

Gender Violence in Elementary and Secondary Schools

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My research on peer-to-peer sexual harassment during the past two decades has forced me to see that schools may well be the training grounds for sexual and domestic violence through the practice of and permission given to the public performance of sexual harassment. Peer-to-peer sexual harassment is rampant in elementary and secondary schools across the country. Yet, when educators and policy makers consider interventions to curb youth violence, they usually overlook sexual and gender violence. This oversight occurs despite the growing recognition of the problems of teen dating violence, acquaintance/date rape, bullying, hazing, battering and domestic violence.

When gender violence is acknowledged in elementary and secondary schools, staff members from sexual assault and domestic violence organizations are frequently asked to make classroom presentations on teen dating violence, date rape, battering, and sexual harassment. There may be a gap between what the agency staff present and what the school staff retains and teaches to the students afterwards. Moreover, there is often a cultural dissonance of sorts between the school's culture and protocols and those of the community-based rape crisis organizations.

In order to provide effective interventions and prevention work on student-to-student sexual harassment and gender violence, I developed a research project that utilized a collaborative intervention model in order to develop a curriculum for school

personnel and community-based organizations (1995-1998, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, and the Kapor Family Foundation).

This research project had two dimensions: 1) a survey of nearly 500 sexual assault and domestic violence organizations about their work in K-12 schools in regard to gender violence (including teen dating violence, domestic violence, sexual harassment, etc.), and 2) the development of a teaching guide for grades 7-12, Gender Violence/Gender Justice: An Interdisciplinary teaching guide for teachers of English, Literature, Social Studies, Psychology, Health, Peer Counseling, and Family and Consumer Sciences. This teaching guide was pilot tested by teachers across the United States, including in Los Angeles, Washington state, Alaska, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and included contributions from sexual assault and domestic violence staff from agencies in Washington, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Alaska, & South Dakota.

The survey of more than 500 sexual assault and domestic violence agencies took place during 1996-97. For financial considerations, the four-page survey could only be mailed to each state's coalition for sexual assault and domestic violence (n=160), with the request that each coalition then distribute it to their member agencies. Besides mailing the surveys, I also visited several states and conducted "think tank meetings" with sexual assault and domestic violence agencies. By no means were either the surveys or the on-site visits scientific, yet according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, this survey was the first attempt to gather nation-wide information on the relationships between sexual assault and domestic violence agencies and their local school districts. Although the 500 responses were indeed anecdotal and non-scientific, they nonetheless

represent snapshots of the work that was going on in the field and point towards future research directions.

Questions on the survey instrument covered a wide range of topics. Included among those questions were: conditions under which access to schools were gained; age of the students; typical venue of the presentations; size of the student group at each presentation; number of times the same students received presentations; subject matter most often discussed; relationship with teachers; curricular materials used; questions asked by the students; restrictions placed on the topics discussed in classroom presentations; limitations of the curricular materials used and suggested improvements for curricular materials.

The results of the survey showed that sexual assault and domestic violence staff spend a lot of time in schools, running from classroom to classroom, building to building, and covering great distance. The disheartening news is they are rarely allowed to see the same group of students more than 2.7 times, which certainly would work against the effectiveness of their presentations.

An additional piece of difficulty is that the materials that they bring into the classrooms are often not connected to the general curriculum the students are studying, thus making the presentations seem even more remote to the students and teachers. The overall state of affairs is that skills of the sexual assault and domestic violence staff have not been utilized appropriately, while at the same time some of their classroom pedagogy and materials work at cross-purposes with their goals of reaching the students and staff alike.

Summary and Recommendation

Since the administration of that survey, I have continued to work with sexual assault and domestic violence coalitions around the country. Between the spring of 2000-spring 2001, I worked with five state coalitions and unfortunately found that crisis centers' access to schools has diminished and the number of visits agency staff make to schools has been restricted – largely due to the rise of high stakes testing and the anxiety those tests produce. Drawing both from the responses provided by agency staff to my survey in 1997-1998, and my subsequent work and experience with prevention educators, I believe that agency staff need to find approaches other than curricular interventions to gain access to students during the school day. I believe that framing the topic of teen dating violence and acquaintance rape as a matter of violence prevention and as an integral part of creating a safe school might increase schools' receptivity of the material. Given this new set of circumstances, I have developed a list of 12 recommendations that I believe might strengthen the relationship between agency staff and school personnel.

I hope these suggestions might produce more fruitful relationships with students and staff and lead to deeper discussions regarding issues of relationship violence.

1. Connect to Existing Curriculum

Since high stakes tests are driving education today, learn as much as you can about these tests, their objectives and the academic standards and goals that surround them. Any outsider coming into a school should connect their presentations to those standards/tests, so the teachers won't feel that they will be “deviating” too much from the tests and taking time away from preparing their students for those tests. Teachers are reluctant to give up time to subjects delivered by outsiders that they consider to be “tangential” to the test. Check out the website of the particular state's education

department, and get the information on the tests and the curriculum standards. Before our research team visits any state, we go to their website and research the health standards, social studies standards, and anything else that might connect to interpersonal violence and school safety.

2. Link to School Safety

Figure out a way to tie the presentations into the topics of school safety and sexual harassment. As a topic, sexual harassment seems to be one that schools feel warrants their attention especially since the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the Davis case in May 1999 which established that schools are liable for peer-to-peer sexual harassment. This case provides an entry that didn't exist before. However, this was not a criminal case and students cannot be put on trial for sexual harassment; in fact, under Federal Law Title IX, it is schools who are liable and who get sued for sexual harassment.

