

Educator Sexual Abuse

Charol Shakeshaft

Professor

Department of Foundations, Leadership and Policy Studies

Molestation, rape, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse, sexual harassment. These are words and phrases that are used to describe adult-to-student sexual abuse in schools, an act that I label “educator sexual abuse.” This article is a summary of a strand of research I have been conducting over the past decade, which has been funded by three grants from the U.S. Department of Education. During this time, I have collected data from students, parents, administrators, and teachers through one-one interviews and self-report surveys. I have performed secondary analyses of the AAUW *Hostile Hallways* data sets (1993 and 2001) and have examined news coverage and legal documents of alleged incidents of educator sexual abuse. This article summarizes selected findings from this inquiry.

No matter what we call it, educator sexual abuse has three components: (1) any behavior by an adult (2) directed at a student (3) that is intended to sexually arouse or titillate the adult or the child. The behavior can include physical, verbal or visual acts. Examples of educator sexual abuse include touching the breasts or genitals of students, showing students pictures of a sexual nature, or conversations, jokes or questions directed at students that are sexual in nature.

Prevalence of Educator Sexual Abuse

When I talk about educator sexual abuse, one of the first questions parents (but not educators) ask is, “How widespread is this practice?” Parents want to know how much to worry about educator sexual abuse and where to place it on the list of evils that can harm children.

Despite a number of national studies about child sexual abuse funded by the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Justice, and the U.S. Department of Education, there are no



Newspaper headlines underscore the increased number of allegations and actual cases of educator misconduct.

national studies that document educator sexual abuse.¹ It is curious to note that none of the federally funded studies of child sexual abuse provide data that could answer parents' questions. In these studies, teachers are most often subsumed in the category “other” that includes any person who is not a parent or parent substitute. Since 49 percent of children are sexually abused by someone other than a parent or parent substitute, it seems sensible to know what types of “others” are sexually abusing children.

Most knowledge of educator sexual abuse comes from newspaper reports, hardly a reliable sample. However, newspaper coverage does remind us that educator sexual abuse is a regular occurrence in all parts of the United States. Below is a sampling of stories that were published during just one month (February 2003) and which represent only those incidents that have come to the attention of school and law enforcement officials.

- Henderson, NC: The Henderson County School Board agrees to pay \$1.78 million to the families of 17 children who were alleged sexual victims of a former teacher assistant.
- Augusta, WI: Family alleges sexual assault of 12-year-old boy by male teacher.
- Ann Arbor, MI: Male high school teacher assaults female student.

- Indiana: Former Baptist school principal to be sentenced for taking an 11-year-old female student across country to have sex with her.
- Omaha, NE: Wrestling coach sentenced to 45 days in jail and required to apologize publicly to female student he assaulted.
- Sarasota, FL: Former female high school assistant coach pleads no contest to unlawful sexual activity and committing a lewd and lascivious act with two students on her basketball and softball teams.
- Westminster, CO: Male softball coach gets six years in prison for sexually assaulting seven girls on his softball team.
- Amelia, OH: Former male high school administrative assistant gets 18-month sentence for having sex with female high school student.
- Hackensack, NJ: 42-year-old female middle school teacher admits sexual intercourse with sixth grade male student.
- Yonkers, NY: 50-year-old male Montessori teacher fondles 7-year-old student in bathroom.
- Bullhead City, AZ: Male ELL teacher has sexual contact with 12-year-old female student. Teacher is a registered sex offender in Florida.

Unlike government-sponsored studies that do not examine educator sexual abuse, the American Association of University Women (AAUW) included questions on the *Hostile Hallways* survey that provides national data on incidence. In addition, there are regional studies (e.g., Shakeshaft, 1994, 2002; Wishnietsky, 1992). None of the studies — either singly or as a group — answer all of the reasonable questions that parents, students and the public ask about educator sexual abuse. Nevertheless, they are currently the best we have.

