

# **The Impact of Transactional Sex with Teachers on Public School Students in Monrovia, Liberia – a Brief Report**

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# **The Impact of Transactional Sex with Teachers on Public School Students in Monrovia, Liberia – a Brief Report**

Access to education has been shown to strongly influence adolescent health across the world, and strong relationships with teachers lead to better academic and psychosocial outcomes for students. In many low-income countries where adolescents have less access to education and are more likely to experience poor health outcomes, risky sexual behaviors can exacerbate these challenges by increasing the risk for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. This study sought to examine risky behaviors, such as substance use and risky sexual behaviors, of in-school youth in Liberia, a post-conflict country in West Africa. Nine focus groups were conducted with public school students in Monrovia, Liberia in April 2012. The sessions took place in three public schools with N=72 participants aged 12-20 years old. Liberian medical students from the University of Liberia and a psychiatry resident from Harvard Medical School led the focus groups using a semi-structured guide. Following thematic content analysis, a pattern emerged of transactional sex between girls and male teachers, which often led to contrived and coercive relationships for the students. Conversely, participants reported that educators were not disciplined for having sex with students. Interventions to reduce the prevalence of transactional sex within the academic environment would likely protect the wellbeing of school-going youth, particularly female youth, and support students' academic pursuits in Liberia.

Key words: transactional sex; sexual behavior; adolescents; Liberia

## **Introduction**

Liberia is a post-conflict country in West Africa that weathered two civil wars between 1989 and 2003. The conflicts decimated the country's health and education systems, and had an enormous social and economic impact on its people (Lee et al., 2011; Levey et al., 2013). In 2012, much of Liberia's population remained in severe poverty, which disproportionately affected women due to

unequal employment opportunities, unequal pay, and sexual harassment (World Bank, 2012). The 2014 Ebola outbreak further highlighted and exacerbated these challenges (Chan, 2014).

Research with adolescents has shown that access to education is a key social determinant of health worldwide, and that positive relationships with teachers improve adolescents' academic and psychosocial outcomes and reduce their engagement in risky behaviors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Viner et al., 2012). Adolescent girls' risky sexual behaviors in low and middle income countries (LMICs) are particularly significant because wider gender disparities in many of these countries increase girls' risk for poor sexual health outcomes (Santhya & Jejeebhoy, 2014). One concerning risky sexual behavior for adolescent girls in LMICs is transactional sex. Research in Sub-Saharan Africa has documented transactional sexual relationships beyond the Western notion of "prostitution," which include sexual acts between adolescent girls and older men in exchange for money, gifts and/or services which may not be directly tied to specific sexual acts (Atwood et al., 2011; Atwood et al., 2012; Dominguez et al., 2013; Jones & Norton, 2007; Luke, 2003).

Though studies in Liberia and other Sub-Saharan African countries have documented negative effects of transactional sex between adolescent girls and older men, including girls' diminished negotiation power regarding condom use, increasing risk for unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Atwood et al., 2011; Hunter, 2002; Wamoyi, Wight, Plummer, Mshana, & Ross, 2010), only one study to date has examined transactional sex between teachers and students and the resulting impact on girls' health and academic achievement (Postmus et al., 2015).

This study's primary purpose was to explore Liberian students' thoughts and beliefs about substance use and sexual behaviors, however, transactional sex with teachers emerged upon

analysis. Though these data constituted a small portion of the data set, we believe the findings can help elucidate youth attitudes about transactional sex in Liberia, and raise awareness about this practice to encourage school reform in Liberia to protect students.

## **Methods**

### ***Study Design and Sample***

This study consisted of nine focus groups, conducted with public school students in Monrovia, Liberia in April 2012. Focus group questions were generated based on a literature search of similar studies, then adapted by a Liberian psychiatrist for cultural relevancy and appropriateness. Three focus groups of seven to nine students each were conducted at each of three schools with an all-female, an all-male, and a mixed-gender focus group. Participants were recruited and enrolled in the study through announcements made by staff at participating schools using purposive sampling. For more details on the methods and data analysis, refer to Pullen et al., 2016 (Pullen et al., 2016).

### ***Data Collection Procedures***

Data was collected during 90-minute focus groups which consisted of open-ended questions and discussion topics, and which were conducted in private rooms at students' schools. A psychiatry resident from Harvard Medical School and Liberian medical students from A.M. Dogliotti College of Medicine conducted the interviews in English, all of which were digitally audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The University of Liberia Institutional Review Board and the Partners Human Research Committee granted ethical approval for this study. All study participants aged 18 and up provided written informed consent. All participants under 18 years old gave written assent and received written informed consent from a parent or legal guardian. Participants were explicitly given the

right to refuse participation or to stop at any time. Subjects were compensated with a phone card worth \$5 USD. A local psychiatrist was available in the event of a psychiatric or medical emergency.

