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‘Sometimes it’s fun to play with them first’: girls and boys talking about sexual harassment in Caribbean schools

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This paper discusses findings from a qualitative study conducted in four government secondary schools in the Caribbean state of Antigua and Barbuda on students’ experiences at school in relation to sexuality. Both girls and boys experienced a range of anxieties and confusions in relation to sexuality, whilst also seeing (hetero)sexual attraction as an exciting part of schooling. Sexual harassment of girls emerged as a widespread and serious (as well as ‘normalised’) occurrence in all the schools studied. However, the data also showed that girls were far from passive. Instead, girls demonstrated complex and contradictory responses to boys’ behaviour due to their own investments in being desirable within discourses of hetero-femininity, as well as the pleasure they gained from their relationships. Both genders would clearly benefit from opportunities to discuss their needs, beliefs and desires regarding sexuality and relationships.

Keywords: youth sexuality; sexual harassment; Caribbean; secondary school

Introduction

A growing body of research on sexuality and schooling has highlighted that despite the discomfort adults feel about associating ‘schools’ and ‘sex’, discourses about sexuality proliferate within schools (Epstein and Johnson 1996; Kehily 2002; Allen 2007). Alongside, and often separate from this literature, is a body of work that has begun to emerge on sexual harassment and violence within schools. However, some authors have themselves noted that this work has sometimes been limited by paying insufficient attention to the pleasure that girls gain from their sexual relationships, portraying girls as passive victims of male sexual advances (Leach, Machakanja, and Mandoga 2000; Leach and Humphreys 2007). Yet, as a small number of studies have sought to demonstrate, complex dynamics of sexuality and power exist in schools and so the line between normal romance relations and harassment is fine (Skelton 2001; Renold 2005; Youdell 2005; Reddy and Dunne 2007; Wood, Lambert, and Jewkes 2007).

This paper aims to contribute to this emerging research by exploring the complexity of gender, sexuality and power relations in four secondary schools within the small Caribbean Island of Antigua, a region of the world that has been neglected in research on sexuality and gendered violence in schools (Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach 2006). In doing so, it will focus on both girls and boys and explore experiences of harassment alongside positive experiences of sex and sexuality. Indeed, the data suggested the near impossibility of separating out these two dimensions since ‘normal’ boy-girl relationships were almost inevitably entangled with experiences of harassment and gender inequitable
dynamics. Yet to deny that girls actively sought out and took pleasure in these relationships would be to misrepresent the issue in question.

**Framing the theoretical context**

Neither sexuality more broadly, nor gendered violence and harassment in particular, have been prominent foci of educational research in Caribbean contexts, though a number of studies have discussed some data on sexuality as part of broader projects. Bailey’s (2002) research on gender regimes in Jamaican secondary schools, for example, showed that girls are subject to sexism and sexual harassment from both male pupils and teachers. Parry’s (1996, 1997) work on boys’ underachievement, meanwhile, found that teachers blamed school girls’ transactional sexual relationships with older men for boys’ school drop out, since school boys felt the need to ‘get rich quick’ by finding employment in order to compete for girls’ attention. Other research, also conducted within the remit of boys’ underachievement, has drawn attention to a rise in ‘hard masculinities’ in which both violence and risky sexual behaviour are normalised (Chevannes 2002; Plummer, McLean, and Simpson 2008; Plummer and Geoffroy 2010). Plummer and Geoffroy (2010), for example, highlight how ‘hard, risky, rebellious, sexually dominant masculinities’ have turned behaviours such as crime and violence into the ‘pinnacle of modern manhood’ (13). How such dynamics play out in the school context seems to be an important area for further consideration. Indeed, Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach (2006) have critiqued the lack of attention to gender and sexuality in research on school violence in the Caribbean, which has instead been framed within discourses of gang and drug wars.

