

Through Students' Lens:  
Is Short Messaging Service (SMS) technology a suitable tool for reporting sex for grades?

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Submitted to the Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Communications and Technology

March 20, 2018

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks to the Almighty God who knows the end before the beginning for pushing me towards that first step in fulfillment of this dream.

Thanks to all my family and friends who supported me along my journey.  
My two little angels- Lakeisha and Milan Joy, this is for you.

Thanks to Dr. Gow, Susan and Eileen and the MACT faculty for their outstanding guidance, patience and dedication in making this programme a life changing experience.

Thanks to my amazing cohort who have been my encouragement and motivation every step of the way. Trish, Michelle and Ken, I cannot appreciate you enough.

Thanks to Mariah Fahnbulleh, Lawrence Yealue and the Accountability Lab team for making this research study possible.

Thanks to all the participants of my research for sharing your heartfelt experiences in this study.

Philippians 4:13  
I Can Do All Things Through Christ Who Strengthens Me

### **Abstract**

The power dynamic between teachers and students is one which can be easily exploited financially or sexually without adequate prevention and control measures. Reporting of complaints has been identified by the research literature as a key factor in addressing sexual exploitation or sex for grades (s4g) in schools. This research is a qualitative study using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) with one-on-one semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of four purposefully selected former high school students on their use of a confidential mobile technology SMS reporting hotline piloted in their high school in Liberia. Using free imaginative variation, I interpreted transcribed data from the conversations using three broad themes (Focused life history, details of experience, and reflection on meaning) with the aim of providing insight into how students' experiences with the problem and the tool shaped their perception of a suitable reporting channel which is appropriate and reliable for students. Results of the study found that while participants found the SMS hotline appropriate, they recommended a mixed method approach which comprises of technology and traditional channels such as suggestion boxes to provide students freedom to choose their convenient option. Findings also revealed their desired criteria for a suitable reporting tool. The findings of this research cannot be generalized, but can provide administrators and policy makers understanding of students' reporting tool preferences which provides a basis for designing an adequate reporting system for students to actively report and reduce instances of exploitation in schools.

*Keywords:* SMS, mobile technology, sex for grades, sexual exploitation, reporting, school, Liberia, Interpretative Phenomenological Approach, free Imaginative variation

## Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION .....	6
Background .....	6
Terminology .....	8
Research Question.....	9
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	9
Review Methods.....	10
The Prevalence of Sex for Grades .....	12
The Global Context. ....	14
The Liberian Context.....	16
Code of conduct for teachers. ....	20
Reporting of sexual exploitation.....	21
Broad context of mobile technology in social advocacy.....	23
Summary of key findings and gap from the literature. ....	29
Conclusion.....	31
CHAPTER 3: THE METHODS .....	32
Research Design.....	32
Sampling Strategy and Study Participants .....	34
Instrument.....	38
Setting.....	39
Data Analysis .....	40
Transcribing interviews. ....	41
Bracketing my presuppositions. ....	41
Acquiring a general sense of the data. ....	42
Developing a list of significant statements.....	43
Grouping significant statements into themes.....	43
Integrating meaningful sections and themes with similar focus or content. ....	43
Interpretation of meaning using free imaginative variation. ....	43
Critical review and analysis of interpretations. ....	44

Research Reliability and Validity .....	45
Ethical considerations .....	46
Challenges and limitations .....	47
Summary and conclusion .....	48
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS .....	49
Participant Profile.....	49
Results .....	50
Focused life history. ....	53
Neglected educational system. ....	54
Sexual and financial exploitation .....	55
Abuse of power.....	56
Emotional turmoil.....	57
Existing reporting structures.....	60
Details of experience. ....	63
Sense of the problem .....	63
Survival Tactics .....	64
Initial reaction, purpose and use .....	65
Reflection on Meaning. ....	69
Mixed Methods.....	69
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION.....	71
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION .....	76
Recommended Direction for Future Research .....	78
REFERENCES .....	81
APPENDICES .....	94
Appendix I .....	94
Appendix II.....	95
Appendix III .....	98
Appendix IV .....	99
Appendix V.....	100

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### Background

Past research has shown that the exchange of sex for grades (s4g) and other kinds of exploitation by teachers continues to be a problem in schools especially in developing countries. More recent research studies suggest that the exchange of money or sex for grades is an increasing problem for students across Liberia. Policies and tools have been introduced by some schools to reduce these acts but the reporting channels provided to students are not trusted because they do not protect students from retaliation or provide redress for their complaints.

In September 2015, a U-report text message poll was sent out to all U-reporters in Liberia asking if s4g is a problem in their schools. U-report SMS is a mobile open source text messaging platform with over 100,000 registered users in Liberia and 1million worldwide. This platform was developed by UNICEF to share and receive information with adolescents and youth pertaining to issues which affect them. Findings from the poll showed that 86 per cent of U-reporters responded yes that s4g was a problem in their schools. This U-report poll provided data which provided insight into the scale of the problem. It also captured my interest and concern that adolescents and youth in Liberia were indeed faced with a grave problem. I decided to look further into what was being done to address this problem.

In my google search, I came across a story about the pilot of an open-source text messaging hotline *Tell- it -True* (TELL) by Accountability Lab in three high schools in 2013 which provided students the voice they needed to report cases of s4g and other issues confidentially to independent sources.

In the wake of the increasing need to address the situation of sexual exploitation or sex

for grades in schools in Liberia, an innovative mobile technology hotline was designed to tackle corruption in schools in 2013. A high school student, Maria Fahnbulleh was provoked by her frustrations with the culture of silence on sex for grades and lack of faith in an untrustworthy traditional reporting system and designed Tell-it-true (TELL) reporting hotline to provide a confidential channel of reporting school-related problems through a text messaging hotline (Mollenhauer, 2015). It allowed users to send free text message reports to the hotline number and an operator called back within 24 hours to gather details on the issue and to provide assistance (Yealue, n.d.). In 2014, with financial support from Transparency International and Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA), it was launched as a pilot in three high schools in Monrovia; D. Tweh High school, William V.S. Tubman High School and G. W. Gibson High School. The hotline was rolled out through the establishment of TELL teams who conducted outreach and awareness with students on the use of the tool. The information coming into the TELL system database was consolidated periodically and used as a feedback loop for deterrence through collaborative discussion and agreed actions by the academic administration, TELL teams, and students. (Banks, 2013).

The dynamic landscape of mobile technology provided the platform for adolescents to raise pertinent issues about their social welfare in real time. This SMS hotline appeared to be the perfect tool to start the advocacy for social change in education to facilitate collaborative discussions about misconduct between the administration, TELL teams, student government and Parent -Teacher Associations in line with the Code of conduct. Unfortunately, the pilot was discontinued because of the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in 2015, when schools were closed indefinitely for several months. The literature does not expand to document how students in the pilot schools perceived this reporting channel and how they used the tool to

address the pertinent issues they faced.

My subsequent in-depth literature review of the topic revealed that previous researchers have probed and documented the prevalence and scale of the problem as regards demographical coverage, its significance, who are affected and why, contributing factors, ways in which it can be addressed, and innovative efforts being made to address the issue. (Morley, 2011; Sweeney, 2013; Corbett & Gentry, 1993; Mirsky, 2003; Kim et al, 2003; Antonowicz, 2010; Delomez, 2015). Studies show that providing students with effective reporting channels to complain confidentially and expose the perpetrators of exploitative acts without them having to face retaliation remained a key factor in addressing the problem. One thing is certain however, while researchers concentrate on the adequacy of the measures instituted to fully address this problem, the gap in existing research shows that very little research has been conducted in understanding students' experience-based views and perceptions about the suitability and adequacy of the reporting channels and tools which have been made available to them. How and why did students use the SMS hotline? What did students think about mobile technology as a reporting tool? What do students perceive as an effective and appropriate reporting tool? The absence of answers to these questions set the basis for my research.

### **Terminology**

The term sex for grades was coined in Liberia to describe the exchange of sex for grades or sexual exploitation in school. For the purpose of this research study, sex for grades will be shortened as *s4g* for ease of reference. This term will be used interchangeably with sexual exploitation in this paper.



### **Research Question**

To address the gap in the existing literature, this research is a qualitative study using an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of four former students purposefully selected from the pilot high schools through the TELL user database. Using semi-structured interviews, the study looks into their narration of their real-life experiences with sexual exploitation or s4g and how they used TELL, a confidential SMS reporting channel piloted to report sex for grades and other issues in their schools.

Through conversations with the former students, this exploratory study probes into their experiences to answer the below over-arching research question:

**RQ1:** *As a result of their experiences, how do high school students who have used the TELL reporting hotline in Liberia perceive SMS mobile technology as a tool for reporting sex for grades?*

In the following chapter, I outline my search process, justification and findings from a detailed review of the existing literature on sexual exploitation in education and the use of mobile technology in reporting and collecting data. The findings from this process will establish the basis for my research study and provide the background information I need to build upon.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In late 2016, I commenced a selective review of the existing literature to understand the extent of foundational research which has been done on s4g or sexual exploitation in schools and gather research data on the scale of this problem. My search of the literature was driven by my desire to uncover information which would tell a story about my research topic based on two

broad categories; the problem and the tools. All of the literature uncovered in my searches were placed in either of these two categories. This chapter outlines my search methodology and the interpretation of the story which I discovered from the existing literature.

This literature review chapter begins with a methods section where I clearly outline my search methodology, how I developed my focus and identified the themes and search keywords for my review of the existing literature. The various themes which were identified in my search are discussed under subsections in the chapter. In the second subsection of the review chapter, I use the lens of existing research to investigate the prevalence of the problem and provide a comprehensive picture of the magnitude and scale of s4g in schools first from a global perspective before narrowing it down to a national perspective, Liberia, the location of primary concern. After discussing the research literature on the problem and narrowing in on proposed solutions and highlighting the importance of reporting as a major key in addressing the problem., the next section delves into the literature on the approaches which have been instituted in an attempt to address the problem, The subsequent section narrows in on the documented literature which shows mobile technology as an appropriate tool, and its successful use and shortfalls for reporting in education, social advocacy and medicine. In the conclusion section, I close with a summary of my findings and identify the gap in the existing literature which forms the basis for this research study.

### **Review Methods**

Oliver (2012) suggests that every research serves as a continuation of ideas or building blocks upon previous researchers' work (p.6). Based upon this fact, I adapted a learning approach to my review of the literature relating to sex for grades. To better understand if mobile technology can be an effective tool to report s4g in Liberian schools, I felt it was important to

understand the scale of the problem globally as well as nationally and gather from foundational research how the issue of s4g is being framed and how it is being addressed in various country contexts. A further review of the existing literature on the use and suitability of mobile technology in advocacy and reporting was deemed necessary to develop my research question and better direct my research focus.

The literature review covered published and unpublished reports, news articles, research papers and blogs relating to s4g or sexual exploitation in schools and the use and applicability of mobile technology and text messaging for reporting and social advocacy. Using key words and phrases such as 'sex for grades', 'sexual exploitation', 'sexual harassment', 'corruption in schools' as broad search criteria, I searched the online library databases of University of Alberta (EBSCO) and Google Scholar for as many articles, research papers, journals and reports related to the topic. Keywords and phrases such as 'reporting in schools', 'confidential reporting', 'mobiles in education' and 'text messaging' supported my further search for literature on past efforts made in addressing the problem. To ensure the credibility of my sources, I used the filter search function to restrict my search to only peer-reviewed journal articles. I also looked up some of the sources cited in some very solid reports and research papers to add to my list of literature for review.

To further narrow my findings, I designed an eligibility matrix in excel based on a quick scan of the abstracts of the papers and sorted the literature according to its relevance to my research topic and publishing dates. Reports and articles which were not directly related to my topic were discarded and related literature published before 1990s, (pre-mobile technology era) were conveniently excluded to only capture more recent research data which corresponds to the context of the mobile technology age. I created annotations for all of the selected literature into

an annotated bibliography in order to assess the strength and weaknesses of each paper in regard to my research. The brief annotations included vital information on the credibility of the authors, the methodology used, the findings of the research as well as its recommendations for future studies. The annotations were very useful in further categorizing the selected literature into a logical flow of ideas on the topic.

Based upon the categorization of the literature uncovered in my search findings, I began to see a story emerge about the prevalence of the problem, its root causes and actions taken to address it. I also saw research to prove that mobile technology could serve as a suitable tool in addressing the issue due to its successful use in other areas. The emerging story is narrated in the succeeding subsections of this chapter.

### **The Prevalence of Sex for Grades**

The volume of the existing literature revealed in the search relating to s4g in schools suggests that it is a widely deliberated problem. With sources ranging from renowned international organizations (UNDP, Global Corruption, Panos Institute, Save the Children, Action Aid, UNICEF and USAID) to independent individual researchers it is apparent that grasping the root cause and practical solutions to this problem appears to be of grave concern to researchers. Most of the deliberation in the research surrounding s4g seeks to establish its causes and extent to which this problem exists in order to propose solutions for addressing it. Some of the research literature on the topic also seek to assess the effectiveness of already implemented systems in addressing the problem.

A further systematic review of the literature establishes that s4g or sexual exploitation in schools is a widespread social problem which has a detrimental effect on society. Sweeney (2013) defines sexual exploitation in the classroom as an abuse of power for private gain, and

therefore considers it as an act of corruption (p. xx). Even though the exchange of sex for grades is categorized as a misconduct and a form of corruption in schools, documenting and addressing this issue has been a challenge due to the reluctance of students to report (Sweeney, 2013). Researchers attribute this reluctance to deeply entrenched beliefs in the minds of students that traditional channels of reporting are ineffective - reinforced by a culture of silence and impunity (Mirsky, 2003; Dahn, 2008).

In the 2013 *Global Corruption report on Education*, Hubert Labelle, the chair of Transparency International<sup>1</sup> further established that “corruption in education acts as a dangerous barrier to high-quality education and social and economic development” (Sweeney, 2013, p.xiii). In a thorough examination of worldwide studies, Mirsky (2003) reports that sexual violence in the education sector is still a problem which is unaddressed but yet still far from people’s minds (p.1). The author further stressed that “[w]hen sexual aggression is ignored, it becomes normalized and part of the institutional culture” (Mirsky, 2003, p.24). This highlights the urgency and need for additional research focus into addressing this problem.

Antonowicz (2010) defines sexual exploitation as “any abuse of vulnerability, position of authority or trust, for sexual ends, with remuneration in cash or kind to the child or a third person, or social and political gain resulting from the abuse” (p. 24). Sex for grades is a more specific form of sexual exploitation and is defined for this study as the act of requesting or demanding sex from a student in exchange for grades or some type of preferential treatment (Sweeney, 2013, p. 89).

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<sup>1</sup> Transparency International is an international organization which works with governments to fight against abuse of power and corrupt practices in more than 100 countries.  
To learn more visit <https://www.transparency.org/about>

Sexual exploitation can be defined in its applicability to the many facets of life however, for the purpose of this research it is looked at in the context of education and specifically the context of the exchange of sex for grades. The research literature however, explores the problem from various angles, using the term interchangeably with other terms such as sexual violence, sexual harassment, corruption in schools, school gender based violence, school misconduct, transactional sex, bullying or sexual abuse. For the purpose of this research, sexual exploitation and s4g will be used interchangeably.

