

## Sexualised Violence in Pedagogical Contexts and the German Educational Research Association (GERA)

### Recommendations for the critical reappraisal of the GERA's handling of sexualised violence

Preliminary note: The Working Group on the GERA's Handling of Sexualised Violence was constituted on 28 February 2020. The working group was formed as a result of numerous suggestions, some of which emerged from a discussion of affected individuals following the international congress of those affected by sexual violence in Berlin at the end of 2018. Others came from a request for support from the Subdivision for Social Pedagogy to the GERA's governing council regarding the topic of sexualised violence against children and adolescents, and from the "Recommendations for the Critical Reappraisal of Sexual Child Abuse in Institutions", written by the Independent Commission for the Critical Reappraisal of Sexual Child Abuse, and presented in Berlin in December 2019. All divisions of the GERA had been asked to nominate a maximum of two delegates. In addition, three colleagues with relevant research expertise in the field of sexualised violence were invited, as well as the head of the archive of the Library for Research on the History of Education, where the files of the GERA's council have been archived since 1964.

The following recommendations were developed in a total of five plenary meetings and three meetings of smaller subgroups. The desire for reappraisal was held by all participants, even though there were differing views about what exactly should be reappraised and to what extent. Those named at the end of this paper have expressly lent their approval to the recommendations, which emerged as the result of a hard struggle in search of compromise.

In 2017, the governing council of the German Educational Research Association (GERA) described it as "an important task of educational science as discipline to scientifically revisit the topic of sexualised violence in educational contexts and, in particular, to analyse self-critically what significance educational science has had in dealing with sexualised violence in the past" (GERA 2017, p. 96).<sup>1</sup>

In educational science, violence perpetrated by pedagogical professionals against children and youth has long been a marginal topic. This is especially true of sexualised violence. A language for boundary violations and sexualised violence is only gradually being developed in research and in pedagogical praxis, and support is now being sought from other institutions, such as specialised counseling centers. Since 2010, a gradually changing approach to sexual violence has also become

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<sup>1</sup> In the scientific discourse, different terminology is used, including sexual or sexualised violence, abuse, and sexual child abuse. The working group uses the term sexualised violence and thus adheres to the definition applied in 2010 by the expert commission on "Sexuality and Power in Pedagogical Contexts". This term "comprises every association of sexuality, power and violence that violates or compromises human integrity". It emphasises "that it is not sexuality per se that is the problem, but rather the violent exercise of power that uses the medium of sexuality in various forms" (Reh et al. 2012, p. 15).

apparent in educational science, where it is visible in research projects, scientific conferences, discussions, publications, and professional political activities. To the extent that one can tell at present, this dynamic did not initially derive from a genuine educational-scientific interest; rather, it was set in motion by the reports of violence made by those personally affected, by committed journalistic reporting and clarification, by media attention and by political pressure to act. In the *Handbuch sexualisierte Gewalt und pädagogische Kontexte* (handbook of sexualised violence and educational contexts) (Retkowski, Treibel, Tuider, 2018, pp. 20ff.), its editors mention the few relevant studies published prior to 2010 whilst noting large gaps about this subject area overall.

This changed thanks to the Federal Ministry of Education and Research's (BMBF) funding lines on sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts<sup>2</sup>, and not least as the result of various scientific studies on means of addressing it in religious institutions, for example (see Andresen 2021). Thus, (education-related) scientific research projects dealing with sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts now represent an important pillar of the process in which civil society is coming to terms with it in general, something which can be achieved "only in part through legal or scientific agendas" (Brachmann 2017, p. 77). In 2016, the *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* [Journal for Pedagogy] published a themed issue entitled "Coming to terms with sexual violence in institutions of growing up: Challenges of educational research and positioning"; it referred directly to the need for reappraisal.<sup>3</sup>

It is this expertise that the GERA brings to this process of civil society reappraisal, as evidenced by the research of its members and which should be further promoted and supported by the Association itself. However, the GERA does not merely play the role of a distant, research-oriented observer; it is part of the problem of sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts and involved in it. It is involved not only as a result of the traditionally close relationships between actors in pedagogical praxis (the profession) and research (the discipline), but also because of the organisation's own procedures and discussions in connection with the cases of sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts. These include, for example, the cases of sexualised violence at the Odenwald School. The organisation's entanglements and degrees of responsibility should therefore be clarified and thereby made the subject of external investigation.