Given the dearth of research undertaken within Caribbean contexts, it is necessary to supplement discussion of relevant literature with research findings that emanate from elsewhere. In the UK, research on sexuality in schools has grown since the 1990s. As already mentioned, work by Epstein and Johnson (1996) and Allen (2007) shows that despite adults’ desires to construct school pupils as non-sexual beings, discourses about sexuality proliferate within schools. Allen (2011) also shows the construction of pupils as non-sexual leads to an absence of pleasure and desire in formal sexuality education curricula, despite the importance of these to youth sexuality. Kehily’s (2002) ethnography uses the concept of ‘student sexual cultures’ by which she means ‘informal groups of students who actively ascribe meaning to events within specific social contexts’ (1), in this case in relation to sexuality. It is through this meaning making that individual and collective identities are produced. The production of sexual identities has been a common theme of recent research, relating to the ‘post-structural turn’ in educational research and the consequent concerns with subjectivity and identity (Dillabough 2006). Such work often draws on Butler’s (1990) concept of the ‘heterosexual matrix’ in which:

> for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality. (151)

An often separate body of work from Europe, Australasia and the USA also exists on the coercive aspects of sexuality in schools, with qualitative research highlighting the role of sexual harassment in consolidating dominant heterosexual masculinities and perpetuating female subordination (Larkin 1994; Renold 2002; Robinson 2005). Whilst there is no internationally agreed definition of sexual harassment, the key aspects that emerge in most definitions are that it is ‘sexual’ and that it is ‘unwanted’. For example, Renold (2002) draws on a definition adopted by the European Commission’s 1991
Recommendation on the Protection of the Dignity of Women and Men at work, which states that harassment is: ‘unwanted conduct of a sexual nature (including physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct) which is unwelcome, unreasonable and offensive to the recipient’ (418). This definition will be used here. In terms of the prevalence and nature of sexual harassment, studies in these contexts have shown a high frequency of verbal harassment, with physical harassment existing, but more rarely apparent. Where girls from the Caribbean diaspora appear in British or US research they are sometimes depicted as comparatively ‘tough’, able to resist harassment from boys and less likely to construct their identities in relation to being objects of male desire (see Weekes [2002] for a discussion). Other research from the USA highlights that teachers’ assumptions lead black girls to be less likely to be perceived by teachers as victims of sexual harassment (Rahimi and Liston 2011), but they may actually be more likely to be affected by it (see also American Association of University Women 2011).

A broader body of work on gendered violence in schools emanates from countries of the global south, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa. This research has uncovered the existence of a range of types of gendered violence, including sexual harassment and abuse from pupils, teachers and ‘sugar daddies’ (Leach, Machakanja, and Mandoga 2000; Mirembe and Davies 2001; Dunne, Humphreys, and Leach 2006), as well as highlighting the gendered nature of all school violence, including bullying and corporal punishment (Humphreys 2008; Dunne 2007). However, whilst work on gendered violence and sexual harassment has been highly valuable in demonstrating the inequalities and injustices girls are subject to, as some of these authors have themselves noted, the boundaries between consent and coercion are often far from clear. As Leach, Machakanja, and Mandoga (2000) state in relation to their research on violence in Zimbabwean schools:

We found that the distinction between an abusive and consensual relationship was often blurred. It was clear that not all girls were passive victims of unsolicited male attention and that some responded positively to advances by older boys and even by teachers and sugar daddies. (6)

There is, therefore, a need to understand girls’ complex motivations for getting involved in particular relationships and to understand coercive dynamics alongside the pleasurable and wanted.

Thus, a few authors attempt to focus on this issue, exploring girls’ experiences of harassment and inequality alongside their experiences of pleasurable sexuality, both within schools (Renold 2005; Youdell 2005) and within the broader literature on adolescent sexuality (Reddy and Dunne 2007; Wood, Lambert, and Jewkes 2007). This literature all highlights that the line between harassment and ‘normal’ romance relations is a fine one. A key conceptual framing that helps illuminate this complexity is what Youdell (2005) refers to as ‘the virgin/whore dichotomy’ and Wood, Lambert, and Jewkes (2007) refer to as the contradictory demands of dominant and respectable femininities. In this dichotomy, girls need to be simultaneously ‘desirable’ and ‘innocent’. Renold (2005), for example, argues that for the girls in her research ‘to be romantically desirable was almost a validation of themselves as normal regular girls’ (94). This need, alongside the need to be seen as innocent, puts girls in complex and contradictory positions when responding to both wanted and unwanted attention from boys. In relation to harassment, Youdell (2005) analyses a girl named Lucy’s lack of resistance to an incident of harassment by a boy named Stewart, saying:

