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## The Process of Sexual Misconduct by Male Teachers and Staff in K-12 Institutions

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# The Process of Sexual Misconduct by Male Teachers and Staff in K-12 Institutions

## Abstract

Despite the increased media attention of teachers who engage in sexual misconduct with their students, research on such incidents remains limited, specifically on how these incidents are initiated and evolve. The purpose of the current study was to examine the nature of sexual abuse incidents by K-12 teachers who engaged in sexual misconduct with students by focusing on the onset, progression, and conclusion of these cases. Data included 10 secondary narrative interviews with male sex offenders who used their position as school employees to target and engage in sexual misconduct with their students in 2014 in a southern state. All offenders were interviewed and assessed for risk and community notification purposes, and the narrative interviews were obtained from the offenders' correctional casefile. Based on narratives from both victims and offenders, the manner in which sexual misconduct is initiated varies by the victim's age. Incidents of sexual misconduct began through the use of technology among older students. For younger students, incidents of sexual misconduct started with inappropriate sexual contact in the classroom. Incidents continued to progress through manipulated opportunities to be alone with the victim and bribery. Incidents were likely to end when reported to law enforcement or school administration. Overall, findings can help inform educational policy regarding recognition and appropriate responses to prevent future sexual misconduct incidents.

## Keywords

sexual misconduct, professional perpetrators, male sex offenders, schools

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## THE PROCESS OF SEXUAL MISCONDUCT BY MALE TEACHERS AND STAFF IN K-12 INSTITUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

Despite the increased media attention of teachers who engage in sexual misconduct with their students, research on such incidents remains limited, specifically on how these incidents are initiated and evolve. The purpose of the current study was to examine the nature of sexual abuse incidents by K-12 teachers who engaged in sexual misconduct with students by focusing on the onset, progression, and conclusion of these cases. Data included 10 secondary narrative interviews with male sex offenders who used their position as school employees to target and engage in sexual misconduct with their students in 2014 in a southern state. All offenders were interviewed and assessed for risk and community notification purposes, and the narrative interviews were obtained from the offenders' correctional casefile. Based on narratives from both victims and offenders, the manner in which sexual misconduct is initiated varies by the victim's age. Incidents of sexual misconduct began through the use of technology among older students. For younger students, incidents of sexual misconduct started with inappropriate sexual contact in the classroom. Incidents continued to progress through manipulated opportunities to be alone with the victim and bribery. Incidents were likely to end when reported to law enforcement or school administration. Overall, findings can help inform educational policy regarding recognition and appropriate responses to prevent future sexual misconduct incidents.

### KEYWORDS

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**A** LARGE CULMINATION OF RESEARCH suggests that teacher-student relationships profoundly affect students' academic achievement (Pianta, 1999). Students with strong, positive relationships with their teachers are more academically engaged, possess increased motivation, and exhibit more positive behavior and social skills (Furrer et al., 2014). Conversely, negative, conflict-driven teacher-student relationships will likely impair academic advancement and contribute to an atmosphere where students are less interested and invested in their education (Spilt et al., 2012). These negative relationships often result in students' disruptive behavior in the classroom, school avoidance tendencies, and number of disciplinary infractions (Roorda et al., 2011; Spilt et al., 2012).

Although it could be said that most teachers are dedicated to fostering environments that enhance learning and academic development, some teachers use the power and authority they hold over their students in an abusive manner (Knoll,

2010). Specifically, this behavior is prevalent among teachers who exploit their "position of trust" as a means to engage in sexual misconduct with their students (Steely & ten Bensel, 2019; West et al., 2010). In recent years, troubling statistics of sexual misconduct within schools have emerged, with estimates ranging between six and 12% of students reporting being sexually victimized by school staff (Jeglic et al., 2022; Shakeshaft, 2004). Even more troublesome, these estimates are believed to be conservative given the issues with disclosure, report, and documentation of these crimes; however, it is evident that these offenses are not rare occurrences (Abboud et al., 2020).

