

Issues for Teachers in Sexual Violence Prevention Education

It is obvious that addressing social problems in the classroom that are as volatile as sexual harassment and assault requires a different approach than teaching traditional academics. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of the particular issues for teachers to consider when doing sexual harassment and sexual violence prevention education.

Importance of presenter's knowledge and self awareness

One of the possible pitfalls in sexual violence prevention education is an unintentional reinforcing of harmful attitudes. We are products of our culture. Like other members of society, we are affected by cultural attitudes and erroneous assumptions that form the basis of rape myths. These attitudes and incorrect assumptions contribute to a culture that tacitly condones sexual harassment and assault. It is very important, therefore, that those of us who teach sexual assault prevention be aware of these assumptions and attitudes, so that we can separate myth from reality.

The first step in doing this work is developing our personal awareness of the attitudes and assumptions we hold as individuals. A good place to begin to build this awareness is to review the enclosed list of common rape myths. Don't be surprised to find that many of the things you thought were true turn out to be unfounded. Only by taking the time to thoughtfully consider our own assumptions can we avoid unintentionally reinforcing harmful assumptions and attitudes in our students. Self-awareness is an important step on the journey towards truth.

Personal comfort with the issue of sexual violence

There are a number of reasons that a teacher may be uncomfortable about addressing the issue of sexual violence prevention in the classroom. Since one in three women and one in six men has been sexually victimized in their lifetime, many teachers will be in the position of teaching a subject about which they have intense personal feelings. Even if they, themselves, have not been sexually assaulted, they may have a close family member or friend who has been affected. It is important that school systems take this into account and ensure that those who are charged with teaching on this topic are personally ready and able to do so.

Having experienced sexual violence need not preclude a teacher from addressing the issue effectively in the classroom. However, in order to attend to the needs of students, a teacher's emotional needs must be addressed. It is common for survivors of sexual assault to experience insomnia, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, anxiety and depression many years after the initial trauma. Many things can trigger these feelings, including having to teach about it, or hear someone else talk about it. Teachers who are survivors of sexual assault or abuse are wise to seek counseling and/or other emotional support to resolve any remaining trauma, and to address any feelings that are stirred up during the sexual assault prevention program. In short, it is

imperative that a teacher take care of his or her own needs so they can present the material well, and focus on the needs of the students.

Safety and Ground Rules

It is imperative that sexual violence education takes place in a respectful environment. This starts with teachers modeling respectful behavior. Be sensitive to student's individual differences and perspectives, as well as to any discomfort students may experience in discussing an emotional, personal, and perhaps scary topic. If students become defensive, or start acting out or giggling, take time to talk with them about what they find difficult.

Ask the students themselves what they need from you and from each other in order to feel safe talking about harassment, violence and boundaries. Do they require confidentiality, or the right to refuse to participate? Lay down ground rules before you begin each exercise or discussion. These ground rules might include reminders that everyone's input matters, to listen to one another without interrupting, and to talk about people and situations they know, but without mentioning specific names.

Dealing with emotional reactions of students

By the age of 18, one in four girls will be victims of sexual molestation or abuse. Even greater numbers of young people will know someone who has been assaulted. We must be prepared for the fact that the topic of sexual assault will evoke strong feelings among some students. It is important to create as safe a space as possible for students to honestly discuss their experiences, opinions and feelings.

Still, the classroom is not a therapy group, nor should it try to be. Teachers are not therapists. Providing emotional counseling is a fundamentally different process than education, and the relationship between a teacher and student is significantly different than the relationship between a counselor and client.

When students get upset in a classroom, it is sufficient to be generally supportive while referring them to other more appropriate places to receive services. Giving students information about how to access school and community resources will allow them to seek help in a more private situation. The resources available to a student may include school counseling services, community rape crisis centers, mental health hotlines, and other youth programs. Familiarize yourself with the options available in your community, so you can make informed referrals. You may want to have materials from these organizations available in your classroom.