The GERA – represented by its governing council – has served an "initiator and moderator function" (Brachmann 2017, p. 82) in mediating the processing of its own involvement in and research on the problem of sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts. This has been the case in both institutional and in administrative practical terms, and it has been interpreted differently by GERA councils over time. Moreover, the question arises as to the positioning of influential GERA members in leadership roles in the divisions and subdivisions, for example, as do questions about discussions and positioning within those divisions and subdivisions.

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<sup>2</sup> On its origins, see <https://www.forschungsnetzwerk-gegen-sexualisierte-gewalt.de/de/startseite-1/entstehung-der-foerderlinie> [Accessed 26 November 2020].

<sup>3</sup> This was published as "Aufarbeitung sexueller Gewalt in Institutionen des Aufwachsens. Herausforderungen erziehungswissenschaftlicher Forschung und Positionierung", under the direction of Sabine Andresen, Karin Böllert and Martin Wazlawik (2016), *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* 62 5, pp. 619-623. [https://www.pedocs.de/frontdoor.php?source\\_opus=16833](https://www.pedocs.de/frontdoor.php?source_opus=16833)

When confronted with reports about the sexualised violent crimes that took place at the Odenwald School over many years, successive GERA councils initially issued no responses whatsoever, and when they eventually did, their first reactions ranged from restrained to defensive in nature:

- In 1999, when parents approached the GERA council in response to initial press reports, requesting that the GERA address the incidents mentioned, the council refused, stating “that an in-depth review was not called for because neither the Odenwald School, nor the public prosecutor’s office saw any need for action with regard to the offenses reported” (Thole 2012, p. 6).
- In 2010, a GERA conference year, as the media discourse about the Odenwald School became more explosive compared to a decade before, the GERA council issued a “Statement on the Violation of the Psychological and Physical Integrity of Adolescents in Pedagogical Institutions” (GERA 2010). The actual topic, sexualised violence against children and adolescents, was spoken about in an avoidant manner, as something that was not the GERA’s responsibility (see Windheuser 2014). In the press, the statement was described as defensive (see, e.g., Globert & Irle 2010).

This rejection of responsibility was described in 2012 as a “serious mistake” (Thole 2012, p. 6), and GERA councils since 2010 have shown varying degrees of commitment in leading the GERA as well as the field of educational science out of its defensive attitude or even its outright refusal to discuss incidents of sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts at the end of the 1990s. With the establishment of the aforementioned expert commission (see footnote 1), a workshop in 2011, a publication on “Sexualised Violence, Power and Pedagogy” in 2012, and, in 2017, a themed section of the journal *Erziehungswissenschaft*, entitled “On the Role of Educational Science in the Debate on Sexual Violence in Pedagogical Contexts”, representatives of the Association positioned themselves as contrarians and defined the positioning of ‘educational science’ as well (Thole 2012; Thole 2014; EW 2017). More recently, Hartmut von Hentig’s role and the withdrawal of the Ernst Christian Trapp Prize in connection with it (DGfE 2020) have been at the forefront of the Association’s discussions.

To be fair, there was (educational) scientific research and public discussion about sexualised violence in pedagogical settings even before 2010. However, none of the leaders of GERA councils, relevant divisions and subdivisions are known to have commented on any of the cases of sexualised violence in child and youth welfare that became public knowledge. Instead, they appear to have remained silent on issues such as how the cases were dealt with by authorities and on the lack of critical discourse (Bütow 2012; Wolff 2015; Unabhängige Kommission 2020; Baader et al. 2020). In this respect, questions arise here, too, about the responsibility of the GERA councils regarding the forms of reception on the one hand and the de-thematisation or non-reception of relevant findings on sexualised violence against children and adolescents in pedagogical contexts on the other.

## Confronting the past and the GERA's institutional and organisational responsibility

Based on the example of the ongoing controversies about the violent crimes at the Odenwald School, as well as – in this context – the revocation of the Ernst Christian Trapp Award and the remarkably defensive attitude of successive GERA councils until 2010, it becomes clear that the “necessary confrontation of the discipline and professional organisation with its involvement in enabling, facilitating, trivialising or legitimising violent constellations [...] must always include a self-critical component” (Kessl 2017, p. 10).