Although awareness of educator sexual abuse has grown in the recent decade, research remains in its infancy—specifically in relation to male teachers. Although most media coverage tends to publicize female teacher-student relationships (Knoll, 2010), research shows that male teachers sexually offend at higher rates when compared to their female counterparts (Henschel & Grant, 2018). Despite representing only 23% of the teaching population (McFarland et al., 2019), 72-96% of teacher sexual misconduct incidents are believed to involve male teachers (Brady & Tajalli, 2018; Gallagher, 2000; Shakeshaft, 2002). Few studies have exclusively examined teachers who engage in sexual misconduct with students. Of the studies that do exist, most focus on identifying offender and victim demographics (Kocuturk, 2020; Moulden et al., 2010; Walter, 2018), incident characteristics (Henschel & Grant, 2018; Kocuturk, 2020), sentencing (Knoche & Russell, 2019) and legislation (Abboud et al., 2020). Furthermore, most of the known information is derived from media reports (Knoll, 2010), which have significant limitations (e.g., lack of verified information, not all cases are made public). To date, the literature has largely neglected how male teachers use their positions to approach and engage in sexual misconduct with their students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on sexual misconduct by male teachers is scant; however, some studies have reported offender and victim demographics as well as specific incident characteristics (Henschel & Grant, 2018; Moulden et al., 2010; Nhundu & Shumba, 2001; Ratliff & Watson, 2014; Shumba, 2001). Collectively, male teachers who sexually victimize their students are likely to be middle-aged, single, highly educated, established in their career, psychologically stable with no history of mental illness, or have no prior sexual convictions or criminal history (Moulden et al., 2010; Ratliff & Watson, 2014). As for victims, research of victim characteristics is just as sparse as those on teachers who commit sexual misconduct.

In one study, Henschel and Grant (2018) examined 361 online media reports of school employee sexual misconduct cases in 2014. They found perpetrators are likely to have multiple victims with the period of abuse spanning a number of years. In the same study, victims were 14 years of age on average. Similarly, Ratliff and Watson (2014) reviewed public records of 431 cases of male and female public-school teachers who were arrested and charged with sexual misconduct offenses from several southern states between 2007 and 2011. Male teachers were more likely to engage in sexually abusive incidents with pre-pubescent students aged 12 and younger when compared to female teachers. Often, offenders targeted children who might display the need for increased educational attention, have a dysfunctional home life, are bullied, or appear vulnerable (Grant et al., 2018).

While significant gaps remain in the literature, some studies suggest commonalities between school personnel engaging in sexual misconduct with their students. For

example, teachers who spend greater amounts of one-on-one time with their students are shown to be more likely to engage in sexually abusive behavior (Henschel & Grant, 2018; Shakeshaft, 2003; Walter, 2018). Shakeshaft (2003) found that coaches and music teachers were more likely to engage in sexually inappropriate relationships due to greater individualized time with student victim(s). Similarly, Walter (2018) examined 688 cases of license revocation and surrender in North Carolina. Sixty-six percent of teachers' licenses were revoked or surrendered due to sexual misconduct with a student, and half were determined to be extracurricular teachers, such as coaches and music teachers.

## INCIDENT CHARACTERISTICS

In addition to the offender and victim characteristics, some researchers have noted the importance of specific incident characteristics, including the type of acts perpetrated, location of incidents, and disclosures to understand better how these abuses occur (Henschel & Grant, 2018; Moulden et al., 2010; Timmerman, 2003). Moulden and colleagues (2010) examined archival crime reports of 113 male Canadian teachers who committed a sexual offense against a student between 1995 and 2002. The most inappropriate sexual behavior involved non-penetrative acts such as hugging, kissing, or fondling the victim while using minimal force to obtain the victim's compliance. These incidents were most likely to occur on school grounds or at the victim or offender's residence.

As for the reporting of such events, one study conducted by the Canadian Centre for Child Protection (2019) that examined 750 media reports involving teacher-student sexual abuse cases in K-12 institutions determined that victims disclosed in only half of the cases. Female victims were more likely to disclose their abuse in comparison to males. In cases where the victims did not disclose themselves, the abuse was discovered and reported by a third-party such as school personnel, friends, or family. Many studies have examined the offender, victim, and incident characteristics to better understand teachers who sexually abuse their students; however, research focusing on how these sexual abuse incidents develop and continue remains scarce.

## TYOLOGIES OF EDUCATORS WHO SEXUALLY OFFEND

In a secondary analysis of data collected for the American Association of University Women, Shakeshaft (2003) introduced two types of educators who sexually offend with characteristically different personas: 1) abusers who target children younger than Grade 7; and 2) abusers who target older children in middle and high school. Abusers targeting children younger than Grade 7 were found to be the most likable and trusted by students and their parents. These educators were found to be high achievers and held a disproportionate number of accolades, awards, and recognitions compared to their non-abusing counterparts. Alternatively, educators who targeted middle to high school-aged children were less likely to be highly touted, distinguished educators. Their acts of sexual misconduct were less likely to be premeditated or planned and more likely a result of a lapse in judgment when compared to those who abused younger students. In both groups, educators most often held titles of a classroom teacher, substitute, or coach.