### **The Global Context.**

Although most of the research literature establishes sex for grades as a worldwide problem (Kim et al, 2003, p.6; Morley, 2011, p. 101; Mirsky, 2003; Antonowicz, 2010; and Sweeney, 2013 ), the actual picture of the global scale of sexual exploitation in schools is unclear due to several reasons; under reporting caused by a culture of silence, lack of statistical data using proven research methodologies, sensitive nature of the problem, and an unclear definition of what constitutes sexual exploitation in relations to school misconduct (Sweeney, 2013, p.88; Corbett and Gentry, 1993, p. 9). Nevertheless, some research studies in various countries provide an idea of the scale of the problem in the national and regional contexts.

In the United States, a study of 185 sociology students sampled non-randomly in two Universities revealed that 29 per cent of the respondents could recall some instance of sexually inappropriate relationships between teachers and students while they were in high school (Corbett et al, 1993). Lee et al (1996) conducted a study which determined that the rates of sexual harassment perpetrated by teachers in the United States were 20 per cent for girls and 8 per cent for boys (Timmerman, 1996). A United Kingdom report (NUS, 2010) cited by Morley (2011) reported one in four female students experienced verbal or physical sexual harassment

while 68 per cent have been subjected to unwanted sexual touching in the UK (p. 101). Another research study conducted in Netherlands (Timmerman, 2003) revealed that 18 per cent reported unwanted sexual behaviors from peers in school while 27 per cent reported sexual advances from teachers.

This challenge is even more evident in developing countries. In a literature review of school violence in developing countries, Kim et al (2003) cited reports of sexual abuse in various countries; In Tanzania six percent of all girls in a study of 1,219 schoolgirls reported sexual harassment by teachers as a common problem (p. 11); In Cameroon, a study by Menick (2001) revealed that 16 percent of the 1,688 surveyed students reported sexual abuse and eight percent of the abuses came from teachers (p.7); and in Ecuador, 22 percent of the adolescent girls in a school setting identified as victims of sexual abuse in a 2002 World Bank report (p. 6). The authors further clarified that in many of these cases “[t]he promise of good grades or the threat of failure was used by some male teachers to achieve sexual relations with students” (Kim et al, 2003, p.6). The author of a study conducted in Botswana revealed that that 67 percent of the girls out of 560 students reported sexual harassment by teachers in Botswana. The study further disclosed that 68 percent of sexual harassment happens in junior high schools, 18 percent in senior high schools, and 14 percent in primary schools in Botswana (Rosetti, 2001; Kim 2003).

Research in West and Central Africa also proves that the problem of sexual exploitation in schools is a much bigger societal problem beyond national boundaries and not only confined to schools. Antonowicz (2010) reports in a desk review that “[e]vidence suggests that sexual abuse and sexual exploitation are common forms of sexual violence in educational institutions across the region” (p. 22). While 46 per cent of girls in the Democratic Republic of Congo reported sexual harassment by teachers, another 47.7 percent in Niger reported having observed

teachers harass fellow students for sex. In Cameroon, Central African Republic, Senegal and Ghana, students in a survey identified teachers as primary perpetrators of sexual abuse against students (Antonowicz, 2010, p.23). Antonowicz reported that in some of these cases, even those in higher authority were involved and aware of the situation thereby further reducing the possibility of whistleblowing (p. 25). Continuation of this practice of sexual exploitation in schools with impunity forces students into silence, and this non-reporting distorts the sense of the scale of the problem and the monitoring of the effectiveness of the policies (Morley, 2011, p.112)

This challenge appears to also have a gender dimension. The literature suggests that more girls are victimized by sexual exploitation in schools than boys, however a few authors are quick to admit that there is limited research documenting male victimization. (Sweeney, 2013, p.89; Antonowicz, 2010, p. 26; Timmerman, 2003, p. 232; Mirsky, 2003, p. 1; Morley, 2011). Researchers however maintain that sexual violence in schools is indeed a more serious problem for girls because it impedes their ability to pursue educational attainment in the face of gender inequality and also contributes to the drop-out rates of girls from school (Rakiya & De, 1994; Rosetti, 2001). Le Roux (2010) confirms this argument and suggests that even though sexual violence can be exacerbated through conflict, it has its foundation and is normalized through the dominant cultural gender constructs of society (p. 34).

### **The Liberian Context**

Several studies have been conducted to document the prevalence of sexual exploitation in Liberia. The literature highlights a culture of transactional sex which persists in Liberia after a two-decade long civil war during which time women were forced to exchange sex for protection, food, and shelter. (Atwood et al, 2012). The social behavior of transactional sex was documented



in a 2006 study by Save the Children as a practice which had become quite common among young Liberian Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) after the war. According to the study, young girls between eight to eighteen years were engaged in transactional sex with older men who had power and money in exchange for money, food, school support and other provisions. This practice continued well after the war as a kind of barter system for poor families who had no source of income or livelihood but had young daughters who could fend for the family with such connections. Transactional sexual relationships are also a form of sexual exploitation as per the prescribed definition. As a result of this practice, sexual exploitation and abuse in Liberia is perpetuated through trusted relationships with school administrators, community members, family friends, and teachers or sometimes even parents or guardians who pressure their children into sexually exploitative relationships in order to provide a safety income nest for the family. (Delomez, 2015, p.41)

With 54 per cent of the population living below the poverty line in Liberia<sup>2</sup>, research shows that poverty is one of the most cited reasons for sexual exploitation in that country. This challenge is reinforced by a patriarchal society (Dahn, 2008; Atwood et al, 2012; Postmus & Davis, 2014; Delomez, 2015). Dahn (2008) suggests that epistemological inequality is one of the root causes of sexual violence and exploitation against women. She borrows the definition of epistemological inequality from Jane Roland Martin (1985), a philosopher of education who defines it as “the distortion, devaluation and denial or deliberate neglect by patriarchal cultures that invalidate women’s education on the grounds of women’s subservience in knowledge to men while claiming equality for all” (p. 46). She further argues that this inequality has given

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<sup>2</sup> Liberia Household Income and Expenditure Survey-2014-2105

birth to discrimination against women which has existed even long before the civil crisis as far back as 1970's when most parents prioritized boys' education above girls'.

Since 2014, there has been increased interest by researchers into the issue of sexual exploitation in education in Liberia. A mixed method research study conducted by Postmus et al (2014), documented responses from a survey of 1858 students, 120 group discussions and 11 expert interviews in four counties in Liberia. Their findings show that almost one in five students had experienced abuse or harassment by teachers with 18 per cent of girls and 13 per cent of boys reporting they had been asked for sex by a teacher in exchange for grades (p. 5). In a more recent study conducted in 2015, researchers used a participatory action methodology which is an innovative method of using youths (supervised by adults) to conduct a research about themselves using a conversational listening and learning approach. From a purposeful sample of 332 females and 335 males (10-35yrs), in six counties in Liberia the research revealed that 69 per cent of females confirmed in conversations that sex for grades is a violence they have experienced (Delomez, 2015).

Other researchers explored the issue from another angle and demonstrated that sex for grades has also been used by some female students as a social navigational tactic in Liberia. The findings reflect how the normalization of corrupt educational systems steer female students into sexual exploitation and how these students learn, adapt and wield it to their advantage for academic achievement. (Sjögren & Dorph, 2014). Another researcher tends to disagree with this concept however, because it draws a dark cloud over women's achievements, after so many years of struggling for a seat at the table. Society tends to assume when women fail, it is attributed to a lack of competence or academic preparedness, but when women succeed, their achievement is attributed to favoritism based on sexual exchange (Morley, 2011). To challenge

this assumption, Morley (2011) examined the achievement of female students in Ghana and Tanzania in the form of equity scorecards and compared them to their male counterparts. The research established that “women’s achievement was broadly on a par with those of men, if not better” (p.105). This finding challenges the patriarchal argument which attributes female academic success to an exchange-based favoritism and failure to lack of academic preparedness (p.113).

Notwithstanding, the war also contributed to the breakdown of an already weak educational system which currently operates with barely enough qualified teachers to meet up with the demands of the profession (Yealue, 2014). Due to this shortage of qualified teachers, many school officials are left with no choice but to turn a blind eye to the sexual exploitation and abuse exercised in their schools. The low salary and remunerations paid to teachers, are used to further justify the perpetuation of corrupt practices in the educational sector which extends beyond exchange of sex to exchange of money and other favors. Based upon the prolonged practices of corruption in all spheres of society, students and even some parents believe that sexual harassment and transactional sex in schools is the norm and therefore do nothing to report it. This mindset further reinforces the ‘culture of silence’ and discourages discursive strategies which could expedite social change.

### ***Efforts to address sex for grades or sexual exploitation in Liberia.***

The 2006-2017 government, led by Madame Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the first African female President, attempted to institute accountability and educational reform from a gender-sensitive standpoint. The Liberian government also set gender equality high on its agenda and plans to eliminate the marginalization of women and girls in Liberia by 2020 as well as provide free and compulsory primary school for all children and support girls’ access and retention in

schools (Postmus et al, 2015, p. 3). Furthermore, the Ministry of Education rolled out a Code of Conduct for Liberian teachers and school administrators and plan to implement a curriculum around gender-based violence but the literature shows that none of these efforts have been effective up to present in achieving the desired impact.

*Code of conduct for teachers.*

A baseline survey report by Marsh (2007) stressed “the high prevalence of SEA (Sexual Exploitation and Abuse) in Liberian schools and communities may be creating a situation where neither female or male students or teachers can distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behavior” (p.10). The researchers advanced the suggestion that the harmful cycle of sexual exploitation can be broken by addressing the asymmetrical power relations between teachers and students (Marsh, 2007, p.10).

In March 2016, a revised *National Teachers Code of Conduct* was launched by the Ministry of Education. The Code of conduct is supposed to serve as a guide for acceptable behavior expected of all teachers, school administrators and staff. It provides the rules and policies to guide school authorities in carrying out their professional duties and responsibilities in and out of the school and classroom, among other things. Research shows that many school authorities, students and parents are not familiar with the contents of the Code of conduct and more awareness needs to be conducted to have it fully institutionalized (Postmus & Davis, 2014, p. 65).

A study conducted by Rosetti (2001) in Botswana revealed that even though 83 percent of teachers consider student– teacher sexual relations as a problem it did not translate into the code of conduct for teachers, as a result, students accept sexual harassment as a part of their school life and remain silent. Antonowicz & Wood (2011) argue that there is no evidence

whether the codes of conduct may be curbing sexual harassment and abuse by education personnel (p. 26). In another 2014 study, the authors confirm that “the code of conduct is a good tool, but it is useless if students are not trained to recognize and report all kinds of violence at school” (Delomez, 2015, p. 65).

*Reporting of sexual exploitation.*

Several studies have shown that sexual exploitation in schools persists because students are distrustful of traditional methods of reporting and fear reprisals from teachers and administration in the event of whistleblowing (Rosetti, 2001; Corbett & Gentry, 1993, p. 94; Mirsky, 2003). Research shows that only a third of the students who experienced sexual exploitation in schools report it due to the culture of silence and impunity which perpetrators continue to enjoy. (Postmus & Davis, 2014, p. 11).

From an anonymous survey with 2,166 students, Postmus et al (2015) revealed in their research findings that only 38% of the victims of sexual exploitation in the sample population disclosed their experience to someone afterwards. A higher percentage of the victims (over 50 per cent) disclosed their experience to a friend, parent or family member while fewer persons chose formal sources of disclosure such as the police, school administration or a medical person. Students in this survey who did not disclose their experience afterwards alluded to the fear that no one would believe them, fear of getting kicked out of school, fear of what could happen to them, their family or the perpetrator as well as personal humiliation as a result of the experience (p.82).

Another research study, quite unrelated to education, further validates the argument that several mixed mechanisms could be required to increase reporting of misconduct within an institution to reduce unethical behavior. Rajakaruna, Henry & Scott (2015) conducted an online

survey with 166 police employees to assess the likelihood of employees using a confidential telephone hotline, *Blueline* to report unethical police-related issues. This telephone hotline provided the option of anonymity and report follow-up through a special code like what students in this research study used. The researchers maintain that internal reporting is a useful strategy to be used as a deterrence for unethical behavior (p.431).

Previous research cited by Rajakaruna et al (2015) explains that reporting can be inhibited because of the belief that no action will be taken, insufficient evidence, fear of repercussion, lack of trust in system, stressful reporting procedures and perception of seriousness of the issue (Wortley et al, 2008). To allay these fears, Rajakaruna et al (2015) recommend providing multiple reporting options, including a confidential internal telephone line. The research findings highlighted the need for agencies to continuously promote the use of internal, confidential reporting lines as a useful avenue for the detection of unethical behaviour (p.440)

The literature clearly directs the argument that sexual exploitation in schools has to be vigorously and consistently attacked with a variety of mixed approaches for awareness, reporting and penalty in order to minimize or completely halt its occurrence in schools (Rajakaruna et al, 2015). Just as providing a code of conduct without adequately training school authorities and students on how to implement it is useless in addressing the problem, researchers argue that a one-time intervention is not impactful enough for a significant change in sexual behaviors. (Atwood et al, 2012). Research findings from a study done at a school in Australia proves this argument with the confirmation that students in schools which had given continuous and careful attention to the issue of sexual exploitation showed significantly lower cases of sexual harassment reports. (Mirsky, 2003, p.36).

The predominant advocacy in the literature appears to be quite simple. That is, for school administrations to implement actions in collaboration with students to activate the Code of conduct, institute tools which can provide trusted and anonymous reporting systems and activate a system of recognition for exemplary behavior to restore integrity to the educational system (Yealue, 2014). Antonowicz (2010) recommends state parties to enforce school policies through “providing or improving accessible and effective reporting and referral mechanisms for children and families wishing to make a complaint” (p. 51). Marsh (2007) even goes a step further to advocate for the establishment of “a girl-friendly confidential reporting system, wherein the views of girls are integrated into the design and implementation of reporting mechanisms to respond to SEA.” (p.11).

By providing a secure and confidential means of reporting and making it obligatory to report, school administrations could very well make a positive impact on incidence of reporting and deter perpetrators thereby making a positive contribution to the efforts in addressing this issue (Kim et al, 2003, p38). Nevertheless, it appears that school administrations continue to be complicit in maintaining silence about this problem and protecting the perpetrators by failing to adequately implement or enforce the recommended systems thereby rendering themselves as untrustworthy in the eyes of students. Consequently, the absence of effective reporting channels in schools to the legal and law enforcement domains or independent parties which may be considered more trustworthy has discouraged many students from seeking redress for sexual exploitation (Rosetti, 2001).

### **Broad context of mobile technology in social advocacy**

#### **Use of mobile technology for youth engagement.**

The research literature on mobile usage presents the argument that adolescents love using mobile phones not only because of its multiple uses but also because it provides independence and a safe haven from parental prying and supervision. (Nurullah, 2009; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Percell, 2010). Researchers also explored and tried to establish the parallels between text messaging, academic performance, sociability and sexual behaviors. Although findings revealed a strong association between texting and academic performance, there were no clear determinants that text message frequency is a predictor of academic performance or sexual behavior or vis-versa (Perry et al, 2014).

