

# Chapter 2

## Revisiting Lower Secondary Schools in the 1990s: Reflections on and Interpretations of Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment



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### Introduction

Results from national school health surveys suggest that girls' experiences of sexual harassment have increased dramatically between the years 2017 and 2019 (Ikonen & Helakorpi, 2019). The most obvious explanation for the increase, however, is growing awareness among young women after #MeToo, rather than substantial actual changes. In the 1990s, issues related to harassment were not included into main educational documents, and even the terms were fairly unfamiliar to teachers (Lahelma et al., 2000).

My aim in this chapter is to reflect on continuities and changes in sexual and gender-based harassment in schools from the late 1990s to the present day. I will especially explore experiences reported by young people and teachers, and interpretations by researchers regarding the theme in the 1990s. My method for revisiting the 1990s is first to reproduce the main parts of my earlier article *Gendered Conflicts in Secondary School: Fun or enactment of power?* (Lahelma, 2002a), which was published in the journal *Gender and Education*. In order to keep the interpretations authentic, I will, in the section *Looking back to the 1990s*, present the text as I originally wrote it, with some cuts and light editing, but without adding new references. In this article, I analysed the fine line between playing, which is 'just fun' and behaviour that is experienced as harassment.

In the following section, *Revisiting the analysis after 20 years*, I will give an overview of the changes in the political and cultural environment, education and theoretical thinking that are relevant for understanding this theme now. Therefore, I will present some more current Finnish and international research, documents and

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statistics, although other chapters in this book also offer studies that analyse the current situation. Finally, I combine my earlier conclusions with new findings and reflect on what has changed and what has remained the same in young people's experiences of and reflections on sexual and gender-based harassment in schools, and in teachers' responses.

## Looking Back to the 1990s

The article that is present in this section draws on an ethnographic project in lower secondary schools entitled *Citizenship, Difference and Marginality in Schools – with Special Reference to Gender* (e.g. Gordon et al., 2000a, 2006). In the study we observed the daily lives of 13–14-year-old students in two schools during a period of one school year. Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 90 young people (first set of interviews). The following year we interviewed 47 teachers and other staff members.

The other set of data used in this article drew from the memories of the same young people a few years later, obtained in the first round of an ethnographically grounded life historical study *Tracing Transitions* (e.g. Gordon & Lahelma, 2003). Sixty-three of them were interviewed (second set of interviews), now 17–19 years of age. Although our focus in the life course interviews was in following them to their future lives, we also asked them to look back and remember their secondary school years. These interviews were mostly conducted in groups of two or three, and hilarious laughs often followed the sharing of enjoyable memories. Happy memories were related in one interview after another to friends, jokes, situations when the daily routines were broken. What was remembered as important and fun in secondary school was often related to informal relationships. But some had memories of feelings of sorrow and anxiety, and they also were regularly related to peers; experiences of bullying and harassment, or problems in personal relations. (Lahelma, 2002b).

In this article I benefited from an innovative analytic tool that was originally defined in the ethnographic project: differentiation between the *official*, the *informal* and the *physical* layers of the school (Gordon et al., 2000a). Using these concepts it was possible to observe various agendas taking place, more or less hidden from the teacher, sometimes invading the official teaching and learning, sometimes remaining apart. Informal invasions to the official school regularly take place using the physical layer. As one of the foci of the study was gender, we have observed a variety of ways in which gender is implicated in official and informal practices, and how the elements of the physical layer of the school, such as the use of time, space, voice, movement and embodiment get gendered meanings.