Recently, Christensen and Darling (2019) examined both male and female teachers who sexually abused their students to create a preliminary typology of motivations, characteristics, and modus operandi involved in these incidents. They determined three major types of offenders across both groups: minimizers and deniers, poor mental health or stressors, and young, early career. The largest group included

10 male teachers and was labeled as the minimizers and deniers. These perpetrators were more likely to deny the offense in its entirety, continue to minimize the offense or deny the sexual nature of the offense. In the second-largest group, poor mental health or stressors, teachers appeared to suffer from poor mental health or experienced a significant life event leading to or during the abuse. Lastly, the young early-career group seemed to be newly qualified and were more likely to engage in sexual relationships with students that were closer to their own age and believed the acts were consensual. Although still limited, preliminary studies indicate that males and females possess similar motivations for engaging in sexually inappropriate incidents with students (Christensen & Darling, 2019); however, more research is warranted. Specifically, it is unknown if the relationships are initiated, continue, and end in a similar pattern.

Although exclusive to only female teachers, only one study has examined the development of sexually abusive incidents between students and their teachers. In a recent study, Steely and ten Bensel (2019) determined that these incidents evolve, continue, and end in a manner dependent upon the offender's rationale for offending. For example, they determined that female teachers are likely to fall into one of three categories based on narrative interviews with 35 women: sexual predators; sexually abusive friendships; and emotional dependency. Sexual predators were likely to initiate a sexual relationship with their students after engaging in sexually provocative talk in the classroom and through text messages. These actions created opportunities to isolate the student to engage in sex. These women used leverage, such as threats of lowering grades and drugs and alcohol, in efforts for the victim to continue to comply.

The sexually abusive friendship and emotionally dependent incidents were likely to occur following feelings of a connection between the offender and the victim. In the sexually abusive friendship cases, the sexual abuse was likely to occur following a benign friendship with the victim that became sexual over time. Alternatively, the emotionally dependent relationships were likely to begin following a traumatic event experienced by the offender, where the offender sought comfort from their victim. These relationships were likely to continue due to an emotional need, such as low self-esteem, lack of confidence, and depression. All of the abuse cases were most likely to come to an end through reports by a third party, as opposed to reports by the victim.

While previous educator sexual misconduct studies have been insightful, significant gaps remain within the literature, especially regarding the development of sexually abusive incidences by male teachers. Although males account for a small fraction of teachers, male teachers commit the majority of all sexual abuse incidents in primary and secondary schools (Brady & Tajalli, 2018; Gallagher, 2000; Shakeshaft, 2002). It has been implied that males pursue careers, specifically educational settings, to gain access to children (Sullivan & Beech, 2004). At this time, how male teachers approach, initiate, and pursue relationships with their students is unknown. It is possible that males differ from females, as females are not viewed as the stereotypical "professional perpetrators" or even capable of sexual and predatory behavior; however, the majority of "professional perpetrators<sup>1</sup>" are male (Colton et al., 2010). Although Steely and ten Bensel (2019) labeled some women predatory, others were likely to have pursued a relationship with their victim due to an emotional need or friendship. These incidents were largely viewed as "loving" or "harmless" in nature,

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<sup>1</sup> Professional perpetrators are individuals who use their occupations to gain access to victims to sexually offend.

which is inconsistent with literature regarding male sex offenders (Robertiello & Terry, 2007); therefore, the findings among the female sample cannot be generalized to incidents committed by male offenders.

Despite this, these incidents have yet to be examined among a male sample with the relationship as the main focus; therefore, it is largely unknown how male teachers use their positions to gain access to victims and offend. To prevent these incidents from occurring in the future, it is imperative to understand how both sexes become sexually involved with their students, how these incidents continue and change over time, as well as their conclusion. Therefore, the current study approaches these incidents with the relationship as the major focus, such as 1) what was the onset of the relationship; 2) the manner in which these incidents continued; and 3) and what caused the incident to come to an end. The current study offers a new perspective by examining the sexual misconduct process of male teachers as described by offenders and his victims in investigative interviews. The purpose of the current study was to understand the nature of sexual offenses committed by male K-12<sup>th</sup> grade school employees in a southern state, specifically by examining: 1) the onset; 2) the manner in which these events were prolonged; and 3) the conclusion of the sexual misconduct. Data included 10 in-depth narrative interviews with convicted male sex offenders who used their position as K-12 teachers or school employees (e.g., full-time teachers and substitutes, administration, coaches, volunteers, and counselors) to engage in sexual misconduct incidents with their students.