The mobile phone revolution has drastically changed the dynamics of social contact, daily interactions and relationships. The adoption and personalization of this gadget has provided individuals with the liberty of social interaction and discovery thereby presenting the potential of the mobile phone to serve not only as a device for maintaining social contact but a tool which has the propensity to affect social change with youth advocacy (Nurullah, 2009; Thackeray & Hunter, 2010, p. 579). The multi-media functionality of the mobile phone makes it an engaging attraction for teens and adolescents. In the US, a Pew research conducted in 2010 reported that teens and adolescents are the most avid users of mobile phones. The research revealed that the average teen in the US makes and receives approximately five calls a day and everyone in three teens sends more than 100 text messages a day or 3000 texts a month (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Percell, 2010).

In post-conflict Liberia, a research study conducted by Best et al (2009) reported findings on the uses and gratification needs of mobile phone users from a random sample of 63 urban and 36 rural participants showing that both groups of participants placed a high significance on the use of the mobile phone for personal security and emergency (p. 476)



### **Use of Mobile technology in education.**

Mobile technology has contributed several advantages to education by enhancing coordination, access and management in the classroom. Most teachers in developed countries now use mobile phone applications for staying in touch with parents and providing regular updates on students' performance, sending reminders about homework and projects and even keeping students organized with daily school activities. (Economides & Grousopoulou, 2010; Richardson & Lenarcic, 2008).

Mobile phones have been studied in educational settings looking at its use by gender (Economides & Grousopoulou, 2010; Nurullah, 2009; Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Percell, 2010) and its reported impact on academic performance (Faure & Orthober, 2011, p.65-66; Pietrzyk, Semich, Graham, & Cellante, 2011, p. 641; Castleman, 2015; Richardson & Lenarcic, 2008; Santo et al, 2016). Results of these studies seem to indicate that girls use the mobile phone primarily as a source of information and social contact but boys use it more as a gadget to explore its technical aspects. Researchers conclude that many users consider the mobile phone as an extension of themselves, therefore, the technology holds a promise of effective content delivery anytime and anywhere for educational institutions. Accordingly, some recommend that educators should leverage mobile technology and open source concept to improve delivery of education through mobile learning.

Another quantitative research was conducted through telephone interviews and nine focus group interviews with a nationally representative sample of 800 teens age 12-to-17 years-old and their parent or guardian (independently). The study looked critically at text messaging and voice calling in relations to the broader context of teens' overall communications practice. It concluded

that 72% of teens are avid texters who send up to 50 texts a day. (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell & Percell, 2010).

Pertinent to this project, some studies have examined the role of mobile phones in addressing bullying in schools. Mobile technology has proven quite effective as a practical tool in tackling and reducing bullying in schools. In their journal article, Whitted & Duper (2005) define bullying as “the unprovoked physical or psychological abuse of an individual by one student or a group of students over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse” (Batsche & Knoff, 1994; Hoover, Oliver, & Thomson, 1993; Olweus, 1991). In their article, they identify direct, indirect, racial and sexual bullying (includes sex for grades) as some forms of bullying and highlight that witnesses are equally important as victims when it comes to whistleblowing because of the fear that they may also become targets of this kind of behaviour (Whitted & Duper, 2005, p.168).

The 12-month process of developing a text message-based bullying prevention programme for middle school students was documented by Ybarra, Prescott & Espelage (2016) in their research report. *BullyDown* is a tool based on the theory of social-emotional-learning, which delivered a set of social and emotional skills to users for better decision making and coping techniques. With a 100% retention rate and 86% of the students liking the resulting tool—in an end of project follow-up survey, the study confirms that these kinds of tools are acceptable and appropriate for some school students. The authors attributed the success of the intervention to the removal of the teacher from the content delivery because when teachers deliver the prescriptive contents of anti-bullying programmes, it results in resistance from students as a form of rejection of authority. The use of SMS provides a win-win scenario which

frees up teachers' time to focus on other areas and opens up room for easier acceptance of the programme by students (Ybarra, Prescott & Espelage, 2016).

Zielezinski, (2016) buttresses this view in his article about the ways digital tools can be leveraged to support cognitive development and educational attainment especially for underserved students in minority populations. The author contends that when it comes to harnessing the full significance of digital tools, access alone is not enough. He stresses the importance of creativity in the use of digital tools for more meaningful ways to take advantage of the "use of realtime digital feedback in digital learning environments" (p. 33).

#### **Use of Mobile technology in medicine.**

Text messaging has also proven quite useful in the medical field as well. Gathering and disseminating real time information for medical research as well as clinical trials have been enhanced by the use of text messaging (Kew, 2010). The medical practitioners have used text messaging to send out reminders to patients for various activities such as; hospital visits, immunizations, routine checks, administration of medical doses of pills, insulin, and other tests. Mobile technology has also provided the platform for distance consultations, counselling, helplines as well as providing emergency medical advice. (Walker, Leicester & Under, 2013).

#### **Use of Mobile technology in social services and advocacy.**

A number of studies and reports have documented the role of mobile phones in support of social services and advocacy. The literature shows that text messaging has been used effectively for data gathering in social services, birth registration, case management, family tracing and reunification during emergencies, surveys and assessments (Mattila, 2011). In a UNICEF report, *Mobile technologies for Child protection*, Mattila (2011) makes reference to a Child Helpline

International (CHI)<sup>3</sup> project in Kenya where the demand for helpline services for increased 20 times when an SMS text messaging service was added, stressing that “[t]his massive jump in usage indicates the power of mobile phones to provide solutions to social issues” (p.7). The child helpline project has been in existence since 2003 and was established globally to respond to children in need of care and protection from sexual or domestic abuse through a four-digit help hotline. In a research analysis of the 2010 data collated from helpline contact data questionnaire of 133 child helpline projects across the globe it was reported that in the Middle East, Europe and North America more girls contacted the helpline than boys but it was on the contrary in Africa. In the 2012 collation of unique data from mobile technology helplines, the Child Helpline International confirms a gap in the availability of data relating to child sexual abuse in Africa as a result of nature of the topic and social stigma attached to it. “Not many victims and their families are willing to report the incidents fearing social stigmatization and outcome of reporting these cases” (Prasad, 2012, p. 4)

Thackarey and Hunter (2010), in an effort to conceptualize a framework for use of technology in facilitating social change for and with youth advocacy found that when the social advocacy activities are easily integrated into daily life, individual participation in social change can be maximized (pg. 578). Mobile phones provide so many ways for young people to connect and create a movement with their mobile phones; SMS, facebook messenger, whatsapp, imo, twitter, and the list goes on. “The combination of speed, breadth and access of mobile technology makes it a vital tool in creating information loops that can lead to action” (Fabian, n.d.). For adolescents (12-17) who are not allowed to vote, mobile technology provides a platform to advocate social change and make their voices heard. It presents the possibility for all

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<sup>3</sup> Child Help International (CHI) is global network of 181 child helplines in 147 countries see more info at <https://www.childhelplineinternational.org/>

youth to have a voice and exercise their social responsibility. As part of the communities they live in, they can also become a part of the solution to its problems (Thackeray & Hunter, 2010, p. 578). Some examples from the literature of how mobile technology is being used in advocacy are; Ushahidi, FrontlineSMS, Map Kibera and Ureport.

### **Drawbacks of mobile technology.**

There are numerous studies that highlight the applicability and effectiveness of using text messaging in education, medicine and advocacy as highlighted above. However, some researchers did not stop there but also highlighted some drawbacks of the use of mobile technology. The literature suggests that users of mobile phones in education can be subjected to risks such as: addiction, cheating, disruption of classes, exposure to cyber bullying, harassment, peer pressure and sexting (Ling, 2007; Matilla, 2011; Nurullah, 2009). Technical issues are also possible such as hardware usability (weight, screen size), battery life, unfriendly text input, difficulty to take notes and reading simultaneously (Economides & Grousopoulou, 2010) and from the perspective of a social worker, text messaging can be detrimental to the development of social skills in adolescents (Graham, 2013).

More specific to my research study, the use of mobile technologies for reporting and data gathering is not cost-effective or sustainable. Furthermore, access to the service may be limited periodically due to poor telecommunication infrastructure, lack of awareness, and in some countries the technology may be out of reach due to poverty. (Mattila, 2011, p. 12; Prasad, 2012, p. 4).

### **Summary of key findings and gap from the literature.**

My review of the available literature clearly establishes sexual exploitation in schools as a widespread social problem which requires urgent attention and research focus. Sexual exploitation in schools does not only affect girls but also boys, as well as school officials who are also targeted in the social navigation scheme. The literature reflects that there are major social and economic development threats involved in allowing the situation to persist. However, due to the scale and nature of the problem, it will require more than a one-time fix but rather involves continuous and careful attention to the issue in addition to mass awareness with all the actors involved.

This review of literature shows that previous researchers have looked extensively into why sexual exploitation and abuse in schools exists with causes ranging from deep rooted societal beliefs to fragmented systems and structures (Mirsky, 2003; Kim et al, 2003; Morley, 2011; Antonowicz, 2010; & Sweeney, 2013). Four main elements have been identified as requirements for adequately addressing this problem; an institutionalized code of conduct or policy, awareness of all parties, an effective whistleblowing mechanism with trusted reporting channels and execution of penalties (Morley, 2011, p.112; Sweeney, 2013, p.88; Corbett & Gentry, 1993, p. 9). Research case studies show that in the absence of a policy framework which defines sex for grades as a misconduct in schools, full awareness of students about their right to report and seek redress on the issue and an effective confidential reporting channel, the problem of sexual exploitation and abuse in schools persists. (Morley, 2011, p.112; Delomez, 2015, p. 65).

Reporting of incidents of sex for grades in schools has remained a major challenge in addressing the problem due primarily to lack of awareness coupled with lack of trust in existing reporting channels. (Sweeney, 2013, p. 88). In most cases students have not been educated on the

existing reporting channels and their own responsibility of reporting as a means of curbing instances of sex for grades in schools. Studies show that students are also not confident in the confidentiality and protection of whistleblowers from retaliation by those in authority or suspected perpetrators of the act (Antonowicz, 2010, p.25).

Mobile technology is proven by research literature to be well positioned to provide a confidential and accessible platform for tackling an issue such as this. Some strides have been made, with youth advocacy now taking the forefront with U-report and TELL intervention, however, more research is urgently required to document the prevailing issues from the perspectives of both students as well as teachers.

Although past research sets out a clear depiction of the limitations with some of the existing reporting channels, the existing literature has very little to say about students' own views about what kind of reporting tools or channels would preferably enable them to adequately report and address sex for grades and other corrupt practices in their schools. This study is poised to shed more light on how students in Liberia who used the TELL reporting hotline perceive mobile technology as a reporting tool and how the TELL hotline was used in order to address the gap in research.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I attempted to narrate the story of the themes in the existing literature which describe the problem of sexual exploitation in schools and mobile technology in its applicability to the problem. The research literature is strong in its argument that sexual exploitation in schools exists and is a problem. It argues that the available data and statistics on the problem are misleading because of the issue of low reporting due to students' lack of trust in reporting channels but shows no inquiry into hearing from students themselves on their experiences and preference of reporting systems. My research is designed as an exploratory

study to help provide insight into students' reporting preferences by answering the question:

*From their experiences, how do high school students who have used the "TELL" reporting hotline in Liberia perceive SMS mobile technology as a tool for reporting sex for grades?"* The next chapter provides a detailed description on my research design and methodology and the justifications which prompted its selection.

### **CHAPTER 3: THE METHODS**

This chapter outlines the reasons why an exploratory study design using an Interpretative Phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology was used for this research and carefully explains the reasons why this design and methodology are considered more appropriate in answering the research question. A detailed description of the rationale and process used for the selection of research participants, settings and data collection tools for this study follows in the second part of this chapter. In closing, this chapter takes into account the challenges and limitations encountered in this study with respect to the selected design and methodology.

#### **Research Design**

De Vaus (2001) stresses that "the function of a research design is to ensure that the evidence obtained enables us to answer the initial question as unambiguously as possible" (p. 9). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, a qualitative study design using one-on-one semi-structured interviews with students was used for collecting data. An exploratory research using IPA methodology such as this one, does not attempt to test a pre-determined hypothesis but delves into researching a problem which has limited or no previous research with a focus on discovering ideas and insight about the issue. (Smith, 2007, p. 55)

According to Smith (2007), IPA is a qualitative approach which explores personal experience and is concerned with an individual's personal perception or account of an experience



or event, rather than producing an objective statement of the experience or event itself (p. 53).

This methodology was chosen because the research is concerned with discovering what it is like, from the point of view of the participants, and to describe the perceptions and understanding of students who have had personal experiences with this particular hotline rather than generalizing findings. Smith (2007) further suggest that this methodology “is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world” (p. 55).

The use of one-on-one semi-structured interviews for data collection allowed participants a greater flexibility to respond more elaborately and in greater detail to open-ended questions which provided a rich source of data on participants' personal perceptions, experiences and opinions to address my research question and categorize data (Edwards and Holland, 2013, p. 29). Moreover, questionnaires and structured interviews were found less appropriate for IPA approach because they would have constrained participants' answers while group interviews or focus group sessions may have inadvertently interfered with the privacy of participants' emotional description of personal experiences. One-on-one semi-structured interviews further allowed the researcher the flexibility to guide the interviews based on the participants' answers and probe further into pertinent areas which emerged during the interview.

Due to the nature of the research topic, the desire to maintain the anonymity of the participants coupled with the geographical constraints at the time of the data collection, the only available option was to proceed with telephone interviews. I struggled with the idea of whether interviewing via telephone was appropriate for this study because in phenomenological studies, body language is as equally important in interpretation as the words being spoken. However, research shows that even though telephone interviewing may have some shortcomings it can be

an equally valuable data collection strategy in phenomenological studies (Burnard 1994). In the case of this research, interviewing via telephone provided some advantages. It provided the platform for maintaining the anonymity of participants thereby allowing them to speak more freely. It also provided logistical advantage in saving time and money due to geographical separation which would have required long distance travel to conduct the interviews face-to-face (Worth & Tierney 1993; Burnard 1994; Carr & Worth 2001).

### **Sampling Strategy and Study Participants**

The participants in this research were selected by purposeful sampling of mobile numbers from the TELL user database based on their experience and involvement using the “TELL” reporting hotline. Rudestam & Newton (2007) recommend that “a phenomenological study usually involves identifying and locating participants who have experienced or are experiencing the phenomenon that is being explored (p. 106). The users of the reporting hotline were unidentified but their mobile numbers in the TELL user database linked them to a potential participant pool. The participants’ mobile numbers were selected from the TELL user database using a linear selection method according to their school of enrollment. As users of the hotline, verified through the user database, participants in the potential pool were expected to be adequately informed to provide the answers to the research questions based on their experiences.

The TELL hotline user database is an excel spreadsheet which consists of a list of 95 mobile numbers (including repetitions) of students who had used the hotline by sending a text message complaint to the four-digit short code, 8355. The lists of numbers are categorized into three columns according to the students’ school of enrollment corresponding to the three high schools the TELL technology was piloted in. Tubman high school had a list of 54 numbers, D. Tweh Memorial High School had a list of 26 numbers and G. W. Gibson High School had a list

of 15 numbers. Additional information relevant to the nature of the complaint is also captured in another column of the spreadsheet. No other identifying information was contained in the database. This database is strictly under the control and privacy rights of Maria Fahnbulleh and Accountability Lab as the designer and implementer of TELL hotline in Liberia.