## *Gender Play and Play-Acted Fight*

In lower secondary schools, 13–15-year-old girls and boys spend most of their time together in the same classrooms, sharing the spatiality and temporality of lessons, as well as most of the voices and smells. Girls and boys are physically close to each other but avoid direct physical contact. Sometimes their paths adjoin during lessons and breaks, and they cooperate in friendly and enjoyable ways in which gender and sexuality might or might not be relevant. Sometimes gendered encounters are strained. The atmosphere in some sudden interactions is difficult to interpret for an observer, and often even for the participating young people themselves. Girls and boys might make gender difference poignantly by sitting in single sex groups. They might emphasise same-gender bonding by physical actions; girls with hugs and combing each other's hairs and boys by friendly pushing each other. They can explicate cross-gender aversions by challenging children or groups of other gender verbally or physically. They might also demonstrate heterosexual interest, curiosity or fears in various ways, like in the following extract from a situation in the corridor when students waited for the teacher:

A group of boys sit on the high bench, push each other down, laugh. Soon Tiina, Henna, Lea and Marjaana climb to the other end. They also push each other, giggling loudly. They glance at the boys but do not take part in their play-acting. Boys apparently register the girls, blink at them but do not make any movements towards them.

Like Barrie Thorne (1993), we also found situations when girls and boys float to mixed groups in safe ways, and gender seems not to be a relevant divider (Gordon et al., 2000a, b). Friendly, informal, cross gender communication, however, was not very typical among the groups of the 13–14 year old students that we followed (c.f. Prendergast & Forrest, 1997). Some of them seemed to get along with the opposite gender; for example, there was one boy who interacted constantly with a small group of girls and did not have close friends among boys. But for the majority of the students, informal cross-gender interaction among classmates was rare. This seems to be the experience of the young people themselves as well. In the first as well as the second set of interviews both girls and boys generally agreed that friendship relations and informal communication in secondary school are typically segregated by gender (see also Tolonen, 2001; Hey, 1997).

Our field notes from the lessons include constant remarks on situations when small groups of students go on with their own informal tasks in friendly terms (as interpreted) – in spite of the official agenda of the lesson. This seldom takes place in mixed groups. Sometimes it is difficult for an observer to interpret what is going on within the informal agenda. Play-acting was gendered in the following extract from a lesson of home economics. The notes reveal my interpretation that the process started as a joke but was turning towards a conflict, when the teacher finally noticed it and interrupted.

Sami waves a towel towards Riikka. Matti play-acts kicking her. Teacher: 'Matti, get away!' Sami and Riikka continue, Inka comes along, starts to play-act fight with Sami, Riikka goes away. Sami and Inka start to scuffle with fists, laughing. Then it seems that the fight gets

more serious. The teacher realises it only when it has continued for a while. She comes: 'Heh Sami!' They finish.

In one of the classes gendered disputes continued from one lesson to another. In this class, a group of four active and talkative girls, Henna and Marjaana in the centre, was constantly challenged by some of the active and talkative boys. These girls also used to challenge back, and often they initiated confrontations themselves. Teachers seemed to get annoyed with the recurrent disturbance, and, according to our observations, they were more strict towards the group of girls than towards the boys.

Henna protests why teacher lets Juuso answer after he has shouted [without raising his hand].

Henna shouts, teacher asks her not to shout.

Lasse starts to shout, grumbling 'Henna is wrong!', 'Henna is shouting!'

Marjaana shouts, teacher says laughing: 'Do not scream!'

In the following Juuso screams 'because they [girls] also scream'.

Laughing, Lasse acts as if he would throw something.

Henna: 'Teacher, come now and take this ink paperball from Lasse.'

Teacher: 'Henna, do you want to change place' [so that Lasse cannot tease]

Henna changes place (...)

Soon Henna shouts: 'Teacher, he is trying to throw again!'

Henna and Lasse argue across the room, Lasse play-acts throwing.

Instead of being separate from the official teaching and learning, informal relationships invaded constantly during this lively lesson, and the physical layer of the school was also evoked. Henna wanted to achieve in the official as well as in the informal school and protested because Juuso was allowed to answer. The teacher did not notice. The comments of Juuso and Lasse concerning Henna and Marjaana may have been initiated by the teacher's remarks on the girls 'screaming' and 'shouting'. Juuso and Lasse confronted the active girls by using voice (commenting loudly, ridiculing) and embodiment (pretending to throw something); and thus limited Henna's use of space and voice. The teacher, who had a good sense of humour and was very much liked by all students, tried to keep the situation from escalating, using Henna's flexibility.