her encounter with Stuart underscores and is a further moment in the constitution of her heterosexual femininity . . . Lucy provisionally ‘gains’ desirable heterosexual femininity
In this incident, the need to be seen as a ‘desirable female’ makes it difficult for the girl to fully resist the unwanted sexual attention from the boy. Conversely, however, in the South African context, Wood, Lambert, and Jewkes (2007) show how the need to be seen as an ‘innocent respectable female’ makes it difficult for young women to quickly accept proposals from men even when they are wanted. Consequently, within South African youth sexual culture women resisted sexual proposals and men persuaded or ‘forced’ women to accept. Inevitably, this culture led to high rates of violence and coercion, since women’s genuine refusal could not be ‘heard’ within normative gender scripts or, as the authors state, ‘ambiguities in the expression of desire inherent in culturally sanctioned approaches to the opposite sex lay the grounds for sexual coercion’ (285). These two scenarios highlight how the normative gender order, and the virgin/whore dichotomy through which girls must navigate, lead to extremely complex relationships between wanted and unwanted sexual attention.

The study

The data presented here are derived from a larger qualitative research project, which had the overall aim of exploring gendered inequalities and dynamics that may have been masked by a focus on academic achievement, within the education systems of particular Caribbean countries.

The research on which this paper is based was conducted in four government secondary schools in Antigua and Barbuda. Three of the schools were located within the vicinity of the capital, St John’s, Antigua’s capital (Schools 1, 2 and 4), whilst the other was a rural school (School 3). Of the 22 secondary schools in Antigua and Barbuda, 11 are private and 11 are government-owned and, of these, 2 are single-sex and selective, whilst the other 9 serve the remaining students within each catchment area. Due to this school system, there is a correlation between school type and social class (George 2012), with many middle-class children attending either the selective single-sex government schools or private schools. Therefore, while information about the social class background of each pupil was not collected, the school type combined with the catchment areas of the schools indicate that many (although not all) of the students would be from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. The four schools were chosen due to their geographical accessibility to the researcher whilst also representing the diversity of non-selective government secondary schools in Antigua. The data were collected over two periods of fieldwork lasting one month each. The first period of fieldwork was conducted at the beginning of the school year and involved Form 1 students (aged approximately 11–12 years, with some over-age students) and the second period was conducted halfway through the school year and involved revisiting the same students as well as interviewing students from Form 3 (aged approximately 13–14). However, this paper will focus on data from the Form 1 students.

Data collection involved classroom observations, single sex focus-groups with students and individual semi-structured interviews with teachers. The decision was taken to use focus groups with the students since these not only enable the researcher to tap a wider variety of opinions, resulting in a depth of dialogue not often found in individual interviews (Smithson 2000), but, as Warrington and Younger (1999) point out, they provide security and give confidence to teenagers who might feel threatened when faced with questions from an older stranger. Classroom observations involved quantitative
recordings of teachers’ interactions with girls and boys as well as qualitative observations of girls’ and boys’ use of space, teacher-pupil interaction and pupil-pupil interactions and behaviour. In each class, six groups of three students were interviewed, grouped by gender, friendship and achievement level (low, medium and high) as perceived by their teachers. The use of focus-groups enabled observation of how the participants interacted and responded to each other whilst discussing issues related to gender and sexuality. However, it is also acknowledged that the social context of the focus-group influences what is said and may lead to an overemphasis on normative responses (Hollander 2004).

Students in School 1 also took part in an anonymous writing activity, during a lesson in which their teacher was absent, in which they produced a piece of writing on ‘what it’s like to be a girl/boy in this place?’ The data from this proved to be insightful, showing some differences between private feelings and public performances of gender, and thus provided an interesting addition to the data generated from focus groups.

The data in this paper are taken from focus groups and qualitative classroom observations involving the Form 1 students, as well as from the writing activity undertaken in School 1. The interview guide did not contain questions specifically about sexuality, although issues related to sexuality arose almost immediately in relation to questions such as, ‘what do you like/dislike about school?’ and ‘is it easier to be a girl or a boy at school?’ From these questions, it was clear that sexual harassment was a key issue related to gendered experiences of school since many students (both girls and boys) cited it as a reason why they believed it was easier to be a boy at school. However, (hetero)sexual interest in the opposite sex also emerged as a source of pleasure. Therefore, as the research progressed, sexuality became a key research focus. Whilst much research related to sexuality in schools has focused on older school pupils, in this research, it was the younger Form 1 students who were most keen to talk about issues relating to sexuality, perhaps because of the particular anxieties and confusions they were experiencing, and it is these younger pupils who will be the focus of the ensuing discussion.

