



Classrooms that you're safe in, teachers you can trust

There is great deal that educators can do to assist learners who have been sexually abused. Exactly what, and how, was the subject of a study conducted in schools in the Western Cape, and submitted as partial fulfilment of a Master's degree at St Augustine College. **ELAINE BISHOP**¹ and **GLORIA MARSAY**² highlight some of the findings of the study that are most useful to educators.

South Africa has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. This kind of violence has far-reaching effects on both the individual and the entire community. Violence against women is a public and community issue, which impacts upon schools placing great responsibility on the educators. As schools become increasingly pressured to provide more than just academic development, and educators are overwhelmed with many duties and responsibilities, it becomes of paramount importance that educators are assisted and supported both on a personal and a professional level. The interconnectedness of all our lives makes sexual abuse one of the most pressing issues of our time because it affects everyone at every level of society.

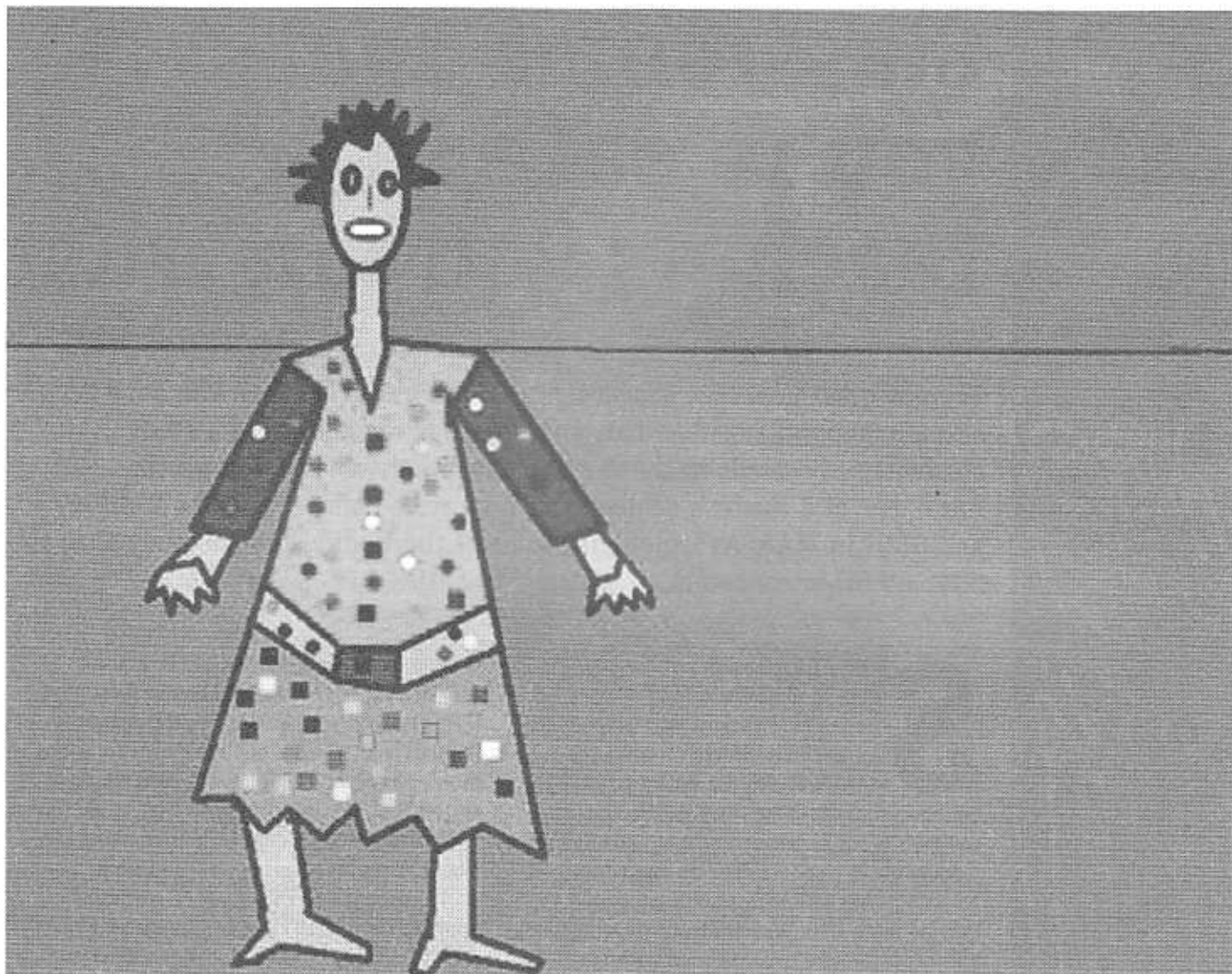
Unless education at all levels acknowledges violence in the lives of women and children, along with its impact on learning, many students will not only fail to learn but may also experience the educational setting as a silencing place, or another site of violence, where they are controlled and diminished by institutional structures or classroom interactions, and shamed by their failure to learn.