In the first interview Henna, aged 13, mentioned that she is irritated by some of the boys who 'always interfere with other people's business'. She continued: 'It's as if you weren't allowed to say anything at all. You should just be quiet and not be yourself.' Henna was right; at least some of the boys really thought that Henna should have been quiet. Paavo and Otto, two quiet boys that I interviewed together in the second set, remembered that Henna disturbed them, because 'she was talking incessantly' and 'complaining about everything'. A talkative girl can be interpreted as a challenge for (some of the) boys.

When I interviewed Henna and Marjaana during the second set of interviews, they both reflected that they have positive memories from the secondary school. These memories were about informal relationships. Henna remembered:

Always when I went to school I got cheerful. (...) And when I was sick, then I was like, oh what has happened now. What kind of gossips and everything (...) You belonged to the group and it was kind of a clique.

When asked about her relationship with Lasse, Henna mentioned that, at that age, girls like to tease boys, and that Lasse just treated her like she herself treated him, he ‘gave back’. Marjaana, in a group interview with two other girls, laughingly remembered these kinds of ‘fights’ with Lasse and the other boys: ‘girls defended me, and boys defended Lasse, and it was just a game, it really was nothing serious (...) we were friends anyway’. There might be a sense of nostalgia, like it often is in memories, but it also seems that the strong support that these girls received from each other helped them to interpret such situations not as harassing or disturbing, but as situations that cheered the boring lessons (Gordon et al., 2000a, b; Hey, 1997).

### ***When It Is Not Fun Any More***

In the article ‘Lads and laughter’ Mary Kehily and Anoop Nayak (1997) show that joking in informal interactions in school is not necessarily fun. The second set of interviews suggests that, unlike Henna and Marjaana’s interpretation concerning their constant and visible disputes with Lasse, some of the girls had experienced situations that they regarded as no longer fun, and their memories were painful. Our field notes and first set of interviews do not include equally much data from such situations; they remained hidden from us as researchers as well.

In another class that we followed, all girls and some of the boys were very quiet and a group of boys occupied much of the voice, time and space. Hannele was a quiet girl and did not have close friends in the class, and in lesson notes she was not often recounted as doing, moving or talking informally. The analytic discussions in our research group and diaries suggest that we were aware that sometimes Hannele was harassed. She did not seem to answer back, as, for example, the following extract demonstrates:

Manu is crawling under the table. Looks at me, smiles. I understand that he is crawling and planning to poke Hannele to buttocks. I am annoyed. So he does. Hannele is startled. Does not turn.

In the first interview Hannele argued that there is no bullying in her class, but in the second interview, at the age of 18, she reported that one of her male class mates had harassed her in secondary school:

Hannele: ‘I don’t know whether he meant it as a joke, or whether he was serious. Well, I think he was joking, but sometimes it really disturbed, because it was practically every day.’

Elina: ‘You mean the entire lower secondary school?’

Hannele: ‘Well, maybe not the entire secondary school, but kind of every now and then.’

Elina: ‘Do you want to say who he was?’

Hannele: ‘No!’

Elina: ‘Okay, you need not tell. What did you think about it? What kind of thoughts you had, how did you react, did you have, kind of, any means to answer to it?’

Hannele: ‘Well, if I was quiet, then he didn’t bother to continue, and finished, so that’s it. Then, later on, I was kind of, I don’t care about the damned bloke, I can’t stand him either.’

I cannot say whether the incident with Manu above was an example of this teasing or whether he referred to some other boy. Most of the incidents did not turn to visible or audible conflicts, presumably because Hannele did not react. This continuous teasing seems to have remained hidden from the teachers. Taina, who participated in the interview together with Hannele, commented that she had not been aware of the teasing either. Hannele did not tell anyone—which also is typical when sexual harassment takes place in schools (Larkin, 1994). Even in this interview, a few years later, whilst speaking rather openly about her own feelings, Hannele did not want to reveal the name of the boy either to me or to Taina. However, she had grown up to be a rather independent young woman who knew what she wanted and suggested that she would not let the boys rule any more, and the one who had harassed her ‘would hear’.