## METHOD

Data for the current study consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 10 male sex offenders who were assessed post-conviction in a southern state in 2014. Specifically, the study focused on male offenders who used their "position of trust" as a teacher or school staff to sexually abuse students. For the purpose of this study, teacher or school staff sexual abuse was defined as any form of sexual misconduct that occurred between a school employee and a child who was subject to his authority while in a K-12 school setting (Grant et al., 2018). Teachers and school staff encompass "positions of trust"<sup>2</sup> and authority over students, including full-time teachers and substitutes, administration, coaches, volunteers, and counselors (West et al., 2010). Sexual misconduct included but was not limited to inappropriate touching and fondling, sexual penetration, oral sex, sending and receiving sexually provocative pictures, and video voyeurism.

## DATA COLLECTION

The sample for the current study was collected from all 752 males who were assessed post-conviction in a southern state for community notification purposes in 2014. The case files for all offenders were obtained from the state's Department of Corrections sex offender community notification and assessment program. Initially, each case file (i.e., investigative reports and narrative interviews) was read to determine which male offenders were convicted of a sex offense while employed in a school setting and engaged in sexual misconduct with their student(s). Of the 752 assessed for community notification purposes, 10 offenders met the criteria for inclusion in the study. All participants included in the sample were convicted of a sex crime and

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<sup>2</sup> By state law, position of trust is defined as any employee in the victim's school or school district.

required to register as a sex offender within the study state and report for risk assessment that is used for community notification purposes.

Primarily, data was derived from in-depth, semi-structured secondary narrative interviews with offenders, victims, and witnesses. The interviews were conducted by trained state correctional staff under the supervision of a licensed psychologist. The offender risk assessment is intended to provide an overview of the offenders' risk propensity, prior criminal history, detailed accounts of current and previous sexual offenses, previous violent offenses, mental health history, treatment records, state agency investigations, and offense allegations. All documents included in the offender case files were standard correctional protocol. Documents obtained from the case files and utilized for the study are discussed in detail below.

## PERSONAL HISTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

The personal history questionnaire was used to guide the narrative assessment and was completed by the offender before the one-on-one interview. This pen-and-paper questionnaire was to be completed before the narrative interview and was administered by program staff. The document is primarily quantitative but provides several open-ended follow-up questions. This questionnaire covers several aspects of the offender's personal history, including demographics, education, job history, physical and mental health, prior convictions, probation and parole history, sexual and relationship history, drug and alcohol use, mental health, and childhood problems. It is discussed at length during the narrative interview. Offenders' demographic information was obtained from this questionnaire.

## NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS

Before the interviews, offenders were asked to sign a consent form that stated their assessments could be used for research purposes and assured that their information would remain confidential. During the narrative interviews, offenders were asked to provide a detailed account of their current and previous sex convictions, specifically addressing the number of sexual offenses, number of convictions of a sexual nature, circumstances where the offenses were sexual in nature but plead to a lesser offense, allegations of previous sexual offenses, number of victims, how the offender gained access and compliance of victim(s), age and sex of the victims, relationship to the victim if the offense resulted in physical injuries, and deviant sexual interests. Each interview lasted from 45-120 minutes and was voice recorded to ensure accuracy. Interviews were transcribed by the program staff member who conducted the interview. To ensure confidentiality for this study, all personally identifiable information was removed from the documents, and each participant was issued a pseudonym. Because the personal history questionnaire and narratives were largely self-reported information, several steps were taken to increase the reliability and validity of the current study, including the review of supplemental documents within the case file. Offenders' accounts provided during the assessment phase were supplemented by investigative notes, victim statements, and interviews conducted throughout their investigation with multiple agencies to determine the existence of discrepancies in reports.

## SUPPLEMENTAL DOCUMENTS

Offender files also consisted of several other documents that were used to supplement the information collected from the offender's narratives. All documents included within the case files are used by program staff to complete the risk assessment.



For this study, these documents assisted in triangulation or using multiple data sources to help develop a greater understanding of phenomena (Patton, 1999). Additional files included mental health evaluations, criminal history reports, court documents, and judgments, child welfare agency investigations, police investigations, offender and witness statements, and probation and parole reports. If applicable, results from the polygraph and Computerized Voice Stress Analysis<sup>3</sup> were included in the case file. These documents were analyzed similarly to narrative interviews.

## SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The offender, offense, and victim demographics were gathered to provide background information on the sample. The average age of offenders at the time of the offense was 43.9 years of age ( $SD=17.1$ ), and the entirety of the sample identified as White. Most of these offenders were highly educated ( $n=9$ ; 90%) and were likely to have either a bachelor's or master's degree. None of the offenders in the sample had criminal histories; however, they commonly had previous sexual offense allegations. Most were married at the time of the offense ( $n=6$ ; 60%), followed by single, never married ( $n=3$ ; 30%). They were likely to be established in their teaching career, as the average was 13 years of teaching experience ( $SD=1.41$ ).