Heteronormativity and sexuality: being a ‘normal’ girl or boy at school

Negotiating everyday gender relations is a complex and contradictory experience, which involves performances of masculinity and femininity regulated within what Butler (1990) terms the ‘heterosexual matrix’. This section will explore how gendered and sexual norms relate to fitting in at school and how girls and boys expressed their sexuality and desire. It was clear that for both girls and boys, showing an interest in the opposite sex was a key part of fitting in at school:

‘they [popular students] don’t want to learn in school, they just want to look for girls and boys. (Tennisha, GM2)  

Boys get popular because of how much girls they have, the kind of shoes they have, how tight their shirt is. Girls get popular because of their cuteness, the sexy clothes you’re wearing. (Alicia, GM1)

Gender inequitable dynamics emerge here in which boys needed to ‘have girls’, whereas girls needed to ‘be desired’. Yet, while girls needed to be seen as desirable, they also had to appear innocent and, in common with research in other contexts, which has illustrated the virgin/whore dichotomy that girls have to navigate (Weekes 2002; Renold 2005; Youdell 2005), this tension, between wanting to stress their desirability and their interest in boys alongside their innocence, was a recurrent theme in the interviews. As the following comments from a boys’ focus-group illustrate, girls experienced ridicule if they were considered too sexually knowing or experienced (which in itself is a form of harassment),
yet being considered uninterested and inexperienced was not compatible with popularity or high-status femininity. Therefore, when it came to sexuality, girls clearly had a fine line to tread:

Clifton: It’s easier to be a boy because they get pregnant and when they get pregnant . . .
George: She [pointing to a girl] loves men, not man, many, many, many men.
Clifton: She’s like a prostitute. (BL2)

Boys were keen to present themselves as tough in their group interviews and did not demonstrate emotional attachment or vulnerability. However, their comments in an anonymous writing activity indicated a more complex picture. For example, one boy wrote ‘Being a boy is hard when Valentines Day comes and I don’t have a girlfriend’, whilst another said ‘I feel sad when my friend Shannon says she does not love me’. This finding is similar to those in Pattman and Chege’s (2003) research in Eastern and Southern Africa, where boys were derogatory and domineering in their comments about girls within group interviews but wrote highly romantic accounts of their relationships with girls within their diaries. This suggests that boys may actually want to have more emotionally engaged and equitable relationships with girls, but that the demands of performing hegemonic masculinity prohibit the communication of their emotional attachments.

Whilst sexuality and sexual relationships were a source of anxiety for both girls and boys, pleasure was also apparent in their narratives:

Interviewer (I): So boys that you would like to be your boyfriends, what are those boys like?
Briana: Handsome.
Davina: Handsome, generous.
Briana: Nice, lovely.
Briana: Cute, precious sexy.
Davina: Kind, wonderful. (GL2)

I: And what are the things you like most about school?
Jared: The girls.
I: The girls are the best thing.
Elliot: Yes.
I: What’s good about the girls?
Jared: They’re pretty. (BH2)

In both these discussions the students were animated and happy whilst describing and thinking about girls and boys whom they were sexually attracted to within their schools and it was clear that romantic attachments could be an exciting and pleasurable aspect of schooling.

We have seen that both girls and boys experienced pleasure from their sexual interests at school, and that boys, whilst performing tough masculinity, also experienced a range of anxieties and vulnerabilities. Similarly, whilst girls’ vulnerabilities and anxieties were more obvious and accessible, some girls also described feelings of power from their locations within the sexual culture of the schools. For example one girl in the anonymous writing activity wrote:

I like to be a girl because you get lots of girl friends, attract hot boys and you get anything you want and so on.

However, as has been described in detail elsewhere (Cobbett 2012), and as girls’ experiences of sexual harassment demonstrate, power gained from being a desirable female was precarious and not without cost. Having now given a background to the gendered and sexual cultures of the schools, the rest of the paper will focus on the issue of
sexual harassment, starting with girls experiences, and proceeding to discuss the complexities and ambiguities surrounding it.