In our opinion, a self-critical process of reappraisal can only be accomplished by means of an independent and systematic analysis of the role played by GERA, as represented by the leadership of its council, divisions, and subdivisions. The results provided so far by (educational) research projects on sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts suggest that the *enabling, covering up and legitimising* of known violent crimes cannot be attributed to individual acts or individual perpetrators. The frequently expressed interpretation that these are matters of (monstrous) individual perpetrators has proven to be a myth. Instead, we must assume that these are the results of perpetrator *systems* (Brachmann 2019) or *networks* (Baader et al. 2020; Unabhängige Kommission 2021) in action. Based on these findings and on the perspective on groupings, networks, systems and structures, the question arises as to whether, and – if so – in what way the GERA as professional organisation contributed to a climate of willfully ignoring or legitimising sexualised violence.

The GERA as an organisation is a powerful structure in which the hegemonies of the scientific field are both represented and reproduced – not least through the recognition and denial of influential positions and important prizes. As an umbrella organisation of those active in the field of educational science, the GERA has the expertise “to inquire, to enlighten, perhaps also to admonish or to stimulate processes of inquiry, enlightenment and the taking of a closer look” (Thole 2012, p. 6). What exactly falls within the responsibility of the GERA must be part of the processes of reappraisal. The responsibility of a professional organisation is measured on its publicly documented self-image and by the statements it has formulated on issues of sexualised violence and the perspectives it has taken on related processes. It clearly falls within the GERA's responsibility if the leadership of its council or of its divisions and subdivisions has declined to follow up on leads, pursued strategies of concealment or participated in concealment themselves. These include strategies of personal and institutional protection in particular.

There is a tendency to see reappraisal as open-ended, and documents and clues can always give rise to new constellations. With this in mind, we recommend that the GERA's council commission an external body to investigate the structures in the context of the incidents of sexualised violence at the Odenwald School as well as the structures identified in connection with Kentler's work in child and youth welfare and to explore the involvement of the GERA's members as well as the network and knowledge practices that promote and support this involvement. The focus should be on these two specific cases in the first instance, with the intent to examine other possible cases and additional aspects that promote structural violence. It seems relevant to us to take these

cases as a central starting point, not only because they provide a concrete, empirically identifiable instance which – in the case of the Odenwald School – extends into the controversies surrounding the revocation of Hartmut von Hentig’s Ernst Christian Trapp Award. This case-related view can, for its part, also open up perspectives of reappraisal that go beyond these concrete cases, leading us to expect differentiated insights into the function that the GERA, its actors and its network and knowledge practices have assumed in the area of sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts.

### Defining the reappraisal’s goals and formats

An approach toward the definition of goals was made in the working group via the independent commission’s recommendation paper on the critical reappraisal of sexual child abuse in institutions (Unabhängige Kommission 2019). The goal of an external commission for critical reappraisal should be to reconstruct the activities and involvements of the GERA, *beginning* with the two aforementioned cases, i.e., with that of the Odenwald School and of Kentler’s work in the Berlin child and youth welfare system, and proceeding along the following themes:

- (1) Identification of cases, chronology of reception/de-thematisation, direct address by the council or informal thematisation.
- (2) Have there been discussions about sexualised violence in the past decades: e.g., discourse starting from self-help and counseling (Wildwasser), the women’s movement, the *Runder Tisch Heimerziehung* [Round table on residential institutions for children and youth], and so on?
- (3) Chronology of events: (From) *when* was the GERA council aware of *what*? *What* was made known to it and *by whom*?
- (4) Chronology of reactions: *How* did the GERA council react to inquiries, reports, and announcements – and *why*?
- (5) Chronology of discourse development: *How* and with *what topics* did educationalists – and here in particular, we mean members of the GERA as well as the association’s divisions and subdivisions – respond to a) the statements and actions (conferences, publications) of the council and b) to the topic of “sexualised violence and (progressive) education”, which became prominent through the “Odenwald scandal”.
- (6) Significance of language in the context of critically reappraising sexualised violence.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The critical reappraisal should include reflection upon whether and which linguistic formulations were or are part of the webs of concealment. In the case of the reappraisal of the cases in the Berlin child and youth welfare system, for example, this would relate to the term “experiments”, which suggests a reform orientation with a potentially positive connotation. In fact, what happened under the guise of the term “experiment” was sexualised violence against children under the state’s responsibility. In part, it was also the use of the term “pedophilia” itself in the pedagogical discourse that contributed to the trivialisation and concealment when it was emphasised that it was associated with a special love and affection for children and, by extension, with the realisation of a pedagogy that