In regard to offense characteristics, most were convicted of sexual assault in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree ( $n=9$ ; 90%). Offenders reported a number of places where the abuse occurred, but the most common location of the offense was in the classroom ( $n=4$ ; 40%). Other locations included the bus, extracurricular events (i.e., sporting, camps, conferences), school restroom, offender's car, and by webcam. As for the victims, the average age at offense was 12.31 ( $SD=4.09$ ) years of age and most likely White ( $n=9$ ; 90%) and female ( $n=7$ ; 70%).

## DATA ANALYSIS

Data were analyzed following a grounded theory coding and analysis process (Creswell, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Steely Smith, 2022; Steely & ten Bensele, 2019; Steely et al., 2018). The analysis process consisted of three phases: open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In the first step of the coding process, open coding was used to sort the data into preliminary categories and subcategories. Each offender's narrative was read holistically to understand the broad context of their offense, as well as how: 1) how the sexually abusive relationship began; 2) under what circumstances the relationship continued; and 3) how the relationship concluded.

After a holistic review of the narratives, a preliminary coding matrix was created. As each interview was read in its entirety, a constant comparative approach was implemented, which involved comparing each interview to the subsequent interview to determine similarities and differences between the two. The constant comparative approach was repeated and utilized until saturation was achieved or when new interviews no longer provided insights into the categories. Through this approach, thematic subcategories emerged and were then placed into broader categories.

Although there was an initial coding frame, codes grew as expected, and new codes inductively emerged throughout the axial coding process. After all the interviews were read completely and coded, the coding frame was examined for common

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to polygraph examination, a CVSA is a test that measures the stress levels in the voice to decipher stress from deception.

themes within and across all interviews. After this was completed, a more concrete set of categories and subcategories emerged and was utilized in the final coding phase. The final phase, or selective coding, is a process in which all categories are related or developed into one overarching core category (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). During this process, all supplemental documents were analyzed in a similar fashion to triangulate and support the themes that emerged in the axial phase. Self-reported information was verified through official records, such as criminal histories, probation and parole reports, demographic characteristics, and treatment records. This allowed for the confirmation of the findings through multiple sources of data.

## RESULTS

The purpose of the current study was to examine the nature of sexually abusive incidents committed by male school staff against their students. Specifically, the study's focus was to understand how these incidents were initiated, under what circumstances they continued, and how they ended. The findings are discussed below based on the narratives of the 10 male school employees included in the sample.

### THE ONSET OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Incidents began in one of two ways: through the use of technology or inappropriate touching in the classroom. The means of initiation were largely dependent on the age of the victim. Teachers who initiated sexual misconduct using technology involved older victims between the ages of 14 and 17. In comparison, teachers who initiated sexual misconduct through inappropriate touching involved pre-pubescent children between the ages of seven and 12.

### USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Six (60%) of the sexual misconduct incidents began through the use of technology. All six teachers reported they established an appropriate relationship with their victims inside the classroom; however, they became inappropriate through the use of social media and text messages. All of these incidents began through seemingly benign messages but eventually became more sexual, leading to the exchange of sexually provocative images. In one example, James<sup>4</sup> was a 28-year-old extracurricular teacher who engaged in sexual contact with three of his students.

Throughout his interview, James consistently denied the abuse that occurred and continued to maintain his innocence. Instead, he reported that the 16-year-old female victim was "infatuated" with him, and he "was unaware of the allegations until I was confronted in a [job] interview in another state." Despite his profession of innocence, investigative reports and victim statements prove that he created a false social media profile that he used to communicate with the victims. Statements by all three victims reported that James would reach out to them via social media after sending a friend request. He would tell them in messages that the profile was fake and confirm that he was their teacher. Once the victims were aware that James was controlling the profile, he would ask for their number. Eventually, he began texting with all three victims.

Initially, conversations were believed to be harmless; however, the messages became more sexual over time. All victims reported exchanging sexually provocative pictures with James via messages; however, one of the three victims reported meeting

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<sup>4</sup> All offenders were issued pseudonyms to protect confidentiality of participants.

James for sex. In her statement, she reported that after one month of texting, he encouraged her to meet him at school for sex. She reported having sex with James roughly 25 times in various locations on and off school grounds, on the bus, at his home while his wife was away, and on school field trips. She stated,

he would be flirtatious with me and text me to come see him in the classroom...he said he had a 'thing' for me and wanted to be with me but wasn't sure how it would work.