**Sexual harassment: girls’ experiences**

Whilst girls clearly took pleasure in their relationships with particular boys, as well as enjoying being admired by boys, by far the most common way in which sexuality emerged in the interviews was in relation to sexual harassment, which was clearly widespread in all the schools. Indeed, when the students were asked whether they thought it was easier to be a girl or a boy at school and why, the most frequent response given by both girls and boys was that it was easier to be a boy because girls had to deal with sexual harassment. One girl said that, ‘boys like to feel them up and push off their clothes’ (Rakesha, S2), a second said, ‘the boys in the class are just too rude, they love to touch you’ (Shona, S3), whilst a third commented, ‘I don’t know what kind of philosophy, but the boys love to touch up the girls’ (Cassandra, S1). It is notable that almost all the comments girls made about sexual harassment were about boys touching girls. This suggests that in this Caribbean context the problem of sexual harassment has a different texture to the British and Australian contexts cited earlier (Renold 2002; Robinson 2005) in which most harassment was verbal. However, it seems likely that the lack of complaint about verbal sexual harassment was not due to its absence, but because it was not part of how the girls conceptualised what sexual harassment was. Indeed, judging from the sexualised and derogatory comments that some of the boys made about their female classmates during interviews, it seems highly likely that verbal sexual harassment also existed in these schools.

The extract below shows how one group of girls perceived the problem of sexual harassment in their schools:

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I: What kinds of stupid things do the boys do here that’s different?
Alicia: They like to touch a lot, they don’t know where it stops.
Jacintha: So you can’t be too friendly because they’ll cross the boundaries and touch you where you don’t want to be touched.

I: What do you do if boys give you any trouble?
Serena: I curse them.
Jacintha: I tell them I’ll break your finger if you touch me where I don’t want to be touched.
I: So you would try and deal with it yourselves rather than go to a teacher?
Alicia: I would go to a teacher first, but if the teacher don’t do anything, and they keep on coming and touching you, I would break their fingers one by one.
I: So you think you would just defend yourselves.
Serena: Yes they think you’re playing with them.
Alicia: Because some teachers don’t really talk to them, they still don’t listen so you take matters in your own hands.

Jacintha: Because maybe when you get married things are going to happen, when you used to go to secondary school, before you get married, so when you get married you don’t want your husband to touch you because you remember what the boys did you. (GM1)
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Several things are striking in this narrative. Firstly, we do see aspects of the ‘tough femininity’ commonly associated with Caribbean girls (Weekes 2002), particularly demonstrated in Alicia’s comment that she would ‘break their fingers one by one’. However, despite this strength, it is clear that the girls were not easily able to prevent unwanted attention from boys, hence the need to fantasise about using extreme violence against such boys. Secondly, one reason why the girls felt that they needed to try and defend themselves was due to the unresponsiveness of teachers, a situation that was further corroborated by other interviews with students and by the teacher interviews. With most
teachers, it was their failure to cite sexual harassment as an issue affecting girls in their schools that suggested their lack of action to address it. Whilst one teacher did notice it, she still did not regard it as a problem:

They’re ok with it. I was talking to some young ladies about the boys, a lot of the boys handle them and fondle them, and that’s life. Most of them do not show any resentment to them.

Moreover, one girl described how she got out of her seat in class because a boy next to her was touching her inappropriately, but she was the one who got in trouble since she was out of her seat. Skelton (2001) argues that a ‘control agenda’ in schools can serve to send the message that sexual harassment is not a serious issue since it often does not disrupt teachers’ abilities to control classrooms. This argument seems to have great resonance in the Antiguan context, where maintaining classroom control was a prime concern amongst teachers.

Thirdly, it is worth drawing attention to Jacintha’s final comment about her perception of the long-term impact of harassment, which illustrates how distressing experiences of harassment were for some girls. Other girls also commented on their own or classmates’ feelings while describing the harassment that occurred in their schools:

Briana: Sometimes they try to grind you or sometimes they try to pull up your clothes.
I: And how do you feel about that?
Briana: Embarrassed and bad.
Davina: Embarrassed. Some guys keep on doing it and you feel like you’re encouraging them. (GL2)
I: And does that happen quite a bit, boys touching girls when they don’t want to be touched?
Jade: Yes. Plenty.
I: Do you see girls getting upset much in your class because of boys?
Jade: A lot. Like this girl named Rhianna, she’s always telling them to stop, and they’re not stopping, they’re always touching her. (GL4)

These extracts highlight girls’ feelings of sadness and embarrassment at the harassment they experienced.

