Sexual Harassment by Peers in Schools

Here is a sample of experiences reported on the internet:

I was called a whore because I have many friends that are boys.
-9th-grade girl

Someone had lewd photos on their phone-they asked if I wanted to see them and even though I said no, they showed them to me anyway.
- 12-grade girl

A friend of a friend said I was known to give oral sex to any male who wanted or needed it because everyone knows and suspects I am gay.
- 10th-grade boy

A great deal has been written about sexual harassment and other forms of bullying (see the sample of citations at the end of this resource). Sexual harassment and bullying are part of what shapes a negative institutional climate and negative outcomes. At too many schools, such acts begin as early as elementary school, increase in frequency as students enter puberty, and contribute to creating a hostile environment not only for the victims but for most students and staff.

Gender, appearance, and peer associations often play a significant role. For example, female students are usually the target of sexual jokes, comments, gestures, or looks, while male students are more likely to experience homophobic slurs (Hill & Silva, 2005). At the same time, the intersection of several factors (e.g., race, sexuality, nationality, immigrant status, religion) may influence and compound the tendency to victimize. And, as social and political theories recognize, a school's actions often reflect institutionalized biases that privilege some and put others at risk (DeFrancisco et al., 2013; Elliot, 2014). However, almost at any time and any place, anyone can be a direct target or an indirect victim. And there is no profile that fits all perpetrators.

Forms and Impact of Harassment

Harassing behavior is exhibited in verbal, nonverbal, and physical forms. Below are examples:

- *Verbal* – lewd or suggestive remarks, name calling, jokes, rumors or gestures; pressuring someone for a date or sexual relations; whistles or rude noises
- *Nonverbal* – written communications such as letters, notes, emails, graffiti; displaying or distributing sexual explicit drawings, pictures; making sexually suggestive gestures; starring at someone's body or looking a person up and down; maintaining unwanted flirtatious eye contact, leering, winking, throwing kisses or licking lips; a person touching or exposing him or herself in view of another person; threatening gestures
- *Physical* – unwanted physical contact; blocking or otherwise hindering a person's movements; standing closer than appropriate or necessary; displaying pornography

The negative impact is experienced by the victims, perpetrators, and the school environment. Reactions are emotional, physiological, and behavioral. Emotions include anxiety, fear, anger. Some individuals feel ill (e.g., stomach and head aches, problems with sleeping). Some victims fight back; most try to avoid repeat encounters (e.g., quitting an activity, changing the way they travel to and from school, not wanting to go to school; changing schools). These all are significant barriers to learning and teaching.

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*The material in this document reflects work done by Fabiola Ortiz as part of her involvement with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA.
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Some Data on the Frequency of Sexual Harassment in Middle Schools and High School

From, *Crossing the Line: Sexual Harassment at School*
(http://www.aauw.org/resource/crossing-the-line-sexual-harassment-at-school/).

Based on findings from their nationally representative survey of 1,965 students in grades 7-12, Hill and Kearl (2011) report and comment that:

Nearly half (48 percent) of the students surveyed experienced some form of sexual harassment in the 2010–11 school year, and the majority of those students (87 percent) said it had a negative effect on them. Verbal harassment (unwelcome sexual comments, jokes, or gestures) made up the bulk of the incidents, but physical harassment was far too common. Sexual harassment by text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means affected nearly one-third (30 percent) of students. Interestingly, many of the students who were sexually harassed through cyberspace were also sexually harassed in person.

Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed, by a significant margin (56 percent versus 40 percent). Girls were more likely than boys to be sexually harassed both in person (52 percent versus 35 percent) and via text, e-mail, Facebook, or other electronic means (36 percent versus 24 percent). This finding confirms previous research showing that girls are sexually harassed more frequently than boys (Sagrestano, 2009; Ormerod et al., 2008; AAUW, 2001) and that girls' experiences tend to be more physical and intrusive than boys' experiences (Hand & Sanchez, 2000). Being called gay or lesbian in a negative way is sexual harassment that girls and boys reported in equal numbers (18 percent of students).

Witnessing sexual harassment at school was also common. One-third of girls (33 percent) and about one-quarter (24 percent) of boys said that they observed sexual harassment at their school in the 2010–11 school year. More than one-half (56 percent) of these students witnessed sexual harassment more than once during the school year. While seeing sexual harassment is unlikely to be as devastating as being the target of sexual harassment, it can have negative effects, such as reducing students' sense of safety. Witnessing sexual harassment at school may also "normalize" the behavior for bystanders.