(Horsman 1998:20)

In 2001 the HSRC was commissioned by UNICEF to study school responses to violence and harassment of girls. One of the main recommendations of the study was that school communities need to engage with their own

experiences, hurts and beliefs in a non-sanctioning environment. They suggest that learners need to speak openly to demystify feelings and to work out their own solutions to problems (HSRC 2001:7). The HSRC study stated that the informants in that study found it difficult to re-orientate their thinking away from the problem to possible solutions.

In response to this study, a narrative approach was used, which provided the opportunity for both learners and educators to engage in their own experiences as suggested in the HSRC study (2001:35). Narrative work acknowledges that people have mastery over their own experiences and that people can "re-author" (White 1995) their lives, moving away from the problem saturated story towards a more preferred way of being. People make sense of their own lives and others' lives through stories. Telling stories has become a valuable way of documenting narrative research, which is a distinct form of qualitative research (Phillips 1994:15). Narrative research focuses on the study of events in an individual's life, gathers data through the collection of stories and reports individual experiences in such a way that the reader may make meaning of these experiences. Narrative work is respectful of people and their stories. Researchers are bound to honour the setting inside which their research story occurs (O'Dea 1994:165). In order to be respectful to the participants and in order to conduct ethical research, each participant in this study received a consent form and an information sheet, which explained the process of the



research. The consent forms were signed by each participant (whose participation in the study was entirely voluntary) and then co-signed by her parent/guardian.

We listened to the girls who spoke openly about their experiences of sexual abuse. Their educators were also invited to share their experiences of working with these girls who had been abused. After examining the effects of sexual abuse on the learners and the educators, we also explored what it was about the educators that enabled the girls to disclose their stories to them. Lastly, we explored what the educators did once the girls had disclosed their stories.

As consultants to educators, it is our hope that this article will offer educators some thoughts for consideration, and provide some tools to enable them to assist learners who have been sexually abused.

Effects of sexual abuse

The learners and their educators described the effects of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse

profoundly influenced the learners' ability to learn, their behaviour in class and their relationships.

LEARNING

- >> The girl may have *difficulty with concentration.*
- >> She may *often be absent.*
- >> She may have *difficulty in setting goals or making decisions.*
- >> She may also find it *difficult to complete tasks.*
- >> Because the girl may *feel worthless*, she has *little or no confidence* in her ability to succeed. Therefore, she may not try, or may be afraid to offer an opinion because she does not believe her opinions are of any worth.
- >> *The standard of academic work may deteriorate.*

In contrast to previously mentioned effects, educators have also mentioned that the learner may use her academic work as a means to escape her traumatic reality and may become a very *diligent overachiever.*

BEHAVIOUR

- >> She may become *attention seeking, aggressive or apathetic and withdrawn.*
- >> She may be *emotionally volatile*, having seemingly emotional outbursts.

RELATIONSHIPS

- >> The girl's relationships with others, especially in class and group work, *may deteriorate* because she may feel *unable to trust others*. Learners often lose faith and trust in educators, peers, other adults and those in authority.
- >> She may have a *serious lack of trust in herself*.
- >> The girl may *dislike being controlled*. She may resist authority, but also finds it uncomfortable being in control herself because she does not trust her own judgement.
- >> Perhaps because of the habit of secrecy, the girl may find open and honest *communication difficult*.

What helps girls to disclose that they have been sexually abused?

Human Rights Watch identified two main barriers to disclosing: fear and the expectation of an indifferent or inadequate response. It was against this backdrop of awareness of barriers to disclosure that we examined the experiences of the girls.

Through their stories, we were able to identify the following factors, which enabled the girls to disclose their secrets:

- >> A crisis – the possibility of being pregnant;
- >> A safe environment;
- >> The restoration of trust in an adult.

The educators, who shared their stories with us, described how they always tried to build a welcoming, safe, nurturing environment for the girls by setting clearly defined consistent boundaries. They made an effort to get to know the girls (knowing their names, likes and dislikes, sports and hobbies etc.). They treated them respectfully, always listened to them attentively and affirmed their achievements while also challenging them to reach their full potential.