To avoid this distress, some girls, usually those higher up the academic achievement spectrum, sought to use dress or behaviour to reduce the likelihood of unwanted sexual touching from boys. For example, one high-achieving girl said, ‘I’m glad I have the longest skirt in the school, the longer the skirt is, the less boyfriends’ (GH2). However, given how important being considered sexually desirable was to high-status femininities, this was not a strategy easily acceptable to all girls. In the anonymous writing exercise, one girl wrote:

I’m a girl and all the boys trouble me but it doesn’t bother me because I’m beautiful: that is why they trouble me, so I don’t say anything.

This is reminiscent of the experience of Lucy in Youdell’s (2005) research in which harassment was seen as constituting her as a desirable feminine subject, and thus it was difficult to ‘say anything’. In this research, it was particularly low-achieving girls who experienced these tensions, since they seemed more likely to construct their identities in relation to their sexual attractiveness, as opposed to the ‘geeky’ identities some high achieving girls adopted (see Cobbett 2012).

‘Sometimes she likes it’: inequality, normalisation and desire

Given these competing expectations, it is unsurprising that many of the boys and some of the girls expressed confusion about what constituted sexual harassment and whether there
was anything wrong with various actions that seemed, in most people’s understanding of
the term, to constitute harassment. Understanding the differences between consensual and
non-consensual sexual behaviour was clearly riddled with complexity for the students. In
the extract below, therefore, we see boys explaining sexual harassment as a normal,
acceptable part of life.

I: What do you think about it if boys sexually harass girls?
Rowan: I think that’s ok because when you get older you have to have a girlfriend and a
boyfriend, so if you start now it doesn’t really matter because in the future it’s going
to happen.
I: So it’s just a normal part of growing up?
Rowan: It’s just a normal part of everybody’s lifestyle.
I: And what kind of thing do you define as sexual harassment?
Rowan: Touching a girl in certain places.
I: When the girls don’t want to be touched?
Rowan: Yes, when they don’t want to be touched. (BM1)

To some extent, this normalisation of sexual harassment can be seen as also being
perpetuated by the girls:

Cassandra: But the girls just tolerate it, I don’t know why.
I: And do girls tell teachers if things like that happen?
Dominique: Some of them like it.
Aliana: Some of them that don’t like it will go and tell the teacher.
Cassandra: Or defend themselves.
I: And in this school have you seen anything like that in your class?
Aliana/Dominique: No.
Cassandra: Well a case of something like that. In our class the girl didn’t have any problem
with it so she just leave it alone. (GH1)

It is clear in the first extract that there was no confusion over what sexual harassment
constituted, as Ronan clarified his understanding that it meant non-consensual touching.
The belief that sexual harassment was ‘no big deal’ demonstrates the normalisation of
inequitable power dynamics between girls and boys (Robinson 2005) and perhaps
indicates that the boys felt entitled to touch girls’ bodies as they wished.

Meanwhile, as the second extract illustrates, it was not only boys who felt confused
about sexual harassment, since these girls described thinking that other girls ‘like it’. The
students’ confusion here seems to be related to the problematic nature of the ‘normal’
pattern of relationship initiation between girls and boys. It seemed that ‘normal practice’ if
a boy liked a girl was to touch her body: if the girl was interested in the boy, she would
respond to his touch, and if not, she would probably get upset. Therefore the line between
‘harassment’ and ‘normal relationships’ was extremely blurred within the pupils’
relationship culture. There are similarities here to the South African youth sexual culture
described earlier in Wood, Lambert, and Jewkes (2007), in which girls’ scripted refusal of
boys’ proposals made the lines between coercion and consent difficult to distinguish.
Some of this complexity is illustrated in the following discussion in one of the Antiguan
schools:

I: What kinds of things do boys do to trouble girls do you think?
Kwamie: Interfering with them a lot, touching with them and more serious.
I: Why do you think boys might like to do those kinds of things?
Kwamie: To get girls’ attention.
Finley: And they might like them.
I: Do you think that works as a way of getting girls’ attention?
Finley: Yeah, it depends, sometimes.
I: They kind of like it, to be played with?
Finley: Some do. Some of them like you to be who you are, just to tell them that you like them, that you like to see them.
I: Is it difficult to tell a girl that you like her rather than play with her?
Finley: In certain situations.
Kwamie: For me, no. When I put my mind to it I could go and tell her, but sometimes it’s fun to play with them first.
I: Do you think girls ever get upset with boys playing with them, or do they mostly like it?
Kwamie: No not really.
Finley: Not really here.
Kwamie: They like the attention sometimes. (BM2)