My secondary analysis of the 2000 AAUW data² indicates that 9.6 percent of all students in grades 8 to 11 report educator sexual abuse. This proportion is significantly less than regional studies would indicate. Of only those students who reported peer or educator sexual abuse, 21 percent were targets of educators. As is evident from Table 1, girls are slightly more likely than boys to have been targeted by an educator, and black and Latina/o students are more likely than white students to have been victimized. Verbal and visual abuse is more prevalent than physical sexual abuse, especially for white students.

Predator Descriptions

Teachers who sexually abuse believe the stereotype of an abuser as an easily identifiable danger to children. In elementary schools, the abuser is often one of the people that students most like and that parents most trust. In my studies, the abusers of children younger than seventh grade have different patterns than those who abuse older children. The educators who target elementary school children are often high achievers in the profession and, compared to their non-abusing counterparts, hold a disproportionate number of awards and teaching recognitions. They are more often recognized in the community, the state, and sometimes the nation as distinguished and dedicated educators. It is common to find that educators who have been sexually abusing children are also the same educators who display on their walls the Chamber of Commerce Teaching Award or the Pleasantview County Outstanding Teacher of the Year

	% All	% Females	% Males	% White	% Black	% Latina/o	% Asian
Non-Contact	8.7	9.7	7.6	7.9	10.8	11	1.8
Contact	6.7	7.6	6.2	5.5	9.1	9	1.8
Either or Both	9.6	10.3	8.8	8.4	12.3	12.2	1.8

certificate. This popularity and trust confounds district officials and community members, leading professionals to ignore allegations against a teacher on the grounds that such an outstanding teacher would never sexually abuse.

It is important to understand that while most sexual abusers in schools are considered among the best teachers available, most of the distinguished teachers are not pedophiles. However, those who are pedophiles work at being recognized as good teachers in order to be able to sexually abuse children. Being a good teacher is the way they get to children, especially those who abuse elementary and younger middle school students.

Job Title	Percent
Teacher	18
Coach	15
Substitute Teacher	13
Bus Driver	12
Teacher's Aide	11
Other School Employee	10
Security Guard	10
Principal	6
Counselor	5
Total	100

At the late middle and high school level, educator abusers might be outstanding teachers but they also might be mediocre. At this level, the acts are less premeditated and planned and are more often a result of bad judgment and a sense of privilege.

Most educators do not sexually abuse children. The small percentage of those who do almost always have targeted many children throughout their careers, which means that the number of teachers who abuse is many fewer than the number of students who are abused. The majority of educators who abuse are classroom teachers, followed by coaches. Teachers whose job descriptions include time with individual students such as music teachers are more likely to sexually abuse than other teachers.

The AAUW data do not allow for an analysis by sex of abuser. Other studies indicate that male teachers abuse more than female teachers (96 percent vs. 4 percent), but these comparisons must be made with nationwide data (Shakeshaft, 2002).

Patterns of Staff Sexual Abuse of Students

At all ages, there are children whose breasts, buttocks and genitals are touched, who are kissed and forced to have sexual intercourse, who are bullied (both emotionally and physically) into touching a teacher's penis, who are shown pornographic photographs, and who are made to listen to sexual slurs and stories. All this occurs at the hands of educators. Sexual abuse happens in all grades: 38 percent of reported adult abusers targeted elementary students; 56 percent abused middle or high school students; and 6 percent abused students throughout K-12.

Most sexual abuse of students by adults occurs in the school, in empty classrooms, in hallways, in offices. Sometimes the abuse happens right in front of other students. It is not unusual for a teacher to take a student into a storage room attached to the classroom

and have sexual intercourse while the rest of the class does seat work. Often teachers touch students during movies. In one class, boys reported that the teacher would call them up to his desk at the front of the room and, one at a time, while discussing homework, would fondle each boy's penis. Every child in the room knew what was happening, and they talked about it among themselves. Although this teacher repeated the same behavior year after year, it was only after he had been teaching for 15 years, that a student in the classroom finally reported the abuse.

