

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT PEER SEXUAL HARASSMENT

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As public awareness of sexual harassment has increased and laws preventing sex discrimination have evolved, schools have been forced to recognize that peer sexual harassment among adolescents is a pervasive social problem. Evidence suggests that adults in school settings are doing little or nothing to stop student peer harassment. Teachers in 20 randomly selected high schools (N = 270) were surveyed to determine (a) teachers' attitudes toward sexual harassment, (b) whether they perceived certain student behaviors as sexual harassment, (c) how they responded to student peer sexual harassment, and (d) the influence of teachers' age, sex, sex role identity, and size of school on their attitudes, perceptions and actions. The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are teachers' attitudes toward sexually harassing behaviors?
2. Do teachers perceive student peer sexually harassing behaviors when they see them?
3. What do teachers do when they observe these behaviors in student peer interactions?
4. Does the teacher's sex, age, sex role identity, or size of the school influence the teacher's attitude toward sexually harassing behaviors?
5. Does the teacher's sex, age, sex role identity, or size of the school influence the teacher's perceptions of student peer sexually harassing behaviors?
6. Does the teacher's sex, age, sex role identity, or size of the school influence how the teacher will respond to student peer sexually harassing behaviors?

The results show that the teachers in the study were neutral to intolerant in their attitudes toward sexual harassment. They did recognize student peer sexual harassment, particularly in its most severe forms, and indicated that they would take action if they observed students harassing their peers. The teachers were fairly homogeneous in their attitudes toward and perceptions of sexual harassment and consistent in the actions they would take in response to student peer sexual harassment, i.e., report the behavior and tell the initiator to stop.

The following conclusions were derived from the study.

1. Teachers expressed low tolerance toward sexual harassment and recognized certain student behaviors as sexual harassment.
2. Teachers' attitudes toward and perceptions of sexual harassment did not differ based on sex, sex-role identity, or school size.
3. Teachers indicated that they would intervene to stop student peer sexual harassment when it occurs. However, their responses were limited to complying with school policies.
4. Teachers' actions in response to student peer sexual harassment were influenced by the set of four predictors, sex, age, sex role identity, and size of school.
5. Sexual harassment training for teachers should extend beyond compliance to include preventing student peer sexual harassment, helping students deal with it when it occurs, and teaching students ways to build more positive peer relationships.