Here we see that the boys started by describing boys touching girls as something problematic: ‘interfering with them, touching them a lot, and more serious’. However, they also saw this behaviour as boys’ way of showing a girl that they liked her, and as the conversation progressed they no longer described it as a problematic practice, saying that the girls did not get upset and that they ‘like the attention sometimes’. Yet Finley’s statement, that ‘some of them like you to just be who you are, tell them that you like them’, and more tentative reply that it is only in ‘certain situations’ that girls like to be ‘played with’, suggests some awareness that touching or ‘playing with’ girls might not be the best way to demonstrate their interest in girls. Whilst they were hesitant to admit to it at the time, it seems likely that the boys might struggle to express their interest in girls through other means, especially since talking about feelings was not typically regarded as masculine behaviour.

Some of the boys also made comments such as, ‘the girls start it but when the teacher comes they shout “sexual harassment”’. Such discourses sound like a means to justify boys’ behaviour and blame girls. However, the following notes, recorded during classroom observations do provide some support for these arguments.

Classroom observation, school 2
One girl is in the middle of a group of boys, they are poking her, she runs away squealing and then runs back towards them and slaps them. After a minute she starts calling to me, ‘miss, sexual harassment, look’ but she doesn’t take up my suggestion of coming to sit with me if they are bothering her, but runs back towards the boys, her expression alternating between squealing gleefully and looking cross.

Classroom observation, school 4
One girl and boy near me are playing fighting, she looks and me and screams, ‘Miss, miss, look’ whenever he touches her and then runs back to poke/slap him etc. and giggles.

Of course, the presence of an observer may have had some impact on the pupils’ behaviour, nevertheless the fact that similar incidents occurred on several occasions, as well as corroborating with views expressed in focus groups, makes them worth paying attention to. In the first extract the girl explicitly called the boys’ behaviour ‘sexual harassment’, whilst in the second the actual words are not used but the incident was otherwise similar. Both incidents indicate the girls’ tacit awareness that gendered assumptions and constructs would lead the boy(s) rather than the girls to get into trouble if their fighting was observed by a teacher and taken seriously. This finding shows similarities to other research in which girls demonstrate awareness of their ability to ‘get away with things’ more easily than boys (Warrington, Younger, and Williams 2000; Myhill 2002). These incidents, however, require further explanation. The girls’ expressions, combined with their unwillingness to remove themselves from the boys,
suggest they were experiencing these incidents as pleasurable. Yet the girl in the first incident explicitly described the boys’ behaviour as ‘sexual harassment’, with the implications that it was unwanted. This suggests that there are some extremely knotty issues to explore about how ‘sexual harassment’ operates as a discourse, which can be appropriated by girls in unexpected ways. It is possible, for example, that girls’ need to negotiate their position within the virgin/whore dichotomy (Youdell 2005) leads them to use discourses of harassment to protect their positioning as ‘innocent’. Since expressing sexual desire is, in most contexts, difficult for girls (Tolman 2002), it could be that the girl in the first incident was aiming to protect her reputation whilst exploring her sexuality through tactile play with the group of boys. For many of the girls, it was clear that touching from boys was definitely unwanted and deeply upsetting. These observations do suggest, however, that the norms of relationship initiation, combined with the demands of acceptable productions of masculinity and femininity, led to some very confusing scenarios and blurred boundaries between wanted and unwanted touching.

Conclusion

The findings from this research have shown that sexuality, despite the formal silences surrounding it, was a key aspect of the experience of schooling for both girls and boys. This was particularly demonstrated by the wealth of data generated on the topic, despite the interview guide not containing any questions specifically related to sexuality. Both girls and boys showed that (hetero)sexual interest in the opposite sex was a source of pleasure at school. Both genders also experienced a range of anxieties related to sexuality and the accomplishment of successful masculinities and femininities.

By far the most common way in which sexuality appeared in the students’ narratives was in relation to the sexual harassment of girls by their male classmates. Almost all of these complaints related to physical harassment, though this seemed likely to be due to their conceptualisations of sexual harassment, rather than the absence of verbal harassment. The high prevalence of physical sexual harassment in the schools studied is worrying, as is the apparent lack of concern about it from teachers. It seems that in this context, as in others, the gendered inequalities that lead to sexual harassment were normalised to the extent that many students and teachers did not see them as problematic. The prevalence of sexual harassment is a stark reminder that despite the focus on boys’ academic achievement that has dominated the ‘gender agenda’ within the Caribbean as well as across the USA, the UK, Scandinavia and Australasia, girls are clearly not the ‘winners’ of schooling.