Even when harassment or teasing does not take place, constant ‘fooling around’ by some of the boys upset some of the girls (and also some boys). They realised that it limited their possibilities to study, and to use space and voice. Students used to prefer teachers who keep order in the classroom (Gordon et al., 2000a; Lahelma, 2000). Annikki, at the age of 13, argued:

Well, in general it’s just boys who spoil everything. Everything is ruined when they start to fool around over there ... It depends on the teacher who lets them fool around.... then I told her [the teacher] that you should shout louder, you must hit your fist on the table!

In the follow-up interview, Annikki, however, does not have bad memories about the boys. She said that they ‘always created something really stupid during the days which helped us to survive the lessons’. But her memories were rather anguished, nevertheless:

I don’t have really nice memories. There were some, well I don’t know, it was kind of, I get a bit anguished when I try to think about it, a bit. There was bullying ... at least I have no friends left from secondary school.

As the interview continued she told about a male classmate who harassed her constantly: “He came very close to me and laughed in a mocking way, you know”. She was, however, uncertain, whether to call it bullying or sexual harassment, because it was not physical. And she had, by now, put it aside from her memory.

Above I have recounted memories of female students who have reflected on conflicts with their male peers. Some of the boys, as well, were targets of bullying (Tolonen, 1998; Lahelma, 1999), but did not mention having been harassed by girls, in either ethnographic or follow-up interviews. One of the boys who was, according to our field notes, constantly teased by both girls and boys refused to be interviewed. Harri was another boy who had a reputation of being regarded as ‘strange’ in his class, and some of the girls used to ridicule him. The following extract from my lesson notes describes a small informal incident:

Ida: ‘Harri, try to catch it!’ Harri comes nearer, Ida play-acts throwing a die. Salli to Ida: ‘Don’t tease him!’ Ida gives the die to Harri. Harri seems to be embarrassed, returns to his place, glancing at me. I got a feeling that he wanted to check whether I had noticed his embarrassment.

I suggest that the shamefulness of this situation for Harri was in Salli's comment that revealed his vulnerability in relation to the girls' joking. Being teased by girls seems to be an exceptionally humiliating situation for a boy and questions his masculinity. 'Doing masculinity' appears to involve the ability to deal with and engage in joking relations (Phoenix, 1997; see also, Prendergast & Forrest, 1997; Duncan, 1999). To be a target for joking of 'mere' girls is most degrading.

Sexual name-calling is another issue in which the line between joking and harassment is not easy to see. In our ethnographic interviews, students repeatedly suggested that calling others names is just for fun, or in the heat of the moment—it is not seriously meant and should not be taken to be so. However, some others suggested situations when this *is* meant to hurt; and sometimes situations which are meant as jokes are not experienced as such (Gordon et al., 2000a). In the second set of interviews, the young women recognised the following meanings of calling a girl a 'whore': it does not mean anything but is just a saying that one can even use for a friend as a joke; it is used when one is angry at somebody, and it means the same as stupid; or it is used for those girls who have sexual relationships with many boys. For example, Marika remembered how she had started to date a boy who was few years older soon after coming to a new secondary school. She had been afraid that she would be called a whore immediately. Riina and Marianne related that in lower secondary school such naming would not have been taken seriously, but now, when one is older, it really would be humiliating. It is in the 'play' of meaning in which power is carried.

Being called 'homo/faggot/pouf' has similar effect amongst boys as 'slag/whore' when used against girls. 'Homo' can be a joke or a general insult, but it can also be directed to one boy specifically; it can be an insult in which the boys' masculinity is questioned (Lehtonen, 2002). Some of the young women in the second set of interviews suggested that 'homo' is used more often as a general insult, whilst 'whore' is more often used as an insult that has to do with a specific girl's sexuality. Neil Duncan (1999) suggests, drawing from his study, that there is a difference between *calling* and *labelling*. Maybe the different interpretations of young people in our interviews can be analysed from this perspective: calling is ad hoc, and not regarded equally severely as more recurrent labelling.