In order to ensure the privacy rights of the students in the user database were not infringed upon, the radio operator of the TELL hotline, Mariah conducted an initial contact phone call to random numbers selected from the database. Guided by the information letter short version for TELL, (see Annex 2) she first verified if the person answering was a former student of any of the three pilot schools, if they answered yes she proceeded to explain the purpose of her call with the potential participants to obtain their permission to give their number to me for the interview.

The approach used for selection of the numbers was executed by calling the numbers under each school column in their order of ranking on the list from top to bottom. If the number was switched off or unanswered, she moved to the next number on the list. If the number was answered and the person on the line had no recollection of using the TELL hotline in the past, or withheld their permission to share their number with me, the number was written off and the next on the list was called.

Due to the length of time which had elapsed since the TELL hotline was piloted in the three schools, most of the numbers in the database were inactive or unavailable. Some of the respondents stated they were never students at any of the three schools and had no recollection of the subject of the research. Two female candidates, who responded to numbers selected from the database confirmed knowledge but declined participation in the research. As a result of this process, four numbers belonging to male former high school students were provided as potential

participants who had confirmed their interest to participate in the research study and proceed with the interviews. All of the potential participants remained anonymous throughout this process.

The sample size of four participants was chosen based on the research design and the researcher's own judgement. This decision was further supported by the basis that phenomenological studies usually engage a relatively small number of participants of ten or fewer (Smith, 2007, p. 55; Rudestam & Newton, 2007, p. 107; Creswell, 1998, pp. 65 & 113; Boyd, 2001). The selected sample size also took into consideration the number of pilot schools, the probable length of the interviews to be transcribed and the fact that the findings of this research is not for the sake of generalization but to gain insight from the experiences of a few high school students who have used the tool.

In order to identify a participant pool in line with the prescribed sample size and further ensure an information rich source of participants the below predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria of importance to the research question were identified (Patton, 2001, p. 238).

#### Inclusion Criteria

1. High school student enrolled (or former) in one of the three high schools where the *TELL* technology was piloted in Liberia.
2. Above 18 years of age
3. Registered user of the *TELL* technology or member of the TELL outreach team evidenced by mobile number in the TELL user database.
4. Verbal permission granted to give mobile contact number to me

#### Exclusion Criteria

Some considerations for non-participation in the interviews were:

1. Non-consent
2. Limited or no knowledge about the tool or the problem
3. Lack of concern or interest to participate in the research
4. Repeated unavailability for the interview

A list of four mobile numbers for anonymous users who met the inclusion criteria was received from Accountability lab, I contacted the participants by telephone to confirm a convenient time for the telephone interviews to be conducted. The interviews were held on separate days based upon the choice and convenience of the participants.

### **Data Gathering Strategy**

The strategy for gathering data for the research study emanated from a phenomenological perspective. The general purpose of a phenomenological study is to understand and describe a specific phenomenon in-depth and reach at the essence of participants' lived experience of the phenomenon. To achieve this aim and maintain the anonymity of participants, semi-structured telephone interviews comprising of four open-ended questions was used to gather data from the participants. Semi-structured interviews provided a framework for open-ended questions to guide the discussion at the same time presenting the interviewer flexibility to follow topical trajectories in the conversation or probing – which was very rewarding to the research. Consequently, phenomenological interview questions should meet the criteria of description (Giorgi, 2009). This means that instead of the usual warm up questions found in qualitative interviews, I asked the participants for a description of a situation in which the participant has experienced a particular phenomenon. The four questions were influenced by the literature and designed from a phenomenological context to capture the personal experiences of the interviewees which would help to answer the research question. The questions used to guide the interview are in Annex I.

As per the prescribed requirement for interviewing in phenomenological studies, I used a three-pronged themed approach with four open-ended questions to guide the interview and a number of prompts to keep the participants engaged and help direct the participants' narration of their experiences in line with the topic being explored. The three themes used borrows from Bevan's (2014) recommendation for a structured phenomenological interviewing method (p. 138) and drills into the following:

1. Focused Life History
2. The Details of Experience
- 3 The Reflection on the Meaning

Participation was completely voluntary and participants were informed of their option to withdraw from the research at any point up to two weeks after the interview. Each participant was briefed on the background and purpose of the research as outlined in the information letter (Annex II).

### **Instrument**

The instruments used to carry out this research study are attached as annexes (see Annex I- IV). A short form information letter was developed to guide the radio operator's initial contact with participants to obtain their permission for sharing mobile contact information with me as potential participants in the study. A longer form information letter outlining the purpose of the research, selection criteria, the risks, benefits, rights of the participants and contact information of researcher was used to orientate participants with the research. A verbal consent statement was produced to obtain informed consent from the participants via telephone after all necessary information had been provided and questions asked and answered. My Dell laptop served as a recorder and my mobile cellphone was used to make the call to participants. All of the four

interviews were audio recorded using a laptop recorder software and saved on my laptop under a password protected file and backed-up on a secured hard drive with labels Interview one, two, three and four respectively. Participants were duly informed at the beginning of the call that the conversation was being recorded. Personal notes were also taken during the interview in a notepad. After providing the background and information of the study, each participant was read a verbal consent statement on the telephone to obtain their informed consent to participate in the research. Participants were reminded that though the interviews were being recorded, their identities were anonymous to everyone and personal identification details specifically their mobile numbers will not be revealed in the interview transcripts or the final research report. They were also provided assurance that their personal experiences shared in the interviews will be void of any identifiable information in the transcribed version or my final report. After the interview, each participant was provided a phone card valued \$10USD through text message as stated in the participant letter as a token of appreciation for their time and participation in the research.

### **Setting**

Another advantage of conducting telephone interviews is that it provided a flexibility in the choice of a convenient setting to conduct the interview. The key factor in arranging a convenient setting in this case is the day and the time for the call to be made taking into consideration the participants schedule, time zone and location. Burnard (1994) warns of the downside of using a 'cold calling' approach or calling participants and asking them to immediately proceed with the interview. He advises that it is unlikely to achieve good research results when a relationship is not established with the participants before the actual interview (p.69). In order to avoid a "cold calling" situation and ensure that all of the logistical details were in the favor of each participant,

an advance call was made to each participant to introduce myself and set up a convenient day and time for the interview. (Smith et al, 2009, p.64)

Participants were also advised that the interview will last for 45-60 minutes and a quiet non-intrusive background was required during the telephone conversation. The preferred number to be called which remained the same for each participant was also agreed upon. Each participant remained committed to the agreed time for the telephone interview, except for adjustments of 30 minutes or so all four interviews were conducted as planned. In order to ensure that my equipment worked well for recording the conversations a test run was conducted a day before the first interview to explore available options for making the long-distance call and check the quality of the line and the recording. I conducted all four of the interviews alone in my quiet home office with my mobile phone on speaker and my laptop recording the conversation.

### **Data Analysis**

Smith et al. (2009) cautions that data analysis in qualitative research methodology can be “time-consuming, labor-intensive, and both imaginatively and emotionally demanding” (p. 42). This is primarily because in a qualitative data analysis process, researchers are recommended to begin their data coding by reading the interview transcripts several times; at least three times to get a deeper understanding of what was being said in the interviews. In IPA, it is even more crucial for the researcher to determine the participants’ state of mind and interpret how the subject-matter has affected their ‘lived experiences’ (Alase, 2017, p.15). Hence it required careful and deep mental reflection and repetitive deliberation of the transcribed data over a number of days.

As with most qualitative data analysis, the analysis of data in this study from a phenomenological approach also involved coding and categorizing of data to make sense of the



essential meanings of the phenomenon. By total immersion into the sea of rich data over time, I expected to gain a thorough insight into the common themes and essential meanings present in the descriptions. The method of analysis used in this research borrowed from Kleiman's (2004), Creswell's (2013) and Alase's (2017) similar methods for data analysis in phenomenological research.

### **Transcribing interviews.**

I manually transcribed the four interviews into a Microsoft Word document format over a couple of days by playing the audio file on my laptop and typing into a word document. This process enabled me to hear parts of each interview repeatedly and was beneficial in allowing me to fully grasp the depth of the experiences which were being narrated. I also paid keen attention to the linguistic parts of the conversation, that is, the intonations, the emphases and the tone of the interviewee's voice and used the left-hand margin to annotate my significant observations about what the respondent said. I saved each interview transcript file in chronological order as Interview 1 to Interview 4 in a password protected folder on my laptop.

### **Bracketing my presuppositions.**

In IPA it is important for the researcher to bracket their experiences and presuppositions away from those of the research participants in a phenomenological study, Creswell (2013) cautions researchers to first describe their own experience with the phenomenon under study to avoid interjecting his/her own experience in the lived experience of the participants (p.193). After transcribing the interviews, I spent some time reflecting on my own personal experience in high school vis-a-vis the topic being researched.

I graduated from high school in Liberia in summer of 1999. I attended private schools throughout my primary, junior and senior high school years. At that time, I did not realize public schools functioned differently from private schools. My school was administered by the Catholic secretariat and had strict policies for code of conduct and any slight deviation on the part of students or teachers resulted in a suspension or expulsion for more serious offenses. My reflection made me realize that my perceptions and presuppositions could be biased in the sense that I could not easily relate to the experiences of these students. Other than reading about it in the news and hearing students' accounts, fortunately for me I was never constrained to find myself in similar situations. Although I attended high school in Liberia, it was over eighteen years ago, during a time when mobile technology was non-existent in Liberia and there were much higher standards in schools.

On the other hand, it was advantageous that I did not have any pre-conceived interpretations based on similar experiences. This allowed me to fully immerse myself into the world and experiences of the unique individuals who were interviewed without injecting my own experience into the analysis.

#### **Acquiring a general sense of the data.**

After transcribing the interview data, I took a break from the data for about two days to allow the conversations to marinate in my mind. On the third day, I read through the interview transcripts in its entirety to get a general sense of all the participants' experiences as a whole, making mental connections and underlining key words and phrases which conveyed expression of emotions such as "afraid", "hurt", "embarrassed", "ashamed", "happy", "relieved", "down hearted", "proud" etc. (Alase, 2017, p.16).

**Developing a list of significant statements.**

Having acquired a general sense of the participants' experiences detailed in the transcribed data, I advanced to the next stage of the analysis. I read each transcript a second time — this time more closely observing and highlighting significant statements with a unique color code for each interview (Alase, 2017, p.16). This allowed me to keep track of the content of each interview in the later stages of the analysis process.

**Grouping significant statements into themes.**

Using the right-side margin to note possible emerging theme titles for each significant statement, I transformed some of the longer statements into shorter phrases while ensuring that the intended meaning was still being conveyed. Alase (2017) reiterates that breaking down the participants' responses into manageable format in the coding process should still result in a condensed coding which can still accurately represent the thoughts and "lived experiences" of the participants. (p. 16) I recognized emergent themes from the literature review as well as new themes starting to emerge.

**Integrating meaningful sections and themes with similar focus or content.**

In a new word document, I drew a table with columns for each theme I had observed in the significant statements, combining themes with similar focus or content. I then copied and pasted the color-coded statements or short phrases into each column of the corresponding "meaning units" or theme.

**Interpretation of meaning using free imaginative variation.**

Free Imaginative variation is a systematic examination of a body of material to determine which integrated meaningful units are important in providing the framework for understanding and interpreting the phenomena under study (Kleiman, 2004, p. 15). The process of free imaginative variation (Kleiman, 2004) was used along with local language terminology form to make sense of integrated themes and identify meaning from the interviews data to rewrite interpretative descriptions of essential meanings into a structure. Alase (2017) states that “[t]he last step of the structured phenomenological traditional method of analysis is the long paragraph; the researcher must write a mini statement that tells the audience (readers) “what” the research participants have experienced and “how” they experienced the phenomenon in a contextual format.” (p.17)

### **Critical review and analysis of interpretations.**

I then conducted a review of the raw data again to ensure and all themes were covered and the core essence of the central meaning of participants' experiences was present in my interpretation without distortion or misrepresentation. Alase (2017) emphasizes that the “[q]uality of research data and the ability to verify and authenticate the data and findings in a research study are very important in a qualitative research study” (p.17). My critical analysis step included verification that the essential meanings were clearly articulated in relations to the phenomenon and the raw data could verify the results of the structure which had emerged out of the analysis (Kleiman, 2004, p. 18)

In summary, the data collected in the telephone interviews with participants was analyzed by the researcher through personal interpretation of cognitive and emotional descriptions in recorded and transcribed data (Howson, 2010). The subjective meanings were extracted from

emerging themes based on the experiences described by the participants and resulted in the structured set of findings highlighted in the Findings Chapter. (Smith, 2007, p.230)

### **Research Reliability and Validity**

In any research study, it is important for a researcher to ensure the reliability and validity of research results if the results are to be considered credible enough to be used (Patton, 2002). This fact also rang true for me in this study. Breakwell (2008) defines reliability as “the extent to which the measures taken [in a study], can be reproduced” (p. 96). Validity, on the other hand, “focus[es] on the extent to which a given finding can be said to show what it is claimed to show” (Breakwell, 2008, p.96). The credibility of the study results is important in both qualitative and quantitative research but different methods are used in assessing the results of a quantitative study vis-à-vis a qualitative one. Campbell (1996) recommends qualitative researchers to verify that the steps of the research are credible and defensible, by examining items such as raw data, coded data, and process notes. Morse et al (2002) define *Verification* as “the process of checking, confirming, making sure, and being certain”. To ensure the validity and reliability of results, while a quantitative researcher is interested in verifying the sample size, participant selection and numerical data, a qualitative researcher is more concerned with verifying the correct application of the concepts and ideas from the data (Osborn & Smith, 2015, p. 68).

In order to ensure the reliability of this study, I allowed myself as a researcher to be open and responsive to the coded data remembering that research is reiterative and not linear. By double checking the internal coherence and presentation of evidence, I tried to ensure that findings are internally consistent and justified by the raw data. (Osborn & Smith, 2015, p.68). I continued to check and recheck data coding and categorization against the findings using

creativity and insight, in order to abandon any ideas or themes which that were poorly supported and include those that were mistakenly ignored.

### **Ethical considerations**

Prior to collecting data for this research, I applied for and received approval for conducting this study from the University of Alberta Research Ethics office as per the requirement when the data collection involves the use of human subjects.

The age factor of the participants was an important consideration especially for obtaining informed consent. If the students were not of legal age I would have had to request informed consent from their parents. This was easily solved because I was informed by Accountability Lab that most of the students had graduated since 2014 and were above 18 years. This requirement was therefore translated into the inclusion and exclusion criteria for participants (Givens, 2008, p.945). All of the participants selected for the study were above the age of 18 years and could provide a verbal informed consent for their participation in the research study. Since they were no longer students or below 18, they were not considered as vulnerable population but I guaranteed their protection by maintaining their anonymity.

