and vaginal intercourse. In Table 5, 333 students (82.6%) and 12 teachers (60%) admitted that unwanted oral sex and unwanted anal or vaginal intercourse are rampant in public senior high schools. Meanwhile, there were 70 students (17.4%) and 8 teachers (40%) respondents who were of the view that this form of sexual abuse does not happen in their learning institutions.

Students' and teachers' admissions on this form of sexual abuse imply that they are aware of this form of sexual abuse in the school. The admissions of the respondents are that penetrative sexual abuse is a sexual activity which goes on in public senior high schools. Their admission is confirmed by Shake shaft (2002) who opines that penetrative sexual abuse which includes the use of physical force or coercion to penetrate the vagina or anus using penis, other body parts or an object for sexual gratification.

## 5. Conclusions and Recommendations

With regard to the nature of student sexual abuse in public senior high schools the following could be inferred: Majority of students and teachers are of the view that non - contact sexual abuse which may include, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual phone calls, unwanted sexual messages, unwanted sexual jokes and frequent request for sexual favours are common in public senior high schools. The study revealed that majority of the respondents are of the opinion that sexual assault, attempted rape and rape which are under the contact sexual abuse are not common in public senior high schools. Penetrative form of sexual abuse which may include unwanted oral sex, anal or vaginal intercourse were admitted by the students and teachers as frequent form of student sexual abuse in public senior high schools.

Student sexual abuse which exists in the public senior high

schools should be addressed without any further delay. The following recommendations are offered: Teachers, civil society organisations, human rights organizations and Government should raise awareness of the unacceptability of student sexual abuse, and promoting the notion that stopping student sexual abuse is everyone's responsibility. Educate the public, especially policymakers, about the true nature of student sexual abuse in public senior high schools. Various forms of student sexual abuse issues need to be addressed. Strategies like continued examination of counselling services in public senior high schools to give advice on sexual maturation and concerns such as assault, sexual harassment and teenage pregnancy should be provided to female students. Necessary provisions should be made for female students with special needs so that they can care for themselves and become productive resources for the society.

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