### INAPPROPRIATE TOUCHING

As for the other four offenders with younger victims, incidents of sexual misconduct began with inappropriate touching or behavior in the classroom. This was evident in John's interview. John was a 34-year-old teacher who was sexually inappropriate with a 12-year-old student. During John's interview, he said the victim was "disruptive and a troublemaker" in class. From previous discussions with the student's mother, John knew that the victim's father was absent and that his family was in need of financial help. John claimed that he "wanted to do more for [the victim] and his family" and arranged to begin bringing the child home from school in the afternoons.

Eventually, John invited the victim to his home to play basketball and video games while his mother was out. About three weeks later, John felt the victim was comfortable and trusting of him. At this time, he stated he began encouraging the victim to stay after class, specifically to "play a game of wrestle." When John was asked to define a game of wrestle, he responded,

I enjoyed wrestling and liked to be tackled by [the victim]. I could psychologically manipulate [the victim] to do anything I wanted. I would play all innocent and let [him] pin me down.

Eventually, they began to wrestle with no clothes, which John claimed was for his own "sexual arousal and gratification."

At the time of John's assessment, 10 additional students had come forward with disclosures similar to the narrative the victim provided. In addition to being asked to wrestle, other students described receiving money and extra points on assignments in exchange for sexual favors. When the administration was asked about the allegations against John, the principal responded with,

He was an excellent teacher and never had any complaints against him. It was odd that he would jump schools, but he said his goal was to teach in all 50 states. He was even teacher of the year at a previous middle school.

### DURATION OF SEXUAL ABUSE

Many offenders preyed on those who were considered vulnerable. Offenders targeted students who were being bullied, had low self-esteem, dysfunctional home lives, and lacked a father figure or role model. All teachers made organized, concerted efforts to create opportunities to be alone with the victim. Various opportunities involved afterschool tutoring, meeting in isolated places during school sporting events or between classes, extracurricular field trips and conferences, and taking victims on shopping trips or running errands outside of school. Some would use these opportunities as a means to also engage with the victim's parents and caregivers by taking the child home from school or to sporting events as a seemingly kind gesture. Following

the efforts to be alone with the victims, offenders would use various means to prolong the abuse, like bribes, emotional manipulation, or intimidation and retaliation to maintain the abuse.

Most teachers ( $n=8$ ; 80%) bribed their victims with some kind of gift, largely dependent on their age. For example, younger victims received coloring books, crayons, and stuffed animals, while older victims received drugs and alcohol, money, or extra grade points in exchange for sexual favors. For example, Danny was a 41-year-old school counselor who engaged in a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old student. Initially, Danny stated that the victim reached out to him to ask about finding a tutor. Instead of connecting the victim with a student tutor, Danny agreed to tutor the victim himself. During times when Danny said they were supposed to be in tutoring sessions together, they instead went to dinner, movies, and concerts. Danny said they would find time to meet in empty classrooms during school hours to have sex. He also admitted to fabricating reasons for her to leave class and come to his office. During his interview, he admitted that he was,

deeply infatuated with [the victim] and attracted to her intelligence...she was interested in me as a person and I wanted something for myself, and I wanted to be happy.

He also reported that one time while they were having sex in a classroom, two male students walked in. In an attempt to prevent them from reporting the incident, he increased their grades. During the investigation, another student came forward after Danny messaged her on social media, saying, "If you were older, I would totally go for you" and commenting on her "physical attractiveness." Later, it was determined that many students knew about the incidents but failed to report them to appropriate authorities.

Like Danny, Eli used gifts and bribes to obtain his victim's trust; however, he also used retaliation and intimidation to gain compliance from victims. Eli threatened to expel his victims when they did not comply or wanted to tell an adult. Eli was a 76-year-old elementary school volunteer and bus driver who sexually assaulted three female students. One victim reported that the abuse began when she was five years old and lasted two years. Incidents began with hugging the victims while they were boarding the bus. As the victims became more comfortable, he would sit them on his lap. Over the course of his interview, he referred to the victims as "my favorite girls." He admitted to grooming the girls by "rewarding his favorites with candy and small gifts" like coloring books, markers, and stuffed animals. Although he bought gifts to "reward his favorites," he claimed that some were more difficult to "win over." For those, he said it was "easier to threaten them with expulsion when they did not comply or tried to tell an adult."

Although all 10 offenders manipulated opportunities to be alone with their victims, some specifically mentioned targeting victims who could be easily ( $n=4$ ; 40%) emotionally manipulated due to dysfunctional home lives, low self-esteem, or being disabled. For example, Charles was a 35-year-old band director who sexually abused a 17-year-old student. Charles explained in his interview that he noticed the victim was struggling in school. He was a new student who had moved from another school district and did not "quite fit in." In an effort to make him feel welcome, he added him on social media and sent him a message congratulating him for a recent award he received.