Another ethical issue which was declared to the ethics board was the possible emotional risk that participants may have been exposed to during the study. This risk was considered minimal but identified based upon the assumption that participants may be emotionally tasked by reliving painful experiences they may have had during the interviews. In order to manage this risk and ensure the participants were not exposed to undue emotional discomfort during the interviews, I designed the interviews into three broad themes to take into consideration the emotional state of the participants at every interval. During the interviews at each interval, I asked the participants for their permission to proceed with a specific line of

questioning or the next question to give them a chance to object if they were uncomfortable or unwilling to continue. At the beginning of the interviews, I informed each participant of the estimated time allocated and the questions they will be asked to prepare them for what was to come. I also reminded participants at the beginning of the interviews that their participation was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any point of the process up to two weeks after the interviews.

Finally, the remuneration to participants was also approved as part of the ethical considerations of the study. Each participant was provided a reasonable incentive for their time spent doing the interviews in the form of ten united states dollars mobile recharge card texted to them after the interview.

### **Challenges and limitations**

A few foreseen and unforeseen limitations were encountered in this research:

1. **Bias.** As an exploratory study, this research work generated qualitative information and interpretation which is subject to my interpretation and bias of participants' subjective descriptions. Givens (2008) suggests "the potential for bias enters the research enterprise the moment a researcher chooses one topic over another" (p.60). In order to reduce my personal bias in analysing and interpreting data, I continuously tried to put myself in participants' shoes and tried to stay aware of their implied values and assumptions, I looked out for contradictory data as well as alternative interpretations of the data.
2. **Application.** Due to the small number of samples used in IPA research, the findings do not adequately represent the target population but do set the basis for a hypothesis which can support future research. (Smith, 2007, p. 55; Rudestam & Newton, 2007)

3. **Interview process.** In phenomenological studies, a telephone interview is not usually prescribed because the generation of tacit knowledge through body language and facial gestures is important in interpreting the emotions attached to the narrations. However, due to geographical restrictions and the need to maintain the anonymity of the participants, it was mandatory to use telephone interviews.
4. **Gender representation.** Considering the research topic is about sex for grades which primarily affects girls, it would have been preferable to have the experiences and views of a female participant in the interviews, however the two female candidates which were contacted declined participation.

Some unforeseen challenges which I faced which delayed the data collection process requiring me to request an extension period from the University of Alberta ethics board were geographical distance, political transition period in Liberia as well as health and personal demands and duties as a new mom during the research period. These challenges however were not insurmountable. With persistence and the coordination and support from colleagues at Accountability Lab and the hotline developer, it was possible to overcome the hurdles.

### **Summary and conclusion**

In summary, all of the preparatory steps and procedures outlined above regarding design, sample selection, ethical considerations, data gathering and analysis were taken in line with prescribed qualitative methods and phenomenology to explore the experience-based perspective of students who have used the TELL reporting hotline for reporting sexual exploitation in their schools. In the following chapter, I reveal my next step after the analysis of the transcribed data from conversations which is presentation of the results in answer to my research question.



## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Participant Profile

The four participants who granted permission for sharing their numbers with me from the TELL hotline database were all male. Although I had hoped to have a representation of the female views, two of the numbers contacted turn out to be females but they declined their participation in the study. This reinforces the belief that some of those who are primarily affected by sex for grades or sexual exploitation in school shy away from reporting or sharing their experiences.

In line with ethical approval and considerations and to maintain the anonymity of these former students, the only identification data collected was their sex, school of attendance at that time and age (above or below 18 years) in order to obtain informed consent. Some of the participants were only comfortable with confirming that they are above 18 years and I did not pressure them to reveal their current ages. The below Table 1. describes the participant profile for this research study.

**Table 1: Participant profile**

Reference	Sex	School	Age	Grade at the time of TELL
<b>Participant 1</b>	Male	William V.S. Tubman High School	25	10 <sup>th</sup> Grade
<b>Participant 2</b>	Male	G. W. Gibson High School	>18	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade
<b>Participant 3</b>	Male	D. Tweh High School	>18	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade
<b>Participant 4</b>	Male	G. W. Gibson High School	>18	11 <sup>th</sup> Grade

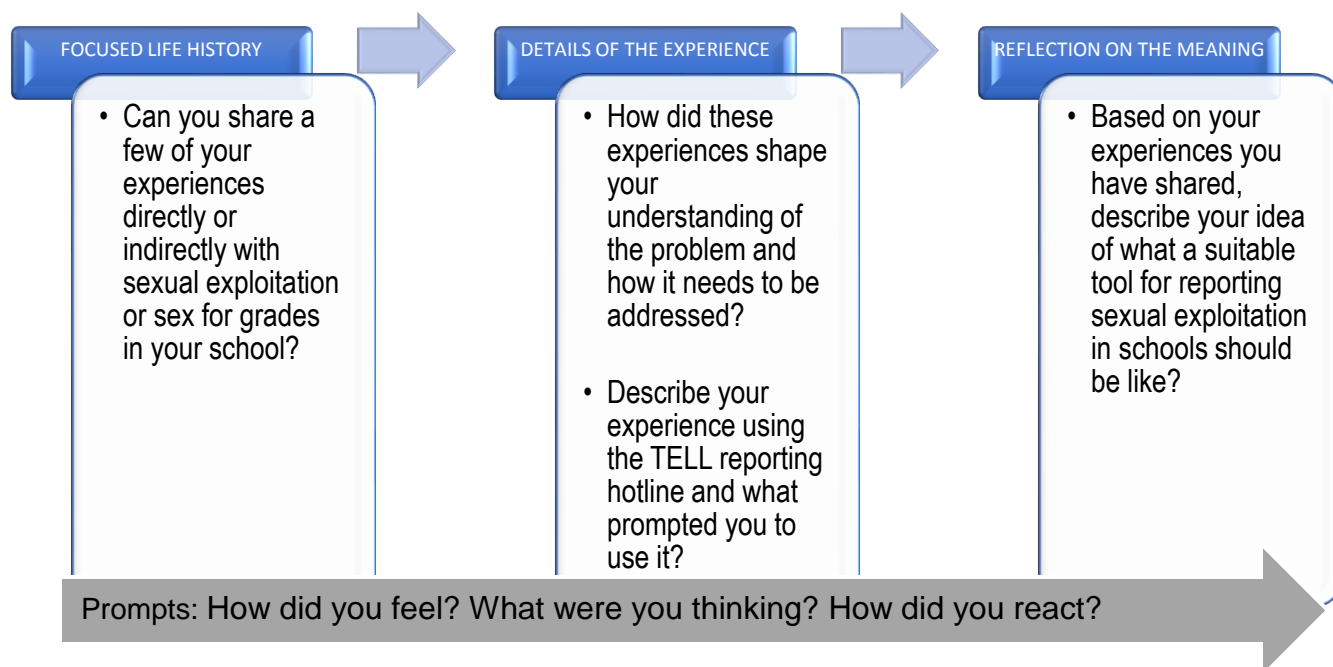
## Results

The phenomenological interviews with the four participants went better than I expected. The students were very open and honest about their experiences and expressed appreciation for a research into this issue at this time. Some of the reasons I gathered that students were so willing to openly share their experiences and views are:

1. The telephone interview eliminated the nervousness of being physically present (face-to-face) with the interviewer;
2. They are no longer students of the schools therefore no longer fear retaliation. One participant even told me he didn't care about anonymity, he just wanted to contribute to the study to help in whatever way possible;
3. As former users of the TELL hotline, they still genuinely want to contribute to changing the system and providing lasting solutions for the benefit of other students.

On the other hand, in the absence of face to face contact, it was very important for me to employ the use of other verbal cues to remain emotionally engaged with participants during the interviews.

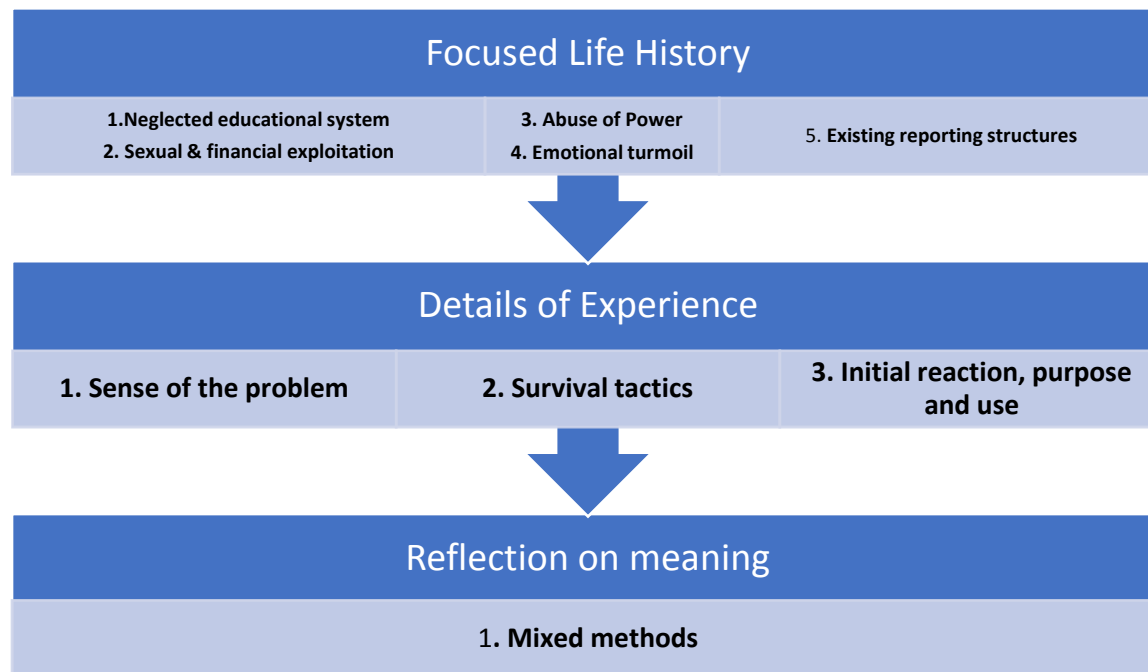
The interview questions designed for this study were best suited to help answer my research questions strictly from a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological interviewing involves the narration of lived experiences relating to the phenomenon under research, therefore participants were asked the below questions relating to their experiences with sex for grades and the TELL reporting hotline from a three-pronged theme style.

**Table 2: Interview questions**

The questions posed during the interview provided me a rich supply of data to transcribe and analyze. I began the analysis by looking at the first color-coded interview transcript for systematic themes which emerged in the conversation and noting them as comments in the right margin of the word document. I used the three thematic areas of the questions as overarching themes to categorize sub-themes under each question. After completing the first, I proceeded to do the same for the other three transcripts. I realized that some of the themes were resonating across all four transcripts while others were unique to a particular participant. I then established superordinate master themes by combining and grouping similar themes and listing them in a separate document as headers in a table. I then moved each of the relevant color-coded phrases or statements from each transcript to the table under its applicable thematic categorization. The below Tables 3 & 4 highlight the resonating themes from the data first grouped according to participants' individual themes and then according to the master themes.

**Table 3: Individual themes from participants' experiences**

	<i>Focused Life History</i>	<i>Details of the Experience</i>	<i>Reflection on meaning</i>
<b>Participant 1</b>	Neglected educational system, Chaos Lack of control feeling hurt, disadvantaged & helpless deprived blames hardship excuses for teachers money for grades no earning system for grades, teacher absenteeism,	escalate the problem not everyone is unhappy regrets ineffective methods  sense of accomplishment satisfaction rescue lifeline understands the purpose of the tool	Escalate complaints No fear of retaliation in face of the truth
<b>Participant 2</b>	Harassment, Intimidation and threats humiliation Traditional methods ineffective Observe Sexual relationships Sense of helplessness lack of the power to affect change, Embarrassment, harassment, avoidance leading to dropout, helpless, abuse of power, Absences lead to negotiation Coercion Bribes-money for grades Self-pity Pity for colleagues Mixed feelings Awareness of code of conduct Fear of retaliation Retaliate with bad grades Advocacy leads to name shaming and teacher conflict Personal challenges-finances, resp Self-motivation/encouragement Proud of success Advise and caution	Normal Common knowledge, no action Sense of forerunner Problem needs fixing Students are limited No change day after day Interest but no implementation Try to bridge gaps with instructors ongoing behaviour  initial disbelief, dismissive, unknown importance, not clear rescue, relief lifeline counselling therapeutic brought changes in admin fear of tracking numbers through gsm co independent group	Secret reporting Technology is good Perceptions cleared Possible identification problem
<b>Participant 3</b>	Disappointment, feeling let down, inconvenienced Anger Hurt Irresponsible teacher conduct Student teacher relationships Lack of awareness of existence of policy Aware of reporting channel Fear of going against the status quo/retaliation Financial exploitation	Disservice to students' future Untrained teachers Not in primary school Teachers to blame, no pay Disgust Teachers against students Still some good teachers- use the good teachers to influence the bad ones counsellors preferred over dean  Rescue Happy Fully aware of purpose and use of tool Faint memory of feedback loop Open for student suggestions Pleased No fear of retaliation Teachers caution fear of reliable systems	Student limitation Training is important Feedback to student is important Mixed methods
<b>Participant 4</b>	Money for grades Sex for grades sexual relationships, disapproval Credibility of students questioned when reported Harassment of male students associated with girls, disapproval, unhappy system of grading not performance based /effort Feeling hopeless, Unprotected failure of systems Punished for not complying with status quo Helpless, unprotected failure of systems Cognizant of the policies for students not teachers Teachers rules are separate and unknown A system of reporting existed	Dominant societal problem with serious effects detrimental to student's future Farsightedness, prediction of doom Backway to education Misplaced priorities waste of education, self-assurance Negative impact by association, threatened by authority, abuse of authority, going against the status quo Systems and authority ineffective in implementing penalties Unprotected teacher misconduct affects students' performance teacher training required  Rescue Opportunity Delighted Commitment to use Feedback loop is not consistent Technical problems may cause drift away	Awareness Confidential collection of complaints Independent review with authority to implement review issues, causes, investigate, observe, and implement feedback loop important feedback can be direct action. I text messages, feedback implementation of solutions is important m& E regular and robust to be effective

**Table 4: Categorization of individual themes into master themes****Focused life history.**

Under the theme *Focused Life History*, the participants narrated some of their experiences in high school at that time which were directly or indirectly related to sex for grades. The analysis of the data from the transcriptions revealed five master themes; 1. Neglected educational systems 2. Sexual & financial exploitation 3. Abuse of power 4. Emotional turmoil. 5. Existing reporting structures

The explanation of the sub-themes under these five master themes are narrated in the following paragraphs.

*Neglected educational system.*

Participants' description of their experiences in high school in 2013, when the TELL technology was piloted in three public high schools revealed that some schools were in a state of neglect. The underlying sub-themes revealed that teachers were absent from classes either due to hardship in the country, lack of salary or proper training or qualification. Students were feeling helpless, deprived and disadvantaged by this lack of control by administration and decided to cause chaos by demonstrating in the streets. One participant (1) described the teacher absenteeism in his school by saying "... because Tubman high is a government school sometimes we never had teachers in class, teachers will not enter class until the period is finished and when it's time for submission of grades, teachers will just give grades that you never took a test for or a quiz for."