### ***Pedagogical Challenges for Teachers***

Teachers are aware of the constant presence of gendered processes and sexuality in school, but these are rarely discussed in the context of teaching or learning or in teacher education; sexuality seems to be almost a taboo. Relations and enactments of power that are involved are seldom questioned (see also Holland et al., 1998). Sex-based harassment is not easily regarded as a gender issue by teachers either, but sometimes taken-for-granted, a part of normal relationships, an 'adolescent mating dance' (Kenway & Willis, 1998, 108; Mac an Ghaill, 1994). Teachers in our research schools sometimes interpreted disputes between girls and boys as evidence of

heterosexual attraction. For example, when discussing about Henna's and Lasse's disputes, one of them suggested that Henna fancies Lasse – which was not Henna's interpretation. During a lesson when some boys were all the time commenting on the doings of some girls, the teacher commented, jokingly: 'This is how the strong Finnish women are growing: they survive being teased!' (Lahelma & Öhrn, 2003). Gendered conflicts are often regarded as self-evident in secondary schools, and some boys' harassing behaviour taken for granted because of the 'difficult' age (Aapola, 1997).

Situations when some of the are harassed are not easy, and sometimes teachers find it difficult to alter their agenda. Subject teachers are 'always in a hurry to cover the syllabus and to get on', as one teacher argued in an interview. She regretted that even when there are important themes to discuss, she feels that there is not enough time. Sexual harassment was not included in the curricula of sex education and there was not a slot in the official school where it was mandatory for teachers to take it into the agenda. Our notes show that students are regularly taught good manners, but the principle that they must not address their fellow students in humiliating, sexist or harassing way was not included in this teaching (Lahelma, 1999).

When the young women and men looked back to their years in secondary school in our interviews, many of them commented that teachers did not often react to sexist or racist insults or address situations when somebody was harassed. For example, Henna told that she was ashamed when she remembered her own behaviour towards a fellow pupil. She suggested that secondary school teachers should have talked about these issues.

## **Revisiting the Analysis After 20 Years**

In this section I will, using more recent research, discuss the old story from the perspective of current situation and new interpretations.

### ***Progress and Stagnation in Educational Politics and School Practices***

After the article was written, feminist politics and policies have paid increasing attention to sexual harassment and violence against women. The level of gendered violence in Finland has always been high, often noticed by international organisations such as the UN. This problem was addressed, for example, in the first Government report on gender equality (MSH, 2010), but the follow-up report (MSH, 2016) did not reveal major changes in this respect. The global #MeToo campaign in 2018 was eye-opening in Finland as elsewhere. For example, a group of Finnish film directors made a film titled 'Force of Habit' (2019) which presented



several everyday incidents in which women are sexually harassed or intimidated. Most of the stories focused on young women's experiences that women of any age can easily recognise from their own lives.

As to educational politics in Finland, we have witnessed reforms in relation to equality. New legislation obliges all educational institutions to provide an equality plan with the aim of advancing gender equality and non-discrimination, and tackling problems based on gender and sexuality. Moreover, equality is regularly noted and gender diversity is mentioned, for example, in the new national curriculum framework for comprehensive schools (NBE, 2014). Sexual harassment is addressed in this document: 'Students are supported in the sense of community, which does not accept any kind of bullying, sexual harassment, racism or other kinds of discrimination' (NBE, 2014, 280). The National Board of Education has also provided a guide for teachers on gender equality (Jääskeläinen et al., 2016) and in this guide, definitions of sexual harassment and good measures to tackle it are presented (ibid., 13–14). As a quick reaction to #MeToo, the National Board of Education provided a guide for teachers for combatting sexual harassment (NBE, 2018).

Even if these reforms are noteworthy, there is little actual change. If actors in schools are not committed to advancing gender equality, formal plans are written but not realised in everyday practices (Ikävalko, 2016). There are still teachers and teacher students who repeat stereotyped attitudes to gender (Naskali & Kari, 2020), and the atmosphere in educational institutions is often negative, even hostile towards knowledge based on feminist research (Ikävalko & Kantola, 2017).. After several gender projects, gender awareness, including knowledge regarding harassment, is still lacking in most teacher education institutions (e.g. Lahelma & Tainio, 2019).