Based on these objectives and the problems associated with these themes, the following challenges and particularities must be considered in the process of an external reappraisal:

Regarding (2): In the case of the Odenwald School, the fact that the council had at least one concrete inquiry (and additional clues, see Thole 2012) in 1999 but that the (then-new) council did not react publicly until 2010 is a circumstance that requires an explanation. Against this backdrop, it is desirable to achieve a comprehensive reconstruction of whatever knowledge individuals might have had – or which they can be proven to have had – at different points in time.

Regarding (3): Analogous to (2), it is necessary to work through the circumstances that led to the inadequate reactions on the part of the council when cases came to light in the child and youth welfare system, especially in residential institutions, as well as in other areas of pedagogical activity.

Regarding (4): Possible thematic and personal hegemonies of the discursive space which are made visible by such reconstruction form an important starting point for the question of why the organisational appraisal of the Odenwald School scandal in the context of the GERA proceeded so slowly and, initially, so defensively. On the personnel level, attention must be paid first to relations of power and dependency, generational and gender relations, and biases of various kinds. At the thematic level, any marginalisation and tabooing of topics must be taken into account alongside (instead of) the topics that in fact dominated.

In addition, an external commission for critical reappraisal is expected to present a concept for data protection and ethical action. Moreover, the participation of those affected must be ensured. The working group also recommends the establishment of an independent point of contact for affected individuals.

Possible formats include:

- the analysis of documents (e.g., council files, the files of divisions and subdivisions, publications in the context of the association as well as papers from the estates of particular individuals and the records of GERA conferences), as well as through
- interviews with the actors involved and the hearing of colleagues as contemporary witnesses.
- network analyses/identification of networks in the community, and
- looking at critical reappraisals of other professional organisations (e.g., those of sexologists) with connections to pedagogical contexts in order to reconstruct extended networks of organisations, people and places.

The results of the scientific reappraisal should provide information about whether and how evidence about the positions of actors and institution-related decisions (publications, conference topics, etc.),

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loved children (see Baader 2019). Moreover, the term “victim” is rejected by many of those affected by sexualised violence. Therefore, the process must continually examine which linguistic formulations and scientific terms contribute to the reproduction and/or legitimisation of sexualised violence and to the discrimination faced by those affected by sexualised violence rather than contributing to a critical reappraisal.

concrete interconnections, networks and discourse formations within the GERA can be identified that favoured, enabled, or legitimised the tabooing, the relativisation or even the justification of sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts. The critical reappraisal of the two cases may provide a sense of the need for additional reappraisal assignments in the sense of the reappraisal process structure described above. Based on its findings, the externally commissioned reappraisal body would have to formulate recommendations for the future work of the GERA and suggest potential reforms for its formal procedures, its content-related orientation, the treatment of its members and, above all, for the acknowledgement and respectful treatment of those affected by sexualised violence in educational contexts.

### Concluding Recommendations

Finally, we would like to emphasise that the initiation of an external, initially research-related reappraisal process is a prerequisite for the GERA's internal reappraisal process. We recommend that the GERA council initiate an external reappraisal (by historians, sociologists, psychoanalysts, and others) and that they provide the necessary financial means. If this is not possible using the organisation's own resources, alternative financing options should be explored.

In addition, we consider it necessary that the GERA appoint a scientific advisory board. Among other things, this advisory board would have the task of assessing the results and recommendations of the external reappraisal commission, of preparing decisions about possible reforms (of, e.g., the procedure for admitting new members, the code of ethics, or the identification of topics for conferences and meetings) and of furthering debates within the organisation.

Only when the GERA recognises and deals with its organisational responsibility in the terms described above will it take appropriately seriously the rights of those impacted by sexualised violence in pedagogical contexts to have their experiences recognised and addressed.

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