This prolonged absenteeism on the part of teachers with no action by administration of the school led the students to feel deprived, disadvantaged and helpless. He (Participant 1) elaborated "... we got on the street to meet the President once because it was really getting to us that we spent money or take our time to go to school from in the morning up to three o'clock and there was no teacher for lesson...it really got to me. Participant (1) recalled vividly how this lack of control by school administrators resulted into chaos with thousands of students taking to the streets to demonstrate for the intervention of the government into the situation in their schools.

While the causes of teacher absenteeism are debatable, one of the participants (1) attributed the tardiness of teachers to the hardship in the country and the fact that they were not getting paid regularly. He concluded his justification that "those were the hardships in the country because teachers are not getting their needs, because if teachers were getting their needs they won't stay away from class". Another participant (3) agreed with his point but goes a step

further to apportion the blame on the qualification and lack of training of teachers. He stressed “[t]wo reasons are the cause. One maybe the teacher is not getting his/her salary on time. Two, maybe the teacher has never been in the classroom to get the education of teacher – he never got the teacher training and has never been in teaching college.”

### *Sexual and financial exploitation*

As evidenced by the literature, all four of the interview participants' experiences and observations confirmed a widespread practice of exchanges of sex and money for grades between teachers and students in their schools. The underlying sub-themes point to observation of teacher-student sexual relationships, bribery of teachers and a system of grading which was most often not performance based. One participant (4) reported that “instructors were most of the time engaged in the act of collecting money from students after administering tests. For students who they claim did not make a pass”. He also described how teacher-student sexual relationships were so common place in his school that it was like a family setting. He narrated “the school was like transferred into a family where teachers are in sexual affairs with students and students are in sexual affairs with teachers which of course was not good”. Participant (4) recalled receiving a failing mark on his card at one point in time because he refused to cooperate with making the payment requested by the teacher. On the other hand, he reported girls were getting free grades “they [female students] only received grades because why-because of their relationship with that instructor. So they see that as a privilege, they don't see it as something very harmful to them”. Participant (4) concluded with his observation that “instructors are not encouraging students in the sense that they don't base on merit in terms of providing grades”.

The conversations revealed stories of teachers writing their private numbers on female students' test papers and asking her to call him after school, teachers threatening male students

for being close to female students which the teacher may be interested in. Another participant (2) also confirmed that “the intimidation was from all angles not just only teachers requesting for sex, sometimes teachers requested for bribes”. In the same vein participant (1) recounts his teacher saying to them on many occasions “we are finished taking the test, so for that reason you have to put a certain amount of dollars together for grades”. However, he (Participant 1) believes that teachers could be excused for their corrupt practices because “according to the teachers, they said government was not paying them so that was the reason why sometimes they used to rob students”.

Another participant felt quite strongly about the issue of buying grades with sex or money. He felt that this practice does not only damage a student's future but also affects society at large stating “it's actually damaging the society because these are people who tomorrow will be leaders and if they are given positions, they cannot effectively execute their duties because they are not competent.”

### *Abuse of power*

The participants explained how they endured abuse of power in the classroom in different forms during their educational journey. The sub-themes under the master theme of abuse of power covers participants' narrations of instances of verbal abuse, intimidation, threats, public humiliation, retaliation with bad grades, and coercion. Participants in this study allude to experiencing abuse of power in the form of verbal abuse by teachers during their time in school which was quite traumatizing. Participant (2) recalls his experience of teachers referring to students as “dull” in the classroom and making threats of failing the particular student for this reason. He laments that “sometimes the way a teacher talks to a student before his/her colleagues, it leads to the student being intimidated at that level”. He further recounts instances



where a teacher purposefully requested a student to perform a task which he/she had limited abilities to perform, in an effort to humiliate that student in front of the class. In the student's helpless effort to avoid this public stunt by the teacher, participant (2) goes on to explain that "[s]ometimes it just frightened her to the extent that the student will decide to walk out of his class whenever she sees such instructor coming because she feels the man is always intimidating her in the classroom".

In all of these cases, it seemed that the teachers always had the final say when it came down to grading of students. As if this verbal and mental abuse of power was not sufficient in establishing their position of authority, one participant who served as a student leader reported that teachers went further by retaliating on anyone who dared advocate against them by giving them bad grades or coercing them to drop their advocacy. This made the cause of students learning even more hopeless and helpless in the midst of everything else. Participant (2) asserted that "many times some students even dropped from school because they were being embarrassed on a daily basis". He said that it really makes him unhappy up to this day that some of his friends were not successful in graduating from high school because of this abuse of power and authority by some teachers.

### *Emotional turmoil*

As a result of all of these issues students were facing in school as well as some personal challenges, participants described their emotional turmoil they experienced at that time. The sub-themes emerging in the emotional turmoil included feelings of fear, helplessness and unprotected, disappointment leading to hurt, pity for self and colleagues, anger and disgust, and finally frustration from personal challenges.

Fear was one the main emotion students were struggling with. They were afraid to speak out about their experiences because they did not know who to trust. They all expressed the feeling that their administration already knew about the issues and the fact that they did nothing about it hinted to them that they were a part of it. One participant (2) who was also a student leader narrated “there was some fear that the very teacher that you were going to complain, [that teacher] has some of his colleagues or trusted allies among us as students”. Participant (3) described the teaching administration in his school as a union that one could not go against. He explained “...let’s say always the student can be afraid to report teachers... they think that if they report the teacher and the teacher knows that that person reported, he/she will cause problem for them.”

This fear which prevented reporting of issues and solving them led to disappointment and hurt. Participant (4) narrated in frustration, “So you see the thing as wrong, you want to speak against it but how can you speak against it? Authority is not protecting you. So you just feel bad within yourself and just let it go or cope with what is ongoing”. They experienced hurt from seeing all of the obstacles they had stacked against them. Participant (1) recalled his situation of teacher absenteeism “It really hurt us. It hurt me a lot. It was the reason why the students got on the street”. Participant (4) confirmed his hurt by saying “I actually felt bad because it was doing more harm than help to the students”. Participant (3) noted loud exchanges by teachers in halls during class as one of the things that “hurt him a lot”. He reported that this affected his concentration. Participant (2) also expressed hurt about the situation “It hurts a lot to see my colleagues that we were all striving together unfortunately due to one or two situations or challenges they were not successful as compared to me”.

All four participants alluded to the fact that the fear, disappointment and hurt made them feel helpless and unprotected in their situation. They could not get the needed attention from the school administration as regards their experiences, therefore they did not know who they could turn to for help. One participant (4) explained "...but you see our society is structured in such a way that you don't speak the truth to power because you don't feel protected". He continued to express his frustration by saying "So where could I have gone with such complaint and who would have been willing to listen to me and to see to it that those things that were going on wrong in the class be corrected?"

Participants reported in the midst of their emotional turmoil some of them felt pity for themselves and their colleagues who were being constantly humiliated. Participant (2) said reliving his experiences reminded him of it. "It was very pathetic, up to now in fact when I think on some of these things". Two of them admitted trying to advise or counsel other students who were faced with harassment out of their sympathy for them. Participant (4) described how he and some other students encouraged each other while they walked to and from school that one day their school problems will come to an end having coined the term "no bad day" to describe the fact that they had to face another day and deal with the same issues. He said this kind of group spirit of being "in it together" coupled with words of advice from the few good teachers and guidance counselors provided the motivation they needed to rise above their self-pity and cope with the situation at hand.

While students were struggling to cope with the emotional turmoil of experiences in school, some of them had personal challenges on the home front which further disturbed their mental stability. Some of these challenges were primarily financial. One participant (4) shared a harrowing account of how his own situation changed drastically when his aunt died. His parents

could not afford to send him to school and his Aunt had pledged to support him in private school up to graduation. After her death, he could no longer afford the private school fees or the public school fees which he was now required to pay but made a pledge to himself that he would not drop out and become a laughing stock. He started work as a security guard at night at his church and walked 45 minutes to and from school just to be able to pay his fees. He explained with sadness, “in the situation where I just can’t afford a fitting 10\$ or 15\$ to buy water to drink, teachers will be asking us to give him money before he passes us”. He explained how the teachers’ assumption that all of the students always had money to give in exchange for grades caused much embarrassment for students like him who were struggling and making sacrifices to attain education by staying up nights studying to make honest grades. However, he stated that he saw these challenges as an opportunity to overcome and prove that he can be successful in his studies.

### *Existing reporting structures*

Students also provided account of some of the reporting structures which were in place in the midst of all of these experiences, before TELL was introduced and how they perceived them. The final theme which emerged under the broad theme, *Focused life history*, revealed through all of the students’ accounts that some form of reporting mechanism was in place in all three schools. Sub-themes which were revealed centered around the participants’ awareness of these reporting structures but little knowledge of the policies on conduct, no penalties for misconduct leading to distrust of the system.

All four participants reported their awareness of some existing form of reporting for students before TELL was introduced in their schools. One participant (3) noted “they had a counselor wherein if you had any problem you go to the counselor and then explain your

problem the challenges you face and then they will try to counsel you". Another participant (4) provided additional background by explaining;

"... during the third or fourth year of the former president Madam Sirleaf, in the public schools they introduced what is called the guidance counselors. We had guidance counselors at our school and other public schools. So if there was a problem not only concerning us-between students and instructors but other problems like domestic problem that is being confronted by students, the counselor was there and you can go and you tell him/her what you are faced with and she will be able to counsel you and encourage you and give you some suggestions of things to do."

Participants (1 and 2) also confirmed that they had the direct reporting conduit to the dean or administrators' office in case they had issues and on some occasions, the administrator came to the classes to quiz students about the code of conduct and if teachers were complying. However, these open sessions were futile as explained by participant (2), "there was a code of conduct governing teachers that we were aware of... sometimes in fact, the principal will come to the class to ask one or two questions on how well the teachers were adhering to the code of conduct. But you know as a student normally it is always difficult to just openly complaint your instructors to his/her bosses."

Participant (3) on the other hand stated no knowledge of an existing code of conduct in his school while participant (4) explained "we had a handbook, a school handbook. But the handbook in the case of Liberia in most instances does not point out the behavior of staff or administrators, it's strictly student-based".

In spite of these existing known systems for reporting, the problem ensued and students saw no resolution of their issues. One participant (4) explained that though some students were open and honest with the counselors about the issues they faced and these were documented in their reports he noted “our society [authorities] is not really willing to react or to implement those things that are written or in the books. Participant (2) who was also a student leader described numerous conferences with administration to highlight some of the issue resulting in little or no action. Some students who were brave enough to report to authorities supervising the administration such as the Superintendent had their credibility and character questioned by school officials rendering their complaints insignificant.

Due to this lack of action for change, students felt they lacked the ability or power to affect change. Participant (2) described this feeling with the statement “our thoughts at that time were very limited as ordinary students”. Any action on their part which could have been viewed as an attack on the status quo and would have resulted in that student being earmarked as an adversary. Participant (2) further affirmed this powerlessness by stating “when you have been earmarked by a particular teacher it creates an impediment to your success”.

In summary, the experiences of the participants under the broad theme of *Focused Life History* revealed the details of their school environment, the problems they faced, the state of mind of the students, and the use of the reporting channels available to them before the introduction of TELL hotline in their schools. The findings showed that former students were in a school environment where the administration had little or no control over the action of teachers some of who were absent most of the time or involved in financial and sexual exploitation and verbal abuse of students. Moreover, findings revealed that these students were emotionally tasked by the actions of their teachers and in spite of fear and intimidation, some brave ones

attempted to complain using the guidance counseling system and direct reports to the principal or dean to seek a solution. No action was taken on complaints by administration, rather students who complained were retaliated against by teachers and the situation ensued.

### **Details of experience.**

Under the theme *Details of Experience*, the participants narrated how their individual experiences affected their discernment of the problem as a whole and what they could do as students to address it. They also give account of their experiences with the introduction of TELL in their school and how they used the hotline. The analysis of the data from the transcriptions revealed three master themes; 1. Sense of the problem 2. Survival tactics 3. Initial reaction, purpose and use. These master themes and their sub-themes are discussed in the following sections.

#### ***Sense of the problem***

The sub-themes under this master theme pointed towards the two-fold view of the problem and its main contributing parties. Through the lens of the participants' experiences, the educational system was viewed as two-fold; somewhat normal because they knew that it was common in high schools and colleges across the country but also as a serious societal problem which required urgent attention. Participant (4) stated "it's not peculiar to a particular institution. It is something that has been decentralized, that has covered the entire republic. Almost everywhere you go, at every institution even at the greater institutions of learning- the University and colleges". Participant (2) also confirmed he shared the two-fold views of the others by stressing, "It's a problem that needs to be fixed. I saw it one as a usual something that other people that came before me went through so it's obvious that I have to go through it also but it also needs to be fixed".

Another participant (3) allocated the blame of the system to three main parties, he argued, "...on the education side it [the mess] is either caused by one - the parent, two- the student and three- the teacher himself. I believe that now the current government needs to work on the educational sector." All participants had strong views of either of the two parties-the teacher and student but little was said of parents' role in the problem. Participant (1) observed that some students were complacent in the fact that they did not have to study and could pay money or give sex for grades. Participant (2) observed that some females were always the first to make payments when the teachers requested money and participant (4) noted the future drawbacks for students using the "backway to education" stating, "what it does is that students will be graduated and at the end of the day they cannot justify their diploma or the degree they are handling". Participant (3) was adamant in his claim that "[o]nce you are a teacher and start to take money from students, you are not a professional teacher... because if you are a qualified teacher, you can't do all these things". He stressed that the teachers were the crux of the problem and once they stopped accepting bribes, students will have no other option but to study. He was quick to note however, that all was not lost and there were still a few teachers who remained morally upright and made a great impact on his personal educational sojourn.

### ***Survival Tactics***

Under this master theme, participants revealed their own measures employed to address the problem and survive. The sub-themes discovered from the participants' conversations are escalate the problem and bridging the gap.

From the conversations with participants, it was seen that sometimes out of frustration students escalated their problems to a higher authority or independent party in order



for it to be addressed. In some cases, this tactic proved successful in other cases it did not.

Participant (1) recounted the scenario where students took to the streets in disruptive protest to meet the President and ask her to address the issue of teacher absenteeism in their school. He explained that this action on their part had significant impact on the problem by forcing a visit from the President to their school and resulted in “changing the corrupt teachers from the school, changing the principal from the school, bringing in books in the library for the students – changes went on”. In addition to the changes, Participant (1) further testified “... after the President came and addressed that issue, I never faced any difficulty on the issue of grades or teachers telling me to pay this amount for grades... until I left the school.”

In other instances, participants said students escalated their complaints to the Monrovia Consolidated School System (MCSS) board of directors, the Superintendent or their Representative's office. Students “... put effort together in terms of meeting the authorities that be”, with most of them showing interest but no implementation. (Participant 1)

Another tactic employed by students was to try to bridge the gap to get onto an amicable level with teachers who were being abusive or exploitative. Realizing that the teachers, corrupt or otherwise, actually held the power of their success in their hands, students were left with no choice but to establish a better rapport with teachers. Participant (1) explained “we did not see them as the enemy or to really spite them or to keep fighting them or maybe have a plan to expose them to an extent that they will lose their jobs...no, but just to minimize it.”