Sexual abusers use many strategies to entrap students. They lie to them, isolate them, make them feel complicit, and force them to have sexual contact. Often teachers target vulnerable or marginal students who feel especially gratified by attention and whom the teachers know will be disbelieved if they report abuse.

Effects of Child Sexual Abuse

The research tells us that an abuser has a good chance of never being discovered or, if discovered, receiving only minimal sanctions. What about the children who are abused? What chances do they have?

Sexual crimes against children result in damage that lasts well into adulthood in most children, and in the majority is never fully repaired. Child sexual abuse targets lose trust in adults and authority figures, suffer physical ailments and lowered immune systems, and do less well in school. They often drop out of or avoid school. Sexually abused children are more likely than children who aren't sexually abused to be substance users as adults and to have difficulty forming intimate relationships. David Finkelhor (2001), the premier researcher of child sexual abuse, notes that the same sense of betrayal and shame that attaches to incest is found in sexual abuse by teachers where the "pseudo parental relationship has been sexualized."

Re-analysis of the AAUW data indicates that targets of educator sexual abuse suffer emotional, educational and health effects. At least one-third of students reported behaviors that would negatively affect academic achievement:

- Avoid the teacher or other educator (43 percent)
- Don't want to go to school (36 percent)
- Don't talk much in class (34 percent)
- Have trouble paying attention (31 percent)
- Stayed home from school or cut a class (29 percent)
- Found it hard to study (29 percent)

About one-fourth of students reported academic or discipline repercussions:

- Changed schools (18.7 percent)
- Made a lower grade on a test or assignment (25 percent)
- Made a lower grade in a class (25 percent)
- Got into trouble with school authorities (25 percent)
- Felt less likely to get a good grade (23 percent)

Health effects such as having trouble sleeping and loss of appetite were reported by 28 percent of students. A substantial number of targets reported experiencing negative feelings of self because of the abuse:

- Felt embarrassed (51 percent)
- Felt self-conscious (39 percent)
- Less sure of self or less confident (37 percent)
- Felt afraid or scared (36 percent)
- Felt confused about identity (29 percent)
- Doubted whether could ever have a happy romantic relationship (29 percent)

In addition to costs to the child, there are costs to society. A report on sexual abuse in the New York City public schools indicates that more than \$18.7 million has been paid to students in the past five years who were sexually abused by educators, with 110 cases still active. This is in addition to the fees for attorneys and investigators (Campanile & Montero, 2001).

Legal Context

In preK-12 schools, educator sexual abuse is covered under Title IX of the Education Amendments, regardless of

the age of the student. In institutions of higher education, the courts have only dealt with acts that are unwanted by the student. Where sexual actions directed toward students violate Title IX, institutions and individuals have been required to pay millions of dollars to the students who were violated.

If the student is considered a minor and if the sexual act fits within a certain definition, these sexual acts violate criminal statutes and can result in prison. Criminalization of child sexual abuse is not uniform across the states. The age of minors varies by state, as does the definition of criminal sexual activity with a minor. Because of the limits to the definitions of sexual abuse, some states have adopted laws that prohibit sexual abuse by educators. As of 2003 five states have laws prohibiting sexual contact between educators and students 17 years of age and younger; 27 prohibit sexual contact between educators and students who are 16 years of age and younger; and 30 states prohibit sexual contact between educators and students 15 years of age and younger. These criminal statutes are in addition to child sexual abuse laws already on the books.

Responses to Educator Sexual Abuse

With so many students experiencing educator sexual abuse, why haven't we heard more about it? Although students are often abused in the public world of the classroom, few students tell adults in authority about this abuse. Only about 6 percent of students report sexual abuse by a teacher or other staff member to someone who can do something about it. The other 94 percent don't tell anyone, or, if they tell, they talk to a friend about it, and then swear the friend to secrecy.