### *New Research Widens the Scope*

In the title of this chapter I use the term *sexual and gender-based harassment*, in order to avoid the biological (and dichotomic) connotations of the term sex and to emphasise that, along with sexual harassment, it is important to reflect on other kinds of harassment that are connected to gender. There are several terms to conceptualise the issue but I have predominantly remained in the terminology that was used in the original article and the texts that I have referred to. The term *violence* is often used, as in the title of this book but I did not come across this term in research on harassment in the 1990s. Jane Kenway and Sue Willis (1998) used the word *sex-based harassment* for sexual and sexist harassment. The latter includes insulting references to girls as a whole or to a certain group of girls, name-calling or subtle physical intimidation such as blocking the way or invading personal space; this happened, for example to Annikki in my article. Harassment is sex-based, that is, it is directed at girls largely because they are girls, as in the extract above in which the space and voice of Henna was challenged.

In my article, main focus was on the experiences of (presumably) heterosexual girls. Recent research addresses heterosexual gender norms such as (hetero)sexual

harassment, homophobic harassment, and harassment based on gender non-conformity (Meyer, 2008; Odenbring, 2019), for example violence towards trans and intersex youth, as in the chapter of Lehtonen in this book. Current analyses on sexual and gender-based harassment are often intersectional (Robinson, 2005). Contemporary research has also indicated that gendered acts of harassment intersect with minority background, social class and sexuality (Meyer, 2008; Odenbring and Johansson, Chap. 12 this book). Aaltonen (2006, 2017) suggests that in her study girls' accounts of harassers were racialised and pathologised in ways that separate the phenomenon from young, Finnish, normative masculinity. In the study by Hinkkanen, categories of gender, age and ethnicity were used by young women to describe and explain both the perpetrators and the targets of harassment (Hinkkanen, 2018). There is research on boys as perpetrators, for example of Robinson (2005) and Jackson and Sundaram (2018), also in relation to care (Manninen et al., 2011). Theoretical perspectives for understanding the complexities of gender, sexuality and violence have also widened through affective methodologies and posthuman approaches, for example in the study by Huuki and Renold (2016) on young children's playground play.

Whilst several register questionnaires in Finland, for example, have suggested that young people, especially girls, experience sexual or gender-based harassment regularly, they also suggest that most of the cases do not take place inside schools (Ikonen & Helakorpi, 2019). The spaces and places of the school have become more blurred, however, due to the presence of mobile phones (Paakkari & Rautio, 2019). This means new possibilities for sexual and gender-based harassment which is even more difficult for teachers to see (Rivers, 2013; Boyd, 2014). The fact that cyber-based harassment as well as reading harassing texts can take place inside or outside schools, and during or after of school hours, as Hunehall Berndtson and Odenbring (Chap. 8, this book) show, is basically ignored by the adults. Livingstone et al. (2014) suggest that there is no easy line to draw between online and offline social relations, nor between cyberbullying and sexual harassment, nor indeed between empowering or entertaining content and that which is experienced as threatening or upsetting.

Above is just a very limited overview of some themes in contemporary research; more thorough analyses of violence and harassment in schools will be presented in other chapters of this book.

### *Sustainable Patterns in Analysis*

The main result in my earlier article was the analysis of the continuum between play and harassing behaviour, which was highlighted using the physical and informal layers of the school (Gordon et al., 2000a). Larkin (1994) has argued that girls and women do not recognize harassment that does not assume extreme physical forms, although they might experience it as most unwelcome; this was also reflected by Annikki in my study. One of the central findings in the studies on gendered and

sex-based harassment is still the difficulty of seeing the fine line, as is argued in a recent study by Odenbring and Johansson (2021). In the study by Aaltonen (2006), students were able to construe the borderline between pleasant and unpleasant, tolerable and intolerable attention as clear in principle, but they also suggested that in practice this borderline is ambivalent, negotiable and contextual.