### ***Initial reaction, purpose and use***

Having established in detail the full picture on the state of affairs before the TELL hotline was introduced, under this master theme, the participants revealed their initial reaction to the

introduction of the hotline, their understanding of its purpose and their experience using the hotline.

As with all other proposed solutions, participants revealed that the TELL hotline was welcome with mixed feelings. “At first, I saw it like a mere charade.... little did we know that it was very much important”, was one of the participants’ (2) initial reaction to the introduction of the TELL hotline. He further explained that he initially suspected it to be an attempt from a local NGO to raise funds for their organization at the expense of students. Generally, the other participants saw the hotline as a lifeline and rescue from their current circumstance. Participants (1 & 2) explained that they were very happy for the tool and were prepared to report any issue they faced very fast using such a tool. Participant (4) also stated “the environment does not protect you to express yourself ... the TELL IT programme was giving you all the comfort and design that was required to voice out those things that are eating you up within. So we actually accepted [it] with joy and we pledged to respond to it”.

The narrations also provided a recap of the reactions of teachers as well as school administrators to the reporting hotline. Participant (3) said “... the first day when certain teachers got to know that they had a certain channel where you could send in your report, most of them cool down for a period of time”. Participant (2) explained the introduction of TELL prompted their school principal to come to the classes and ask students instead to “write the teachers name and pass it through my window and let me be aware instead of you exposing the school” in an attempt to prevent exposure.

In spite of the initial mixed reactions described, all of the participants were able to provide an accurate explanation of their understanding of the purpose and function of the reporting tool. Participant (1) was a bit limited in his knowledge of the hotline function because

apart from a registration and test SMS, he explained he did not have a reason to use the hotline after the President's visit to his school because the situation had improved. Participant (4) outlined his initial understanding of the purpose of the hotline by stating;

“this was a programme or initiative created to afford students the platform to express their disenchantment confronting them in their school. Because by going to maybe the school administrator or the principal they may not be free because of fear so this programme was created to provide that avenue so that they could express themselves and tell what they think is going on wrong in their school. They also spoke about privacy, that is your name will not be mentioned as xyz of x school said this or that”.

Participant (3) affirmed this understanding of the purpose by stating, “it is a programme where you channel your concerns, like challenges that you are facing, especially the issues of teachers loving to students and the selling of grades by teachers”. He added “... they said that if you report anybody, they can never give the information to the person that you reported so I was never afraid to use [it]”.

Participant (2) also recounted his later understanding of the hotline concluding with, “when it started working for us, we got so glued to it to the extent that we saw that as a little relief”. He explained that some students still held reservations about the confidentiality of the hotline. They believed that the custodian of the information could still track the complaints to them and provide it to teachers who wanted to retaliate against them by using their mobile numbers which are registered with the GSM companies in their names. He however countered this perception saying “I used it back then because I was not really too afraid ... it was above my institution

...managed by an independent group. They wouldn't really expose it, they want to be of help – to see how best they can get rid of the problem.”

Once students grasped the understanding of the tool and recognized its potential in curbing the problem or at least bringing the issues to light, they began to use the tool and interestingly each participant interviewed had a different experience using the TELL hotline. Participant (2) admitted he found using the hotline therapeutic. He described his experience saying;

“At first I sent my telephone number because it was like ... I can't remember exactly but after some time I received a call from a lady and she decided to quiz me on one or two things whether it was something embarrassing. She wanted the entire thing to be confidential also, where I was not maybe forced to tell her the name of the instructor or I don't have to identify myself but I should just explain what is it that's bothering me in school as a student. As a young man going to school, what is it that's bothering me? What are my plans and why was I thinking about dropping from school. But I tried to explain to her and she was just like a counselor.”

Participant (3) could not recall the full story of his experience using the hotline but he remembered submitting a complaint about problems he faced with being barred from using his phone for research while in the library. He remembered receiving a call back after his SMS complaint and being asked by the radio operator some of his proposed suggestions to remedy the problem. Participant (4) also texted in a complaint to the hotline but reported that he never received a call back or response which discouraged him from making additional reports. He stated that “it [his experience] has

the propensity of even making me to be negligent the next time when I hear of such issues because I will say what's the difference?"

Based upon the experiences of the participants, only two of them were fortunate to experience the full benefits of the TELL hotline. Moreover, due to the length of time which has elapsed since the hotline was introduced in the schools, some of the participants had difficulty recollecting the specific details of their use of the hotline since it was a one or two-time use occurrence and not an experience of a longer duration.

### **Reflection on Meaning.**

Under this broad theme, *Reflection of meaning* participants were requested to reflect on their past experiences described under the first two themes and use those experiences to suggest their preference of a suitable tool for students to use in reporting issues they are faced with in schools. The master theme revealed in the conversations under this broad theme was Mixed methods. This master theme and its respective sub-themes are discussed in the following section.

### ***Mixed Methods***

Participants reflected on their experiences in school facing exploitation and abuse and their use of the traditional reporting channels and the TELL hotline to suggest their preference of a suitable tool which students can use for reporting issues they are faced with.

All four participants were of the consensus that using one method or channel may not suit all of the students need for reporting issues they are faced with. They suggested that multiple channels should be made available however the reporting source and the feedback loop are important factors to consider. While students' major

requirement in such situations is a confidential channel which will provide them safety from retaliation, they also desire to have a channel which provides them feedback that their issues have been addressed.

Participant (1) suggested “[f]rom my own experience and from my own understanding, the way I think that students can solve all the issues they are faced with in school – the easy way to solve such an issue is to get the hotline”. He pointed out his concern as to whether the hotline was still functional in the three schools since it had been a long time. He further suggested that in the absence of a hotline any alternative reporting channel should direct complaints to the higher authorities of the school or lawmakers, and not to the school administration. Participants (2 & 4) suggested a more traditional approach for confidential reporting such as suggestion locked boxes placed in discreet locations in addition to the hotline would be convenient for students to report confidentially. Participant (2) added that “using the technology is also good but people’s perception sometimes is just somehow different most especially when people are not knowledgeable and it is not being properly explained to them”. Participant (3) inferred that he observed that many students had trouble using technology without proper training therefore he proposed a mixed method of texting complaints combined with authorities randomly calling students in a telephone survey for information. He suggested, “[a]nother way too is to have each person contact and asking them like how you are doing now”.

Participant (4) backed up his suggestion of using suggestion lock boxes in addition to the hotline by further recommending;

“The Ministry of Education can organize or establish a special independent committee outside of the education arena. Those committees only responsibility or task is to gather students’ grievances. They place the suggestion boxes at various schools, maybe after a week or at the end of every week maybe Friday, go and gather those suggestions or recommendations made by students, properly go over them, gather some of the key issues, and then make those recommendations to the Ministry of Education.”

His statement reconfirmed another important characteristic of the reporting channel that students continued to highlight, that it should be managed by a party independent from the school administration.

In summary, participants recommended the use of a variety of confidential reporting channels managed by an external independent party including, suggestion boxes and hotlines, to be made available to students for sending in their complaints. This is so that a student will not be discouraged from reporting issues just because he/she is uncomfortable or distrustful of the one available channel.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

The results of this study derived from the themes in the conversations with former students of the three pilot high schools in Liberia not only revealed the experiences of students from their direct perspective but also confirms some of the themes in the existing literature.

The purpose of this study was to reveal students’ perceptions of SMS as a suitable reporting tool based upon their lived experiences directly or indirectly with sex for grades and the TELL hotline in their schools. Using the overarching research question, “*From their experiences, how do high school students who have used the “TELL” reporting hotline in*

*Liberia perceive SMS mobile technology as a tool for reporting sex for grades?"* the study intended to add insight to existing literature with research about the experiences of some students with sex for grades and reporting with SMS technology through the lens of students.

In confirmation of the existing literature on sex for grades in school (Rosetti, 2001; Corbett & Gentry, 1993, p. 94; Mirsky, 2003), the findings of my research show that some students in high schools in Liberia have endured neglected institutions, financial and sexual exploitation, verbal abuse, emotional turmoil, fear of reporting and retaliation, and dysfunctional reporting channels. My findings revealed that these experiences contributed to students' absences, drop-out, and in some cases unfair grading or underserved failure. My study went further to reveal that even though students felt helpless in the absence of redress from their school's administration, they continued to take actions to address the problem within their own abilities by reporting to guidance counselors and other available channels, escalating complaints to higher authorities (Superintendent, lawmakers and even the President), and bridging the gaps to a smoother teacher-student relationship.

Although the participants in this study admitted to recognizing the exploitation in their schools as a problem, they all seemed to think of it as the norm or usual practice due to the prevalence of the practice which confirms previous researchers' argument of a deeper societal problem (Dahn, 2008; Atwood et al, 2012; Postmus & Davis, 2014; Delomez, 2015). They were clear in pointing out that this problem actually begins in high school and they did not have to worry about it in elementary school. They also identify the teacher, student and parent as the major contributors to the problem – with the teacher as the primary culprit as a result of his or her position of power, followed by the student. I believe that this is a significant factor and could also be key in addressing the problem. Participants in the study reported being unaware of the



teachers' code of conduct or standards to which they are held. If teachers are considered to be the main culprits in this exploitation scheme, more focus has to be placed on not just training them but weeding out the bad apples. Students have to be aware of the standards to which teachers are held and vice versa. The participants in this study recommended that the good teachers should be used as examples to influence the bad ones.

The crux of the research findings has to do with the suitability of the SMS reporting hotline to the preferences of students. In answering the research question, participants revealed their delight in having “a programme or initiative created to afford students the platform to express their disenchantment confronting them in their school” (Participant 4, 2018). All the participants were in consensus that the SMS hotline is a great tool which is suitable for reporting sex for grades and other issues in school as shown by their feedback in Table 5 below:

<b>Participants' reaction and assessment of the TELL hotline</b>	
Participant (1):	I was one of the very strong supporters and I was very happy of that.
Participant (2):	When it started working for us, we got so glued to it to the extent that we saw that as a little relief...ok ...relief in terms of somebody coming as a counsellor to help us in this process to get rid of those things that we consider to be a stereotype...most especially for the females. So we saw it completely like a relief for us and we benefitted from it greatly.
Participant (3)	I felt very happy, because even the time they introduce it I first did my report. First thing when they came they told us that it a programme where you channel your concerns, like challenges that you are facing. Especially the issues of teacher loving to students and the selling of grades by teachers. So, when they came in first I was like wow...I was very happy..., they said that if you report anybody, they can never give the information to the person that you reported so I was never afraid to use it.
Participant (4)	Yes, because like I said the environment does not protect you to express yourself how you feel so the TELL IT programme was giving you all the comfort and design that was required to voice out those things that are eating you up within. So we actually accepted it with joy and we pledged to respond to it. We actually made use of it. But even though I did not make use of it all the time but I actually responded in so many ways by using the SMS.

All of them also had different experiences using the hotline. In the famous parable of the six blind men who met an elephant for the first time and tried to describe it through their sense of touch, each blind man described the elephant according to the part of the body that he felt. This resulted in various descriptions of the same animal and each person leaving with a completely different picture of what an elephant really looks like. Like the story of the blind men and the elephant, their description of the same tool varied depending on their experience using it. While one participant was opportune to benefit from the full range of services from the hotline—registration, text-in, call-back feature, counselling and follow-up, the other three participants only benefited from the text-in feature, registration feature or text in and call-back feature of the hotline respectively. This demonstrates that technology can present an unfair advantage or disadvantage to different users depending on their level of knowledge or awareness of its functionality.

One participant (3) stressed the need for continued hands-on training when a technological intervention is introduced to students. The findings show that participants in this study were also in consensus for a mixed method reporting structure using a combination of SMS technology and traditional reporting systems such as suggestion lockboxes, counselors, etc. to meet the different needs and preferences of various students. This finding also confirms the recommendation of Rajakaruna et al (2015) for establishment of multiple reporting channels including a confidential hotline for effective reporting. Their suggestions for maintaining traditional reporting options also further confirm Thackeray and Hunter (2010) emphasis that “[e]ngaging in advocacy efforts through use of technology is not intended to replace traditional advocacy efforts such as face to face meetings with decision makers, but rather enhance and augment them” (p.588).

The findings went a step further to reveal participants' perceived characteristics of an ideal reporting tool to be:

1. Anonymous and confidential
2. Feedback on complaint
3. Managed by an independent party
4. Regular review of complaints, discussed and solutions offered and implemented

One participant (4) stressed that the goal of any good reporting tool should not only be to collect complaints from students but the ultimate goal of an effective reporting tool should be to provide solutions to students' problems.

On another hand, participants also offered suggestions on tackling the issue of teacher misconduct in schools through regular and consistent actions that include

1. Training workshops
2. Robust monitoring
3. Evaluation by both administration and students

In summary, the findings revealed that while participants appreciate with relief the role and adequacy of the TELL hotline mobile technology in providing them with an effective channel of reporting, their overall preference is to have a combination of both traditional and technological channels to report cases of misconduct. In the next chapter, the conclusion, I will further scrutinize the findings in relations to my research question and previous studies and highlight the direction for future research based upon the results of this study.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I provide a brief synthesis of my research findings in relations to previous studies and my research question and how it will impact the problem of s4g in education. I will close the chapter by providing suggestions for future research.

This research study was exploratory in nature and did not set off to test a hypothesis or provide conclusive solutions to a problem but rather to gain further insight which can be used or built upon. The findings of this study confirmed from their lived experiences of participants that financial and sexual exploitation or sex for grades as well as verbal abuse was a serious problem in their high schools in Liberia. Their experiences confirmed that not only did these acts cause them emotional turmoil but it deepened their deprivations in education and affected their sense of norm in relations to the problem. Drawing on the emotional themes which were accentuated in the participants' accounts of their experiences, this research went a step further than previous studies by using phenomenology to uncover a deeper aspect of the problem which had not been adequately explored in the literature. The phenomenological approach used in this study provided the occasion to reveal the emotional effects of the problem on students.

The results gathered from this study affirmatively answers the research question "*From their experiences, how do high school students who have used the "TELL" reporting hotline in Liberia perceive SMS mobile technology as a tool for reporting sex for grades?*". The findings confirm that the students perceived the TELL SMS technology as a suitable but inadequate tool on its own for reporting sex for grades. This is to say that even though tool delivered on the criteria required in a reporting tool by students, it does not adequately serve the needs of all students as a stand-alone channel of reporting. Participants in this study recognized that different students have varying preferences and perceptions based on the information available to them.

This affects their adoption and use of technology. In order to ensure the availability of suitable tools for all preferences, a mixed method approach is highly recommended. This mixed method approach has to be a combination of technology and traditional channels such as suggestion boxes and counselors. In Rajakaruna, Henry & Scott's (2015) research evaluation of a confidential reporting hotline for police officers, they also confirmed this mixed method approach by recommending multiple reporting options, including a confidential internal telephone line for addressing unethical behavior. (p. 440)

Shirky (2008) suggests that if you make it easier for someone to do something which they would already do they can only do more of it (p.18). In this case, if administrations want to increase students reporting of sex for grades, the convenience of the right tool for different personalities will help solve the problem of reporting.

The resounding theme from the conversations is the lack of willingness on the part of the administration to institute penalties on the perpetrators thereby leaving students feeling helpless. The stories reflect the frustrations of students that they are ready and willing to do their part in reporting and escalating exploitative acts, but their school administrations are found lacking in their commitment. It is important that administrators are held accountable for their contributions in solving the problem.