When students do report, they almost always report incidents of contact sexual abuse — touching, kissing, hugging, forced intercourse. Verbal and visual abuse are rarely reported to school officials. Of the cases that come to a superintendent's attention, nearly 90 percent are contact sexual abuse cases.

Even when alleged abuse is reported, the majority of complaints are ignored or disbelieved. Other students note this lack of response and reason that it is futile to try to stop a teacher from harassing since the school has not done anything about it in the past.

Until recently, teacher unions have been active in keeping fingerprinting legislation or statutes that prohibit educator sexual abuse from being passed. And, as in the case of fingerprinting, current teachers are exempt from the regulations.

Even when students allege abuse and the district responds, few students, families or school districts report this sexual abuse to the police or other law enforcement officials. As a result, most cases are not logged into the criminal justice system. Instead, abusers are dealt with using internal channels. In one of my early studies of 225 cases of educator sexual abuse in New York, none of the abusers were reported to authorities, and only 1 percent lost the license to teach.

In the aforementioned study, all of the accused had admitted to physical sexual abuse of a student, but only 35 percent suffered a negative consequence of these actions: 15 percent were terminated or, if not tenured, were not rehired; and 20 percent received a formal reprimand or suspension. Another 25 percent received no consequence or were spoken with informally. Nearly 39 percent chose to leave the district, most with retirement packages or positive recommendations intact.

Of the 54 percent who were terminated or retired, superintendents reported that 16 percent were teaching in other schools and that they did not know what had happened to the other 84 percent. A recent report on sexual abuse in New York City indicates that 60 percent of employees who were accused of sexual abuse were transferred to desk jobs at offices inside schools, and 40 percent of these teachers were repeat offenders (Campanile & Montero, 2001).

Until recently, little has been done to prevent sexual abuse of students by adults who work in schools. The advent of awards to abused students, a result of Title IX legislation, and newspaper and

other media coverage has prodded school district officials to acknowledge educator sexual abuse. However, it is not high on the priority list in most schools. The actions — not the promises — of policy makers and administrators indicate that they care more about the rights of adults than the safety of children. As a result, educator sexual abuse continues to be a component of life in schools.

End Notes

1. For example: Second National Study of Missing Children, National Violence Against Women Survey, National Crime Victimization Survey, National Survey of Adolescents, Monitoring the Future Study, Maltreatment and Academic and Social Adjustment of School Children, National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, School Safety Study, Indicators of School Crime and Safety Study.
2. Drawn from a list of 80,000 schools, a stratified two-stage sample of 1,559 public school students in grades 8 to 11 were surveyed in school in fall 2000. An additional sample of 505 students, also in grades 8 to 11, completed online surveys in fall 2000.

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Charol Shakeshaft has been studying equity in schools for more than 25 years, documenting gendered practice in the classroom and in school administration. She is an internationally recognized researcher in the area of gender patterns in educational delivery and classroom interactions. Her work on equity in schools has taken her into school systems across the United States, Australia, China, Japan, Canada and Europe, where she has helped educators make schools more welcoming to females.

Professor Shakeshaft gives talks, presents workshops, evaluates programs and curriculum, and conducts gender audits. She serves as an expert witness and consultant in a number of legal proceedings on sexual harassment and abuse of students, and works with school districts to develop policies and practices that decrease sexual harassment of all persons within the educational community.

Professor Shakeshaft is widely published, and her research has been recognized with several national and state awards. She has received and directed numerous grants throughout her career. Most recently she directed an NSF-funded project aimed to promote interest in the sciences among seventh and eighth grade girls, particularly those from minority populations and economically disadvantaged households. In addition, Professor Shakeshaft received three grants from the U.S. Department of Education that supported studies of sexual abuse and harassment in schools.

Recently, Professor Shakeshaft and her team completed three large-scale studies of the impact of technology on student achievement as well as a three-year longitudinal national study of the effects of in-school programs to reduce student risk behaviors. -SK