Charles continued to converse with him about the band and musical interests until the victim mentioned he was lonely and did not have friends. In response, Charles continued to "be there for him." Three weeks later, the victim disclosed to Charles that he was gay. Charles, who was also gay, believed he felt a connection with the student because he "had experienced the same struggles when he was in high school." Following the victim's disclosure, the conversations became sexual, which eventually led to the exchange of sexually provocative videos. Also, at the time of the incident, statements from victims indicated that Charles was also in a sexual relationship with a former 19-year-old student. When asked about this relationship, he claimed, "the student was already graduated and of age" when the relationship began.

## CONCLUSION OF SEXUAL ABUSE

All of the educator sexual misconduct incidents concluded in a similar manner. Most incidents ended after the victim reported the incident to another individual. Less often, the incidents were reported by a third party, for example, after another teacher heard rumors or witnessed the incident. Despite pressure from the offender, victims were most likely to report the sexual abuse.

In six cases, the victims disclosed to a family member, teacher, law enforcement, therapist, or counselor. For example, Asher was a 34-year-old high school math teacher who sexually abused a female 16-year-old special education student. Asher and the victim exchanged sexually exploitative pictures and engaged in sex on and off school grounds. This incident came to an end when the victim reported the sexual abuse to her mother. After showing her mother the texts and pictures, the mother pretended to be the victim over text messages. She asked Asher to meet her for oral sex; when he agreed, she indicated that she was the victim's mother and would be reporting him to law enforcement and the school administration.

In the remaining four cases, incidents were reported by someone other than the victim. These incidents were discovered through rumors heard amongst teachers, or another student or teacher witnessed the inappropriate behavior and reported it to the administration. This was evident in Rodney's case. Rodney was a 73-year-old coach who engaged in sexual misconduct with a 15-year-old athlete. These incidents ended after another student, a friend of the victim, heard rumors and reported it to her mother. This student's mother then reported the information to law enforcement.

At the conclusion of these events and during the investigation, it was noted that two offenders in the sample were brought to the administration's attention at previous schools for inappropriate sexual behavior. Instead of termination, these offenders were asked to sign a contract that stated either: 1) they would no longer physically touch students; or 2) they were reprimanded with only a warning. By this course of action, both offenders were allowed to keep their teaching licenses, obtain employment in new schools, and engage in additional sexual misconduct incidents with students that led to their current offenses. Also, during the investigation, law enforcement determined that three other offenders continued to contact their victims post-conviction. Two of these offenders later engaged in sexual relationships with their former students who were now of age at the time of the relationship or engaged in an intimate relationship with a close family member of their victim's following their conviction.

## DISCUSSION

To prevent sexual misconduct committed by teachers and school staff, it is important to understand 10 male teachers and school staff who sexually abused students were examined to determine: 1) how these incidents began; 2) how they continued; and 3) how they ended. The victim and witness statements involved in the case supplemented these offender narratives.

The process of how these incidents were initiated and evolved largely depended on the age of the victim(s). Teachers with older victims initiated sexual misconduct through the use of technology via a cell phone or social media, which is also consistent with previous research. Others who have examined teacher-student sexual misconduct have noted the importance of technology in facilitating these incidents (Christensen & Darling, 2019; Henshel & Grant, 2018). Specifically, offenders used technology, such as cell phones, email, and social media, to initiate and easily conceal communication with their victims. Largely, teachers' personal use of cell phones and the Internet are unmonitored and unregulated by school officials (Lane, 2015), which can present relatively new and unique opportunities to offend (Henshel & Grant, 2018). As technology use increases in schools, it becomes an important policy and training consideration for not only school administration, teachers, and staff but students as well.

Second, incidents involving the younger victims in the sample were initiated through inappropriate touching in the classroom. Although some findings show that teachers engage in sexual misconduct with elementary-aged children (Shakeshaft, 2003), studies have yet to report how incidents with young children begin. In recent studies, the average victim ages range from 14 to 18, and most incidents are likely to occur in High Schools (Christensen & Darling, 2019; Henschel & Grant, 2018). The occurrence of these incidents in elementary and middle school is far less common.

As for the duration, offenders would target the most vulnerable of students, including those that had difficulty in the home, academically, or among peers, in the belief that they could continue to manipulate the victim to conceal the misconduct over time, which also consistent with previous research (Henschel & Grant, 2018). In addition, offenders manipulated opportunities to be alone with the victim by encouraging victims to remain at school outside normal hours, meeting in empty classrooms during school hours, taking them to run errands off campus, or meeting during extracurricular activities for sex. Offenders also attempted to bribe their victims into submission through gifts, drugs and alcohol, money, or extra grade points in exchange for sexual favors, which was also found in a study of female-perpetrated educator sexual misconduct (Steely & ten Bensel, 2019).