Among students who were sexually harassed, about 9 percent reported the incident to a teacher, guidance counselor, or other adult at school (12 percent of girls and 5 percent of boys). Just one-quarter (27 percent) of students said they talked about it with parents or family members (including siblings), and only about one-quarter (23 percent) spoke with friends. Girls were more likely than boys to talk with parents and other family members (32 percent versus 20 percent) and more likely than boys to talk with friends (29 percent versus 15 percent). Still, one-half of students who were sexually harassed in the 2010–11 school year said they did nothing afterward in response to sexual harassment.

While perpetrators tend not to admit that sexually harassing others is a serious matter (e.g., some just say they are joking around), the underlying motivation for the behavior may be proactive or reactive. In all instances, the behavior raises concerns about the perpetrators' social, emotional, and moral development with respect not only to knowledge and skills, but fundamental interpersonal and societal values and attitudes.

The negative impact on a school is reflected in decreases in attendance, academic performance, and participation in school activities and increased concerns about safety and morale.

Title IX Calls for Protecting Students from Sexual Harassment

Title IX protects students from continuous and offensive behavior affecting performance in school and holds schools responsible to protect students from such behavior. (Hill & Kearl, 2011). This includes sexual harassment such as aggressive sexual remarks, behavior or threats, abusive touching, chasing, etc.. A school violates Title IX when: (1) school officials have actual knowledge about the issue; (2) officials with the authority to take remedial action show "deliberate indifference," making the students vulnerable to harassment; (3) the harassment that occurred was severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive; (4) the harassment denied the victim's participation in educational programs or activities. (Occasional name-calling, pushing and shoving, and physical fights are not protected under Title IX because they are seen as other forms of bullying, not sexual harassment.)

Why Do Students Harass their Peers

What causes sexual harassment and hurtful behavior toward others in general is unclear. When asked, some perpetrators even claim that their actions are not hurtful.

As with bullying in general, many underlying factors may lead to sexual harassment. Certainly, such behavior may be "modeled" and/or encouraged by significant others (e.g., imitating family members or peers). Some perpetrators come from homes where caretaking lacks warmth and empathy and is even hostile. Over time, harassing behavior probably is maintained because the perpetrator (1) finds the behavior meets psychological needs (e.g., enhances feelings of competence, self-determination, or connection with valued others) and (2) perceives the costs as less than the "benefits." Some individuals seem to use the behavior as a reactive defense; others seem to find so much satisfaction in the behavior that it becomes a proactive way of life.

Some students may well lack social awareness and skills and end up harassing others because they lack the ability to establish positive peer relationships. This problem often is compounded by frustration and anger over this problem.

A few perpetrators fall into the proactive category. These are students whose behavior is not motivated by peer pressure and psychological needs. They are unmoved by efforts to create a caring community. Instead, they proactively, persistently, and chronically seek ways to harass others, apparently motivated by the "pleasure" they derive from their actions.

What Schools Do and Can Do

It is clear that schools differ in how they handle sexual harassment. Some tend to downplay events that are not seen as severe and pervasive, even though the reality is that the negative impact on individuals and even some subgroups may be significant. For example, derogatory name calling (fag, lesbo, retardo, and various racial and ethnic terms) produces significant disruptive emotional and behavior reactions that can have lasting effects around a school. And, when schools take no action, it sends the wrong signals to current and potential perpetrators and victims.

When schools do respond, they often pursue what amounts to a laundry list of interventions that mainly react to events. Relatedly, solutions usually emphasize knowledge and skill development, rather than incorporating a focus on underlying causes and motivational considerations, and relatively little attention is paid to prevention.

Furthermore, with the increasing political attention to sexual harassment, efforts to address the problem often become another project-of-the-year for schools. When project thinking prevails, a golden opportunity to improve student support systems is lost. It is essential to resist "project mentality." Projects exacerbate the marginalization, fragmentation, counterproductive competition, and overspecialization that characterizes the student support enterprise.