Reporting disclosures of sexual assault or abuse

Young people who have been sexually abused or assaulted may not have disclosed it to anyone. Often, misplaced self-blame, or fear of being blamed by others, gets in the way of reporting the incident. In some cases, children who are molested by an adult are threatened with

punishment if they tell anyone. Being available to talk privately to students following a presentation on this topic will open the door for those who may not have identified to any adult that this is an issue for them. As a trusted figure outside the family, you may seem like a safe person to the student. Reacting in a way that lets the student know that you believe them, and do not blame them for what happened, will be a very powerful positive first step in their long road to recovery.

Every state, including Colorado, mandates reporting of child abuse, including child sexual abuse, to the authorities. These laws are designed to protect children. In certain instances, sexual contact can legally constitute child abuse and/or sexual assault. In these cases, teachers are required by law to report the abuse to law enforcement or social services when they have identifying information about the victim. (See "Obligation to Report Sexual Contact, Abuse & Assault," attached) This means that teachers can theoretically be prosecuted for not reporting when they are obligated to do so.

Schools are also required to report any criminal activity that occurs on school district property. Some districts also call law enforcement if they know of crimes off- site. If the school has a School Resource Officer, he or she may be the most appropriate person to handle sexual assaults occurring at school or at school events. The "Colorado School Violence Prevention and Student Discipline Manual" by the Attorney General of Colorado, is a useful guide for all school personnel, www.ago.state.co.us.²

Boundaries between teachers and students

Knowing how to set boundaries is important for healthy relationships between people. Setting boundaries is the basis for relationships built on equality and mutual respect. Author and educator Nan Stein says, "One reason teens may have trouble identifying, declaring, establishing, and maintaining boundaries is that their boundaries are often not respected by adults." It is vitally important that teachers be scrupulous and consistent in maintaining professional boundaries in their relationships with students.

During the middle school and high school years, young people are developing sexual awareness and forming an early sense of their sexual identity. They will inevitably explore and test out their sense of their own sexuality in the school environment. It is common for students to develop "crushes" on teachers or coaches, sometimes appearing to be flirting and even making sexual advances.

When a student approaches you in a way that seems too personal, set your limits quite clearly, and seek support. If a teacher is approached in a sexual way by a student, he or she is well advised to write a memo to a supervisor describing the incident and detailing how the teacher responded. The student can be referred to the school's student assistance program to explore the reasons behind the inappropriate behavior.

Sometimes, teachers find themselves sexually attracted to students. If you notice you are sexually attracted to a student, it is appropriate to seek help to strategize ways in which you can

remain professional and reduce the risk to the student and your career. In any case, it is important that you deal with your feelings in an environment that is confidential and will allow you to talk freely. You may need to seek outside professional help, if you do not feel you can bring this up within your workplace.

OBLIGATION TO REPORT SEXUAL CONTACT, ABUSE & ASSAULT

Teachers and all school staff are obligated to report when:

- The student is under 18 and has had nonconsensual sexual contact. This is considered child abuse.
If offender is family or babysitter, report to Department of Social Services
If offender is outside family, report to law enforcement
- The student is under 18 and has had consensual sexual contact with a person in a position of trust. This is Statutory Sex Assault.
If offender is family or babysitter, report to Department of Social Services
If offender is outside family, report to law enforcement
- The student is between 15 and 16 years old and has consensual sexual contact with someone who is 10 or more years older. This is Statutory Sex Assault and must be reported to law enforcement.
- The student is under the age of 15 and has had consensual sexual contact with someone 4 or more years older. This is Statutory Sex Assault and must be reported to law enforcement.
- If the student is under 12 years old and has experienced any kind of sexual contact, it must be reported to Department of Social Services.
- If the student is under 18 and is the subject of physical abuse and/or neglect, it must be reported to Department of Social Services.

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¹ Need citation

² Also available from: State of Colorado Attorney General's Office 1575 Sherman Street, Denver 80203.