In the 1990s it was evident that sex-based harassment in schools was not seen as such even by the young people themselves. In the early study that draws from interviews with high school girls, June Larkin (1994) discussed the ways in which the harassing behaviour of boys at school was normalised. The girls in her study identified three factors that contributed to it: the frequency of the behaviour; the way it was interpreted by others, particularly the male harassers; and the fact that the topic of sexual harassment was seldom, if ever, discussed at school. Recent studies do not provide evidence of any change in these factors. Drawing from interviews, Hinkkanen (2018) suggests that harassment was understood through different discourses that gave it different meanings: on the one hand, harassment was interpreted as distressing and, on the other hand, as ordinary. Many situations, such as name-calling in schools were often interpreted not as harassment, but as common humour (ibid., see also Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Huuki et al., 2010). Harassment is involved in the everyday life of schools in a way that makes it difficult to recognise, a 'Force of Habit' (2019), referring to the film made after #metoo.

Another theme in the article related to the power relations involved. Kenway and Willis (ibid.) have argued that sex-based harassment acts as a form of social control, and hence has material effects on all girls and women, including those who have not experienced it personally. Girls are vulnerable because they can be insulted at any moment through sexist comments, and at any moment a situation that has started as play-acting and joking can turn into harassment in their experience. To react powerfully and negatively against what is 'just joking' is to show oneself to be humourless (Larkin, 1994; Phoenix, 1997). In the study by Odenbring and Johansson (2019), some girls' narratives were framed as tough-girl femininity: they had to show a tough façade against acts of harassment as well as to other students at the school. When the name-calling became personal, the girls stuck together against the harassing boys and fought back verbally (Odenbring & Johansson, 2019), as did some of the girls in my study. The expectation of girls to be tough and 'grin and bear it' (Aaltonen, 2017) is related to the myth of the strong Finnish woman, as explicitly stated in the example above (Lahelma & Öhrn, 2003). Hannele, too, in my study had learned to harden herself, but only after lower secondary school experiences.

Some of the young boys' vulnerabilities, on the other hand, are evident in their fears of being called 'homo' or not being able to learn to 'take' bullying from their peers (Phoenix, 1997), especially from girls, like Harri in my article. This kind of gender-based harassment constructs differences between boys, between masculinities, in which heterosexual masculinity is on top. Sexist comments and other forms of sexual harassment, then, constitute a way of maintaining and policing gender boundaries (e.g. Connell, 1995; Larkin, 1994). Robinson (2005) has analysed how sexual harassment is integral to the construction of hegemonic heterosexual masculine identities, and how it intersects with other sites of power such as 'race' and

class. Jackson and Sundaram (2018) suggest that ‘lad culture’ is particularly associated with groups of men in social contexts and involves excessive alcohol consumption, rowdy behaviour, sexism, homophobia, sexual harassment and violence.

### *How to Challenge Harassment in Schools?*

Currently there is, for example in the Nordic countries, legislation that should prevent gender-based harassment in schools. This is important, but not enough. It is evident that challenging gender-based harassment is not easy for teachers, even if they are provided with some guiding texts, as in Finland (NBE, 2018). Meyer (2008) identified in her study the following external barriers to teachers’ activity in relation to intervening in harassment: lack of institutional support from administrators; lack of formal education on the issue; inconsistent response from colleagues; fear of parent backlash; and negative community response. An interesting study in Sweden focused on a high school lawsuit, which a young woman lost (Gillander Gådin & Stein, 2019). The authors showed how gender-based or sexual harassment in school was perceived as ordinary, normal and expected at the organisational level.

For decades, (some) boys’ failing in academic terms has been emphasised in educational discourses (e.g. Lahelma, 2014). In this situation the impact of informal hierarchies, based on hegemonic masculinities, may be forgotten by teachers and other professionals. When trying to get underachieving boys interested in something, they do not necessarily combat harassing behaviour and might even support rude and sexist speech, as is shown in our study in comprehensive schools (e.g. Lahelma, 2009) and in vocational education (e.g. Pietilä et al., 2020).