This situation can be correlated to Shirky's (2008) concept of how a working system with a mix of social and technological factors is expected to operate (p.260). Shirky (2008) suggests that the successful use of social tools in group settings depends on correctly identifying and ordering three criteria; A promise, the tool and the bargain. According to Shirky (2008), a promise is the basic requirement and the gel or "sweet spot" of any group venture (p.261). It is that essential piece which attracts the members of a group. Shirky (2008) further explains that

“making a promise without having a way to deliver on it isn’t plausible” (p. 268). The tool is the medium which group members use to deliver on the promise together. It can be a social tool or a technological tool. It can be simple or complex but it has to suit the needs of the group in delivering on the promise. The tool can be used and accessed differently by members of the group based upon their knowledge, capabilities, and access. The bargain sets out the division of labor and responsibilities for group members. It is only necessary if the first two criteria are already in place. In the words of Shirky (2008), “if you are interested in the promise and adopt the tools, what can you expect, and what will be expected of you?” (p. 260).

The promise in this situation is the effort by all parties (students, teachers, administration, Ministry of Education and parents) to work together to erase s4g and sexual exploitation from the educational system. The tools are the effective reporting channels which are being provided for students to report the issues they are faced with. But the bargain, what is expected of both sides, is somehow muddled. If students are expected to report, what is expected of administration, teachers, parents and the Ministry of Education? Confidentiality of reports and that action will be taken by authorities based on reports. Action must also be SEEN to be taken by students and teachers alike to be effective.

Are all sides keeping their part of the bargain? The bargain has to be made clear to each party what action is expected of them in tackling and solving the problem. While the promise is clear to everyone, the tool and the bargain are still to be decided upon. The findings of this research can provide insight which will help to benefit those decisions.

### **Recommended Direction for Future Research**

The problem of sex for grades in schools remains a problem of concern to many researches in and out of the educational field. Much research has been done into establishing the

prevalence and scale of the problem as well as the probable causes. Although researchers are not confident in the accuracy of the picture being reflected due to lack of data from low reporting in many places, I would surmise that sufficient basis has been laid to assess the magnitude of the problem. However, there is still a need for debate on the issue and further inquiry into the problem from various angles. Future research will benefit well by looking into strengthening the efficacy of the reporting tools for students and evaluating the role of administrators and oversight agencies in fulfilling their part of the bargain in the promise to eliminate sexual exploitation from schools by considering the below specific actions:

- ✓ The literature can benefit from more research evaluations of the implementation of tools provided to students to report s4g and sexual exploitation. A successful implementation of tools for reporting will benefit from evaluation of the process of implementation, the promise provided and how the bargain is being kept by all parties. As my study shows, TELL proved to be an excellent tool for students, but it was discontinued without any evaluation or review on its performance. This could be a discouragement to students' commitment to the promise of eliminating s4g in schools.
- ✓ Additional research into successful campaigns and specific actions taken to solve the problem and lessons learned from other countries with similar context can support the implementation of adequate tools to tackle s4g in schools.
- ✓ I would like to see more researchers explore the application of phenomenology to reveal the emotional aspects of the problem from both the students' and teachers' perspective and not to only look at the problem from a data perspective. Because the problem is a structural problem and a behavioural issue which cannot be solved with a one-time fix,

(Atwood et al, 2012) acquiring more insight from the experiences of the victims and perpetrators can greatly benefit the solution of the problem.

- ✓ Finally, the research literature can benefit from the involvement of female voices through their stories and experiences with sex for grades. Researchers and advocates need to explore additional ways to improve and facilitate female participation in the process. Postmus and David (2014) concluded with strong recommendations of working with the students themselves as key actors in any prevention programme for s4g in schools (p.15). Past research shows that females are the primary victims of this problem therefore, their involvement is paramount in finding solutions to the problem (Postmus et al, 2015; Delomez, 2015; Dahn, 2008). This research study was significantly limited in the absence of the participation of female students due to reluctance on their part to speak out even though anonymously.

In conclusion, this research study buttresses the effort in the fight and advocacy against s4g and all forms of exploitation and abuse in schools by providing insight through an emotional snapshot of students' experiences, perceptions and preferences and also laying out the basis for the design of appropriate tools for students to use in reporting sexual exploitation and s4g in school.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I

#### INFORMATION LETTER-SHORT VERSION FOR TELL OPERATOR FIRST CONTACT WITH STUDENTS

**Study Title: Through students' lens: Is SMS technology a suitable tool for reporting "sex for grades"?**

Hello, this is the TELL Operator speaking and I have some information for you.

A research is being conducted in Liberia by a student researcher to complete her Masters studies in communications and Technology. The researcher wishes to interview four to six students (or former) in Liberia who have used the TELL reporting platform in any of the three pilot high schools. The research study is looking into uncovering the lived experiences of students who have used the TELL platform in order to better understand what kind of reporting tools students prefer to use to report sexual exploitation in schools.

Your telephone number is one of those which was randomly selected from the TELL reporting database as a potential participant in the interview.

The interview will be conducted by telephone and your identity will remain completely unknown to the interviewer as with Accountability Lab. Please be assured that none of the information you have reported using the TELL platform will be released to the researcher, except your telephone number. The interview will run for up to 60 minutes and you will be compensated afterwards for your time with a \$10 recharge credit on your number.

Your participation in this research will not only make school authorities and researchers understand how some students feel about the kinds of reporting tools provided to address the problem of sex for grades but also provide information needed for development of appropriate tools for addressing sexual exploitation in schools.

In order to participate you have to be above 18 years of age, are you 18 years or above?

Now that you have confirmed that you meet the age criteria, would you like to grant your permission to the TELL team to give your number to the student researcher who will call you and provide more information and answers to your questions?

**Appendix II****INFORMATION LETTER FOR RESEARCHER**

**Study Title: Through students' lens: Is SMS technology a suitable tool for reporting "sex for grades"?**

**Research Investigator:**

NAME: Melvana Vatekeh

ADDRESS: Paynesville, Monrovia, Liberia

Student of University of Alberta

EMAIL: melmen2007@yahoo.com

PHONE NUMBER: 0770267114

**Supervisor (if applicable):**

Professor Supervisor: Dr. Gordon Gow

ADDRESS

University of Alberta

EMAIL: ggow@ualberta.ca

PHONE NUMBER: n/a

**Background**

- You are being asked to be in this study because you have been identified by Accountability Lab as an anonymous user of the TELL reporting tool which was piloted in your high school for anonymously reporting issues faced by students.
- Your telephone number was randomly selected from the TELL users database for this study and your identity will remain unknown to both Accountability Lab and I.
- By providing your permission to have your number provided to me, you have been selected as a potential participant in this study. I will now like to provide you with more information which would allow you to make a decision to participate as an anonymous participant in this study. You can also ask questions for clarification.
- Please be assured that none of the information you have reported using the TELL technology will be released to me or anyone else, only your contact number which has been randomly selected from the database has been provided to me based on your verbal permission to share it and confirmation that you are above 18 years of age.
- Participant in this study will be required to do a telephone interview with me at a date and time of their convenience to talk about their experience using the TELL reporting tool.
- Your participation in this study will not only help school authorities and researchers understand how some students feel about the kinds of reporting tools provided to address the problem of sex for grades but also provide information needed for development of appropriate tools for addressing sexual exploitation in schools.
- This study is being conducted in fulfillment of my capstone study requirement of the Masters of Arts in Communication programme with the University of Alberta, Canada. This study is personally funded.
- The findings of this research are not intended for sale but to inform policies on sexual exploitation in schools, specifically in regards to reporting.

### **Purpose**

Past research has shown that sexual exploitation in schools continues to be a problem in many developing countries. Policies and tools have been introduced to reduce these practices but many of the reporting systems provided are not trusted or used by students.

In Liberia, an SMS tool -TELL, was introduced in three high schools to empower students to confidentially report sexual exploitation and other issues faced by students through reliable channels. In this research, I would like to explore the views of about 4-6 of these high school students in Liberia based on their real life experience using the TELL reporting tool. Through interviews with these students, this study highlights their experiences with the aim of providing insight and a better understanding on how some students perceive this kind of reporting channel. By looking into the lived experiences of these students, I hope to provide some insight into their preferences of a tool which is empowering, appropriate and reliable to report sexual exploitation in schools.

### **Study Procedures**

- I am conducting this study in Monrovia, Liberia with 4-6 students from the three high schools where the TELL technology was piloted. Your identities will remain anonymous to me and your telephone number which was randomly selected from a database of users of the TELL reporting tool was only shared with me based upon your permission provided to the TELL operator to share.
- Data for this study will be collected through one-on-one telephone interviews with participants
- After this conversation today, once you confirm your consent and willingness to participate in the study, I will be contact you again via phone at a suitable time and date of your convenience for the 45-60 minutes telephone interview.
- You will be required to identify a quiet and convenient place to conduct the telephone interview and ensure there is ample privacy and no distractions.
- You will be asked to provide a verbal consent by phone before the start of the interview.
- You will also be asked four questions to guide our interview conversation.
- The telephone interview with each participant will last a maximum of 60 minutes
- During the interview, you will be required to share personal experiences which may be emotionally tasking. However, by sharing your experiences you could contribute through this research to preventing others from similar incidents.
- If at any point during the conversation, you are uncomfortable to continue, you are at liberty to request to reschedule the interview or withdraw.
- You will be allowed to withdraw from the study at any point during the interview process or within one week after the final interview, if you so require, by notifying me on the number which will be provided to you.
- I will record the entire telephone interview using the mobile phone recording technology and a laptop or mini/recorder as a back-up.
- I will also transcribe all the interviews using a transcription software and will securely save the transcribed files as well as the audio files on my personal laptop in a password protected folder. No one else will have access to these files except my Supervisor.



### Benefits

- There are no direct benefits to participants of this study which I can highlight at this time, other than compensation for your time spent for the interview. However, if the findings of this study are used in the future as intended to gain insight and inform the national policies for addressing sexual exploitation in Liberian schools, you will be proud you were a part of this process to bring lasting change to the educational system-not only for your benefit but also for generations to come.
- I sincerely hope that the information uncovered from doing this study will help all parties better understand students' preferences for reporting tools and channels for sexual exploitation in schools and that these findings will then inform a national strategy for addressing the issue.
- You will not incur any costs as a result of being in this study. All telephone calls for the interview will be initiated by me and I will cover the associated costs. As a result of your participation in this study, you will receive as a token of appreciation for your time, a 10\$USD credit refill on your telephone number provided to me by Accountability Lab.

### Risk

- You will not be exposed to any major risks as an anonymous participant in this study. However, depending on the nature of your experiences to be shared in the interview, you could find the exercise emotionally taxing. Your telephone number will not be shared with or known by anyone else except me and will be promptly deleted from my directories after the study to prevent any future use of this information.

### Voluntary Participation

- You are under no obligation to participate in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary
- If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you.
- If you decide to stop we will ask you how you would like us to handle the data collected up to that point.
- This could include returning it to you, destroying it or using the data collected up to that point.
- If you do not want to answer some of the questions you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.
- If you notify of your complete withdrawal from the study during the interviews or within one week after the final interview, all audio/transcribed data I have of your interview will be completely deleted and will not be used in the study findings or final report.

### Confidentiality & Anonymity

- The research is primarily intended for a Capstone research study which will be posted in the University of Alberta library archives when approved. Findings will be shared with Accountability Lab and other online and offline resources to buttress the literature on the

topic. Students will not be identified in any part of the study final report since in fact their identities are unknown.

- Data will be kept confidential, and only accessible to me or my Supervisor.
- Participants will not be identified in the process of the study and will remain anonymous throughout, including in the dissemination of the research. I am unable to trace the telephone number to you because there is no public directory in place in Liberia which can link numbers to names of persons except if the information is received directly from the mobile company and this is provided only in extreme situations.
- As per the University policy, data will be kept electronically under password protection in my storage archives for a minimum of 5 years following completion of research. This data will be appropriately destroyed after the period in a way that ensures privacy and confidentiality.
- Since participants are unknown to, it will be impossible to share copies of a report of the research findings however, the research findings will be shared with the pilot schools' libraries or presented in student forums.

### Further Information

- If you have any further questions regarding this study, please do not hesitate to contact:  
Melvana Vatekeh  
0770267114(local) or 0019172945489(USA)

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines by a Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Research Ethics Office at (780) 492-2615.

## Appendix III

### PARTICIPANTS INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Study Title: Through students' lens: Is SMS technology a suitable tool for reporting "sex for grades"?**

Verbal Consent Statement via telephone interview:

The research study has been explained to you and you have been given the opportunity to ask questions and your questions have been answered. If you have additional questions, you have been told whom to contact. **Do you agree to participate in this research study and grant your verbal consent to participate in the ensuing telephone interview knowing that you can withdraw at any point with no consequences to you?**

## Appendix IV

### PHENOMENOLOGICAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Study Title: Through students' lens: Is SMS technology a suitable tool for reporting "sex for grades"?**

As per the prescribed requirement for **interviewing** in phenomenological studies, I will be using a three-pronged themed approach with the below four open-ended questions and a few prompts to direct the conversations and my participants' narration of their experiences in line with the topic being explored:

1. Focused Life History
2. The Details of Experience
3. Reflection on the Meaning

Theme	Questions	Prompts
Focused Life History	Can you share a few of your experiences directly or indirectly with sexual exploitation or sex for grades in your school?	How did you feel? What were you thinking? How did you react?
The Details of Experience	How did these experiences shape your understanding of the problem and how it needs to be addressed?  Describe your experience using the TELL reporting hotline and what prompted you to use it?	How did you feel? What were you thinking? How did you react?
Reflection on the Meaning	Based on your experiences you have shared, describe your idea of what a suitable tool for reporting sexual exploitation in schools should be like?	

## Appendix V

### RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL

3/8/2018

<https://remo.ualberta.ca/REMO/Doc/0/LCCPKS8BUFL41867BJLATCD20F/fromString.html>**RESEARCH ETHICS OFFICE**

308 Campus Tower  
Edmonton, AB, Canada T6G 1K8  
Tel: 780.492.0459  
Fax: 780.492.9429  
[www.reo.ualberta.ca](http://www.reo.ualberta.ca)

#### Notification of Approval

Date: August 22, 2017

Study ID: Pro00072178

Principal Investigator: [Melvana Vatekeh](#)

Study Supervisor: [Gordon Gow](#)

Study Title: Through students' lens: Is SMS technology a suitable tool for reporting "sex for grades"?

Approval Expiry Date: Tuesday, August 21, 2018

Approved Consent Form: Approval Date 8/22/2017

Approved Document [Consent Form](#)

Thank you for submitting the above study to the Research Ethics Board 1. Your application has been reviewed and approved on behalf of the committee.

A renewal report must be submitted next year prior to the expiry of this approval if your study still requires ethics approval. If you do not renew on or before the renewal expiry date, you will have to re-submit an ethics application.

Approval by the Research Ethics Board does not encompass authorization to access the staff, students, facilities or resources of local institutions for the purposes of the research.

Sincerely,

Trish Reay, PhD  
Associate Chair, Research Ethics Board 1

*Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system).*