### ***Data Analysis***

Following transcription, five coders, who were trained in thematic content analysis (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2010), independently read the first three focus groups and identified topics in the narrative, which they used to draft individual codebooks. Coders then discussed codes and developed a draft codebook using NVivo software (QSR International, 2012). Categories were clustered together, from broad topics such as “sexual behavior,” to increasingly specific sub-categories, including “transactional sex in schools,” and “consequences for girls involved in transactional sex in schools.”

## **Results**

### ***Demographics***

Of the 72 focus group participants, 37 (51.4%) were male. Participants ranged in grade from 4<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup>, and in age from 12 to 20 years (mean age: 16.67 years [SD: 2.50]). See Table 1 for more details.

### ***Qualitative Data***

Students described male teachers as soliciting sex from female students in exchange for better grades. Participants reported that female students often obliged teachers’ advances in order to pass to the next grade or prevent teachers from retaliating by giving poor grades. Students described sexual relationships initiated by their teachers and other school officials as leading to negative

consequences for the girls involved, including pregnancy and inconsistent and coercive relationships with school figures, and detrimental effects on other students.

Students described girls who had become pregnant with teachers, which led to dropping out of school and difficulty determining paternity. [*“There was a girl in my class who was going out with a teacher... Eventually she got pregnant and dropped out after the second period test.”*]; *I know a girl in my school. She very beautiful and all of the teachers wanted her. Now she’s pregnant, but doesn’t know which teacher got her pregnant.”*

In several instances, participants shared that if a girl refused the teacher’s advances, he would retaliate by convincing other teachers to give her a failing grade, ignoring her in class when she raised her hand, or punishing her for behavior he would normally disregard. [*“Sometimes when a teacher asks you out and you refuse, they tell their friends you were rude to them and they all start giving you a failing grade.”*]; *“A teacher asked me out and I told him I was twelve years old. He said I was lying, and that I just didn’t want to date him. He teaches in my class but he doesn’t speak to me like before. I’m usually the top of my class, but he no longer asks me to answer question or read like he used to.”*]

In addition, the participants reported that when a teacher and student were sexually involved, the behavior impacted the classroom culture. Both male and female participants shared that teachers would treat girls they were in relationships with more favorably than other students or ignore other students’ complaints if the girl was disruptive in class. [*“I am the president in my class, and there’s a girl who’s always disturbing in class. She ignores it when we ask her to stop disturbing because she’s going out with the head teacher. She’d sometimes tell you to go and report her, and when you do, nothing comes out of it.”*]

Transactional sexual relationships also created a corrupt and unsafe school environment. Teachers were described as a close group who protected each other from consequences of these relationships because they all engaged in them. [*“All the instructors in the school have a close relationship, and they remind us daily that they can tell their friends to fail you ... they have the power to make you fail. This makes us afraid to talk.”*] Students did not feel they could report these relationships to school officials; students said school administrators and principals knew about sex between teachers and students, and were in relationships with students themselves.

## **Discussion**

These data describe negative consequences that transactional sex between teachers and students causes for public school students in Liberia, and highlight the need to intervene to protect students' well-being and academic achievement. Transactional sex, which was described in all focus groups, appears to be a normative and often encouraged method for girls to obtain resources in this setting. During data collection, these findings were reported to a local psychiatrist, as per the IRB protocol.

Qualitative data describing transactional sex between students and teachers was an important secondary finding of this study. This was not the primary topic of study, thus limiting the extent to which this particular data was probed, and only provided a student perspective about others engaging in these acts. The scarcity of data on this topic, however, makes this an important public health issue to report. Further research is needed to better understand the social and cultural determinants of this problem.

## **Conclusion**



Our preliminary research has established a pattern of transactional sex between teachers and pupils in Monrovia, which can be harmful to students directly involved and to other students. The findings warrant additional research with school officials, parents and guardians, and government agencies, and a larger investigation into teacher-student transactional sex in Liberia. Ultimately, interventions need to be developed to stem this practice and make school a safe place for all students to pursue their academic goals.

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### Figures and Tables

Table 1. Demographics of Public School Student Participants in Focus Groups in Monrovia, Liberia (focus group N=9)

<b>School</b>	<b>Number of Focus Groups n</b>	<b>Total Students n</b>	<b>Female n (%)</b>	<b>Male n (%)</b>	<b>Mean Age (SD)</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Grade Range</b>
Public School 1	3	24	12 (50%)	12 (50%)	14.00 (1.89)	12-18	4 <sup>th</sup> -6 <sup>th</sup>
Public School 2	3	24	11 (46%)	13 (54%)	17.38 (1.69)	13-20	7 <sup>th</sup> - 8 <sup>th</sup>
Public School 3	3	24	12 (50%)	12 (50%)	18.63 (0.92)	17-20	10 <sup>th</sup> -11 <sup>th</sup>