Rather than pursuing one more discrete intervention, it is essential to use specific problem-focused initiatives (e.g., addressing sexual harassment and other forms of bullying) as an opportunity to catalyze and leverage systemic change. The aim should be to take another step toward transforming how schools go about ensuring that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. This means proceeding in ways that embed separate initiatives into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports so that each school can address a broad range barriers to student learning effectively. This will help counter the tendency for schools to downplay events that are not seen as severe and pervasive. It is time to embed advocacy for discrete programs into advocacy for unifying and developing a comprehensive and equitable system.*

Developing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students is fundamental to enhancing a caring and socially supportive climate throughout the school and in every classroom, as well as providing assistance to individual students and families. And it involves some outreach to families and community networks. Embedded are human relations programs that use strategies to enhance motivation to resist inappropriate peer pressure and pursue social justice and environment-oriented approaches intended to create a sense of community and caring culture in schools. The essence of the work is to maximize inclusion of all students in the social support fabric of the school and, in the process, minimize scapegoating and alienation.

The solution is not to create another stand-alone program for addressing problems such as peer-on-peer harassment. Just adding another program worsens the marginalized and fragmented status of efforts to help all students.

Addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students is a school improvement imperative. Developing and implementing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports is the next evolutionary stage in meeting this imperative. It is the missing component in efforts to enhance safe schools, close the achievement gap, enhance social, emotional, and moral development and improve interpersonal relationships, reduce dropout rates, shut down the pipeline from schools to prisons, and promote well-being and social justice.

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*For details about a *Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System of Learning Supports*, see

>*ESSA, Equity of Opportunity, and Addressing Barriers to Learning* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/essaanal.pdf

>*Piecemeal Policy Advocacy for Improving Schools Amounts to Tinkering and Works Against Fundamental System Transformation* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/tinkering.pdf

>All this is discussed in detail in a new book that is in press entitled: *Transforming Student and Learning Supports: Developing a Unified, Comprehensive, and Equitable System*. For a preview look, send an email to Ltaylor@ucla.edu

Addressing the Problem as Part of a Student and Learning Supports System

In developing the learning supports system, include plans for

- enhancing awareness and understanding of the problem with staff, students, and families
- making institutional/environmental changes that can reduce the problem
- embedding social and emotional learning and moral development (e.g., knowledge, skills, *and attitudes*) into appropriate facets of curricula
- using natural opportunities to enhance social-emotional learning and moral development
- effectively explaining behavior expectations and consequences
- calling on and enabling all school personnel to take a stand against inappropriate name-calling, sexual comments, physical contacts, and all other forms of bullying and to monitor and enforce behavior expectations and consequences
- persuading students not to be bystanders and to take action when events occur
- informing parents of victims and perpetrators when events occur and including them in problem-solving
- accounting for legalities (e.g., investigating and reporting incidents)
- providing counseling to victims and perpetrators when needed

From an assistant principal: *Teach students how to deal with harassment. Ignoring the situation can often lead to a cycle of ongoing harassment and victimization. A perpetrator gets an emotional payoff from seeing others afraid and upset. Students must learn to be assertive and establish strong personal boundaries. They must tell their classmates to stop when their behavior is offensive and inappropriate. Bystanders, too, must speak out against harassment when it occurs. If students become moral spectators, there is little hope for change.*

http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov93/vol51/num03/What-to-Do-To-Stop-Sexual-Harassment-at-School.aspx

A parent takes action:

Dear Principal Jordan,

My 6th grade daughter has experienced sexual harassment at school from a student in her class. She tells me he has sent her sexually obscene notes, chased her, threatened to rape her, told friends he want's to "bang" her. She has repeatedly asked him to stop and has reported him to her teacher. But nothing has changed.

The problem has affected my daughter emotionally and academically (she was on the honor roll but her grades have seriously dropped). She has become extremely sad and moody and no longer wants to go to school.

I need to meet with you quickly to fix all this.

Sincerely,
Distraught Parent

Concluding comments

Despite increasing awareness of the prevalence of sexual harassment and other forms of bullying, the behavior remains prevalent in schools. Societal and legal considerations aside, the potential impact of sexual harassment on a student academic success and mental health is significant and should not be underestimated. Ultimately, the actions a school takes toward addressing all problems that interfere with teaching and learning determines equity of opportunity for success at school and beyond.

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Various other references were drawn from those included in the Center's Online Clearinghouse Quick Find on *Bullying* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/bully.htm

For information on what the U.S. Department of Education recommends to schools related to sexual harassment, see http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/ocrshpam.html

For information on prevention strategies from the Centers for Diseases Prevention and Control, see http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/sexualviolence/prevention.html

For the World Health Organization strategies for ending violence against children, see http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/207717/1/9789241565356-eng.pdf?ua=1

For an example of a school prevention curriculum, see http://www.ccasa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Sexual-Harassment-Prevention-in-Schools-Curriculum-Manual.pdf