It was not only boys but also girls who demonstrated confusion about what constituted harassment and who displayed ambiguous and contradictory positions in relation to it. It was clear that youth sexual culture and power relations were more complex than a simple binary of ‘bad boys’ and ‘good girls’. The norms of relationship initiation in which boys demonstrated their interest in girls by touching and ‘playing’ with them meant that physical sexual harassment was almost an inevitability within this sexual culture. The experience of unwanted touching from boys was deeply upsetting for many girls. However, girls often did want attention from specific boys, both because of their own desires and emotional attachments and in order to consolidate their identities within normative constructions of desirable femininity. This led to some very confusing scenarios, confusion that was heightened by the way in which a minority of girls employed the discourse of sexual harassment, possibly to protect their positioning as ‘innocent’ whilst exploring their sexuality.
Morrell (2002, 38) poses the question ‘for whom is violence in schools a problem?’ In exploring this question he aims to demonstrate that violence is not only a problem for those on the receiving end, but also for perpetrators. Addressed within this framework, he argues, solutions are more likely to be peaceful and positive rather than punitive and violent. This argument seems highly relevant to sexual harassment in this context. We saw indications that both girls and boys would like to be able to have healthier relationships with each other, but that this is prohibited by norms of masculinity and femininity, which restrict what girls and boys feel they can do and say. Boys have difficulty in telling girls how they feel about them, whilst girls are constrained by norms of respectable femininity, leading to contradictory behaviour. All students, therefore, would benefit from opportunities to discuss and deconstruct their ideas, needs and beliefs in relation to sexuality and relationships.

Note
1. Codes following the pupils names stand for ‘G’ and ‘B’ for ‘Girl’ or ‘Boy’ followed by ‘L’ ‘M’ and ‘H’ for ‘Low’, ‘Middle’ or ‘High’ achieving, followed by a number indicating the four schools.

References


Résumé

Cet article traite des résultats d’une étude qualitative sur les expériences des lycéens à l’école en matière de sexualité, qui a été conduite dans quatre établissements secondaires publics à Antigua et Barbuda. Aussi bien les filles que les garçons éprouvaient des angoisses et une certaine confusion par rapport à la sexualité, tout en considérant l’attraction (hétéro)sexuelle comme un aspect excitant de la scolarité. L’étude a révélé que le harcèlement sexuel des filles était un acte répandu et grave (ainsi que « normalisé ») dans toutes les écoles où elle a été conduite. Cependant les données montrent aussi que les filles étaient loin d’être passives; au contraire, elles ont démontré leur capacité à riposter de manière complexe et contradictoire aux comportements des garçons, en raison de leur investissement pour être désirables, conformément aux discours sur l’hétéro-féminité, et du plaisir...
qu’elles obtenaient de leurs relations. L’étude suggère que filles et garçons bénéficieraient clairement de l’opportunité de discuter de leurs besoins, de leurs croyances et de leurs désirs en ce qui concerne la sexualité et les relations.

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza las conclusiones obtenidas de un estudio cualitativo acerca de las vivencias de los alumnos respecto a su sexualidad en las escuelas, el cual fue llevado a cabo en cuatro escuelas secundarias públicas del país caribeño Antigua y Barbuda. En este sentido, se evidenció que tanto las muchachas como los muchachos experimentaron una gama de ansiedades y de confusiones con respecto a su sexualidad, a la vez que reconocían que la atracción (hetero) sexual representaba una parte estimulante del ámbito escolar. En todas las escuelas estudiadas, se constató que el acoso a las muchachas constituía una ocurrencia general y de preocupación (así como también “normalizada”). Sin embargo, los resultados obtenidos también demuestran que las muchachas, lejos de ser pasivas, expresaron respuestas complejas y contradictorias ante el comportamiento de los muchachos, debido a su propio interés en ser deseadas dentro de los discursos de hetero-feminidad y al gusto que les proporcionaban sus relaciones. Sin duda, resulta claro que ambos géneros se beneficiarían con las oportunidades que tuvieran para hablar de sus necesidades, de sus creencias y de sus deseos en torno a la sexualidad y a las relaciones.