What educators can do once the girls have disclosed

Herman (1992:133) reminds us that recovery from trauma is based on empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. It is obvious that each situation required different responses. However, these are the educators main responses:

- >> The educators *believed* the disclosure and responded immediately. Ewing (2004:6) states that of the many cases which are reported to the Department of Social Welfare and Population Development, few are followed up and there are many cases which have been waiting for more than two years. Ewing warns that encouraging disclosure to which there is then no prompt response is "putting children's lives further at risk".
- >> The educators were always *very respectful*, showing the girl that she deserves to be respected no matter what she has experienced. They demonstrated unconditional acceptance of the girl.
- >> The educator *listened* attentively, asking carefully constructed questions, and then followed through with *action*. The educators realised that it was *dangerous to make assumptions*, and therefore checked out their assumptions with the girl.
- >> It is important for the educator to present a sharp contrast to the girl's panic, and *remain calm and controlled, warm, reassuring* and when necessary *send for professional help*.
- >> The educators reiterated to the girl that she was *NOT to blame* for the abuse. No matter what the abuser said, she did not want it, she did not ask for it, she did not deserve it – they helped the girls to see the abuse was beyond their control and that they needed assistance.
- >> Educators tried to *extend hope and confidence* rather than make promises which may not be possible.



Unless education at all levels acknowledges violence in the lives of women and children, along with its impact on learning, many students will not only fail to learn but may also experience the educational setting as a silencing place, or another site of violence, where they are controlled and diminished by institutional structures or classroom interactions, and shamed by their failure to learn.



Footnotes

1. Elaine Bishop works for the CIE in Cape Town as a consultant to educators.
2. Dr Gloria Marsay is an educational psychologist working as a consultant to schools assisting them with incidents of violence and trauma. She works both with SAITS (South African Institute for Traumatic Stress) and CIE (Catholic Institute of Education) in this capacity.

- >> They encouraged the girl to *tell other important people in her life*, for example, a mother or a guardian.
- >> They encouraged and supported the girl to *report* the abuse to the police. However, it is also important to note that educators should *respect the girl's decision if she refuses to report*. This is also emphasised by the Western Cape Education Department (2001:19). This document states clearly that the staff members should *first report to the principal* and then, *with the consent of the abused person*, if she is over fourteen, involve other relevant agencies such as the South African Police Services, Department of Welfare, the Child Protection Unit and the Child Protection Centre (Western Cape Education Department 2001:26).
- >> Educators *acknowledged their limitations*, accepting that they are not psychotherapists. The educators have a list of resource people, therapists and counsellors, to whom they were able to *refer the girls*.
- >> The educators tried to encourage the girls to *develop a sense of achievement* and ensured that the girls did not fall back on the abuse as an excuse.
- >> The educators realised that each girl needed to do things for herself and *make her own decisions*. They encouraged the girls to set goals that were realistic and fairly easily attainable.
- >> Educators encouraged girls to get involved with *activities they enjoy*, for example, playing a musical instrument or participating in a chosen sport.
- >> Educators encouraged the girls to *express feelings, explore personal rights and values*.
- >> The educators spoke openly about life issues and felt that it was necessary to help the girls *deconstruct negative dominant cultural and societal discourses*, especially around the issues of gender, values systems, stereotyping and various cultural myths.



- >> Educators also provided an environment which encouraged and assisted the development of healthy social skills, through small informal *support groups*, made up of trusted peers and other trusted educators.

A final word

When people suffer, they need to be acknowledged and respected. Compassion and caring is often considered inappropriate in view of the disciplinary role which educators have had to play. Sometimes, in the past, educators have tended to avoid being compassionate and caring. However, educators are able to provide a safe place in which healing can take place by embracing the humanity and dignity of each learner. Lastly, educators should be careful not to tell other people's stories, but rather to provide a platform from which the learners may tell their own stories in ways that will be healing for both the teller and the listener. ■

References

- Ewing D 2004. After the assault, the wait, and the despair. *ChildrenFIRST*, 8:21-26.
- Herman J 1992. *Trauma and Recovery*. London: Pandora.
- Horsman J 1999. *Too scared to learn. Women, violence and education*. Toronto: McGilligan Books.
- Human Rights Watch 2001. *Scared at School: Sexual violence against girls in South African Schools*. New York: Human Rights Watch.
- Human Sciences Research Council (2001). *A Study of School Responses to Violence Against Girls*. HSRC/UNICEF: Pretoria.
- O'Dea JW 1994. Pursuing Truth in Narrative Research. *Journal of the Philosophy of Education*. 28 (2) 165-167.
- Phillips DC 1994. Telling it Straight: Issues in assessing narrative research. *Educational Psychologist*, 29(1)13-21.
- Western Cape Education Department. 2001. *Abuse no more. Dealing Effectively with Child Abuse*. Cape Town: WCED.
- White M 1995. *Re-Authoring Lives: Interviews and Essays*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.