Lastly, these incidents were likely to end in a similar fashion. Incidents ended following disclosure by the victim or when another reported hearing rumors or witnessing inappropriate behavior, which is partially consistent with previous research (Christensen & Darling, 2019; Henschel & Grant, 2018). Most incidents were reported by the victim, which is somewhat surprising, as previous literature suggests that most teacher-student relationships surface through reports by peers or parents to law enforcement or school administration, as opposed to direct disclosures by the victim (Ratliff & Watson, 2014). As these allegations surfaced, other students, sometimes for years, came forward and disclosed their abuse.

In this sample, it was common for offenders to have multiple victims over long periods, especially for those previously employed in other school districts or states.

This is concerning, as the school administration asked some offenders to resign instead of reports to law enforcement. This course of action allowed these teachers to keep their licenses and obtain employment in a new school system. This practice is commonly referred to as "passing the trash" (Grant et al., 2018; p. 7) as it enables teachers to pursue other jobs in K-12 institutions with no record of sexual misconduct. In our sample, two offenders were brought to the administration's attention for inappropriate sexual behavior. Instead of termination, they were asked to sign a contract that stated they would no longer physically touch students or be reprimanded with only a warning. Despite this, both offenders engaged in additional sexual misconduct incidents with students that led to their current offenses.

Findings from the current study could be used to inform prevention efforts, specifically educational policy, and procedure regarding teacher-student sexual misconduct incidents. First, school administrators should consider implementing rigorous pre-employment screenings for all applicants, including teachers, staff, and volunteers (Grant et al., 2018; Shakeshaft, 2003, Smith et al., 2019). Most men within this sample were employed in several different states and school districts before applying for their position at the time of their arrest. In some cases, these offenders had previous allegations with former students.

This finding is concerning, considering 46 states have mandatory reporting laws, and 43 of them have penalties for not reporting (Government Accountability Office, 2010; Grant et al., 2018). Further, only 36 states require background checks for contract employees (i.e., substitutes, counselors, and transportation personnel), and 17 require them for volunteers (Grant et al., 2018). Moreover, background checks vary widely and are limited by capabilities. Some states are privy to state and federal criminal databases (e.g., National Crime Information Center, State Crime Information Centers), unlike others who only have access to state law enforcement data. To date, no national database tracks teachers and school staff subjected to disciplinary action regarding revoked, suspended, or invalidated licenses.

Second, school administrations should provide training that explains sexual abuse by school staff, the warning signs, and when to report inappropriate behavior for both teachers and students (Grant et al., 2018). Although a respectable number of these incidents ended with a teacher or school employee witnessing and reporting the behavior, a large majority of teachers report receiving little to no training in child sexual abuse education and are not familiar with identifying the signs of child sexual abuse (Márquez-Flores, Márquez-Hernández, & Grandado-Gómez, 2016). Suppose educators are unaware that these incidences occur more often than expected. In that case, they lack the knowledge to recognize inappropriate behavior and report it to law enforcement, which only allows the cycle to continue (Grant & Heinecke, 2019).

## LIMITATIONS

As with all research, some limitations should be discussed. First and foremost, the sample size is small. The current sample was purposive and based on criteria exhibited by the population of interest; therefore, the sample size must be large enough to capture the experience adequately but not so large the data is repetitive (Mason, 2010). The majority of themes were consistent across all 10 interviews, as the incidents were initiated, continued, and ended in a similar manner.

It should be noted that participants derived from a convicted sample; therefore, generalizability to other offending populations is a concern. This sample only includes those who have been reported and investigated by law enforcement, which resulted

in a conviction. This sample does not include those who their employer asked to resign, nor those that have gone unreported. Although the current study utilized a sample of convicted offenders, it remains unique to the more extensive literature as it involved first-hand accounts from convicted offenders instead of relying upon media reports or arrest records.

Despite these limitations, the study provides new insights into a relatively recent phenomenon. There are several important areas for future research. First, future research should consider comparing male and female educator populations to determine the differences in incidence, victim selection, grooming patterns, and sentencing. Also, examining current policies held by schools to address employee sexual misconduct cases should be considered. It is important to determine why the administration and other school staff fail to recognize and respond to inappropriate behavior by these offenders.

## CONCLUSION

Empirical research involving school employee sexual abuse incidents is scarce. A large majority of these incidents go undetected, reiterating the importance of recognizing, reporting, and developing appropriate responses from school administration to deter these events in the future. Findings from the current study bring awareness and lend new insight that could inform educators' policy in the development of training regarding the warning signs, specifically how these incidents develop and evolve over time to prevent them from occurring in the future.

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