In practice, if teachers ignore negative comments and behaviour, this communicates to students that such behaviour is acceptable. But reacting after something has happened is not enough. Harassment is part of the everyday life of schools and not necessarily unique to certain situations; this was apparent in the cases of Hannele and Annikki. Odenbring and Johansson (2019) suggest that in light of the #MeToo movement, it is important to take girls’ experiences seriously and to help the students who engage in sexual harassment understand the impact of their behaviour and their negative consequences for the people who are exposed to this form of abuse. Whilst this is important, it is not enough either. If teachers rely on opportunities for reflective discussion developed on the basis of negative comments or behaviour by students, then these questions are discussed in the context of problems, and specific students may be the main focus. Often they are underachieving working-class boys (Robinson, 2005; Jackson & Sundaram, 2018). Moreover, as I have suggested through the above examples, harassing situations tend to take place when teachers do not see them, and even when the incidents are visible, it is not easy to see the boundaries. Aaltonen (2017) suggests that most, if not all, young people encounter sex-based situations in which boundaries have to be drawn, whether or not one uses the label of harassment.

It is important to see the school culture as a whole and students as active agents. One example is a research-activist project, #MeToo Postscriptum (Pihkala & Huuki 2019) aimed at addressing sexual harassment in pre-teen peer cultures. After the students talked with the researchers at workshops, they were invited to send an anonymised Valentine's card to a politician of their choice in which they reflected on some unpleasant sexual experience in one sentence. The workshops enabled young children to address and communicate parts of their lives that are often sidelined in educational settings, or are addressed exclusively within a normative regulatory framework. The intervention enabled the children to become part of a wider change (ibid., 255).

The conclusions of several studies in the 1990s already suggested the importance of a whole-school policy in challenging bullying, racism, or gender-based harassment (Duncan, 1999). Some of the teachers in my earlier study also emphasised this: 'If we decide that we don't have harassment in this school, and if the staff is committed to it, then it will stop' (Lahelma, 2004). Today schools have responsibility for providing equality plans. They should be used for this aim: students and teachers should together address how to recognise harassing behaviour, where to report it and how to prevent it. This is the big challenge for schools and teacher education today.

## Conclusions

The contribution of this chapter is to present some historical background to the current research on gendered violence and harassment in educational institutions. The focus of the analysis is the fine line between gendered play and harassment in schools. My aim was to reflect on continuities and changes from the 1990s, when the term sexual harassment was hardly known, to the present time, after #metoo. My method was to present my earlier article (Lahelma, 2002a) and to discuss its findings in relation to current research. The article draws on ethnographic data from lower secondary schools in Helsinki in the 1990s and life history interviews with the same young people a few years later. Through repeating the main part of the article as it was originally written, with only minor changes, I wanted to present my initial interpretations. The second part of the chapter discusses the changes and continuities in the theme. However, more comprehensive observations on the current situation will be presented from several perspectives in the other chapters of this book.

The main conclusion in this chapter is that the overall patterns have not changed significantly, and that the stories that I described in the earlier article could take place today. The complexity of harassment – or violence – is evident in the varying interpretations of the incidents by the young women, the perpetrators, the teachers, and the researchers. Moreover, an action can be perceived as a joke while it is happening, but as humiliating later on. Despite overall patterns not having changed very much, it is possible that cyber-based harassment is a new challenge.

In the 1990s, the term sexual harassment was not commonly recognised in schools, not even by researchers such as myself with colleagues with whom I went to schools with the aim of analysing gendered processes. In the interviews with teachers and in the first set of student interviews, harassment was seldom discussed; the theme was not on our agenda. On reflection, it is now possible to understand that it was difficult even for us, feminist researchers, to address sexual and gender-based harassment. However, using the informal and physical aspects of school as analytic tools, I found patterns in the data about everyday life of the schools that started to ‘tickle my brain’ (Lahelma et al., 2014). I was more aware when I returned to the experiences of the young people in the second set of interviews. The questions that I reflected on in the article are still relevant after #metoo: what is harassment or violence in schools, and who has the power to define it?

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