3. Use Data

If your state administers the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, get the data (the survey is usually given to 9-12th graders, though about 8-10 states also give it to 8th graders). Some states include questions about dating violence (both physical and sexual violence,) and the questions are asked in such a way not to assume heterosexual relationships.

Moreover, as of the 1999 national version of the YRBS administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, dating violence questions have been added. This information can be very convincing data to provide to school administrators who might feel that they don't have problems in their state or district. If a particular state's data is not available, consult the data from the national sample administered and analyzed by the CDC (sample size is usually about 11,000 students).

4. Integrate Information

Collect syllabi and/or lesson plans for the classes in which the subject of teen dating violence/gender violence might be discussed. Then integrate those presentations into the content of the course, be it health, social studies, psychology, family/ consumer science or English classes.

5. Market the Program for Multiple Sessions

Just say NO to those one-shot presentations, especially if those sessions consist of a large assembly of many students. These venues are a set-up for failure, unless the agency staff person also happens to be a rock star or basketball player who can capture the students' attention. Ask the administrator and/or teacher to allot at least four to five classroom sessions, spread across a period of weeks. Present an outline of the sessions and discuss your evaluation strategy. Remind the school staff that they would never teach algebra in five sessions, or reduce foreign language instruction to only a few sessions. Ask how discussions about building and maintaining safe and healthy relationships can be conducted effectively in two sessions? However, if you are forced to have only one session, ask that it be with the faculty and staff, first, and then with the students. If you can't get invited to faculty inservice presentations, then attend the professional conferences that educators attend – like the statewide conference of guidance counselors, and try to get on the program to present a workshop session.

6. Evaluate

Improve the evaluations of programs you are able to implement in schools. Add a teacher component to the evaluations, and go beyond the standard pre- and post- tests with the students, which typically only test cognitive change and barely get to the level of

behavioral and attitudinal change. The majority of the programs/ curricula, which we examined, were evaluated using a survey-based instrument. The comprehensiveness of these surveys ranged from 22 items to more than 150 items.

A gap in the evaluation of these programs appeared to be any kind of qualitative analysis, which may be able to shed light on the meaning of these results. It is also very important that programs attempt to build in longitudinal analysis so that behavioral change/impacts can be documented over time. If a program can demonstrate that students behavior change and that this trend stays constant over time, then this would be evidence of high quality programs, which should be replicated. In addition, include the teachers in the evaluation efforts, and obtain their opinions and feedback in writing. Treat them as your allies and collaborators. Use some open-ended questions with both students and teachers or consider conducting focus groups to gain new information to complement any survey items you might utilize.

7. Work with School Committees

Join the school's various safety committees, which are required if the school district receives state or federal safe and drug-free school funds. These committees are made up of representatives from parent groups, community agencies, law enforcement and students, and can be a vehicle to participate and influence direction for student and school violence prevention education.

8. Work with School Staff

Work with guidance counselors or school social workers to conduct counseling and discussion groups for girls and for boys. Group membership may either be voluntary or by referrals, but these counseling groups should be long term and structured.

9. Develop School-Based Restraining Orders

As an example of an intervention other than a curriculum, develop school-based restraining orders in conjunction with school personnel. Whether or not your state provides for non-cohabitating minors to take out civil restraining orders for teen dating violence, any school can create a school-based version of a restraining order. This is a somewhat more formal version of the dictive that teachers often say to their students: “Now, you two stay away from each other.”

10. Collaborate

Competition among agencies trying to gain access to the schools may confuse school personnel. In particular, when the domestic violence agency and the sexual assault agency are trying to gain access to schools to talk about issues of “teen dating violence,” school personnel may become confused, and wonder which agency should present programs. It could end badly – not just between the two agencies, but also for entry into the schools on these issues. Sexual assault and domestic violence agencies need to clarify the differences between their programs and the ways in which they can collaborate with each other and schools to present comprehensive sexual assault and domestic violence prevention programs.

11. Identify Intended Audience

Negotiate with school personnel about the age of the target audience for the dating violence prevention programs. Research suggests that prevention programs should be implemented in 9th grade at the latest, and ideally these programs should target middle school aged students. Forty percent of high school girls in this study reported that they

had experienced their first incident of dating violence when they were 14 and 15 years old.

12. Identify Allies

Consider your allies carefully. Check out who's offering what and why; we are particularly leery of alliances with those who profess the law and order mantra ("one strike and you're out" or "zero tolerance"); those who want to increase surveillance and regulation in the lives of young people, as they criminalize them at younger and younger ages.

13. Set Limits

Agency staff needs to be careful about what they promise and I urge them not to bite off more than they can chew. Schools will want to work the agency staff to the bone, including conducting and analyzing surveys for them; they'll have the agency staff running through the halls, conducting one session after another for different classes. Most likely, the schools won't pay agency staff for their time and products. My advice to agency staff is not to do everything the schools ask, even if it means doing less for them.

Conclusion

The official discussion around school safety emphasizes metal detectors, identification mechanisms, crowd control and dress codes, while it minimizes or excludes the factor of gender. Girls are thus thrust into a realm of danger, and as in the outside world, that danger is more likely to come from boys and young men they know than from strangers.

As a start, it is incumbent for school personnel to make schools safe for girls and young women. One way to begin that process is to bring the subjects of gender violence,

sexual harassment and gender-based teasing and bullying into the classrooms. Coupled with other school-wide efforts, such as teacher training, discipline codes and counseling groups as well as sessions for parents, educators can go a long way to reducing gender violence.

Informational Guide

Resources developed from project are available from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women publications department (www.wcwoonline.org, or by calling 781/283-2510).

1. GENDER VIOLENCE/GENDER JUSTICE: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY TEACHING GUIDE FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH, LITERATURE, SOCIAL STUDIES, PSYCHOLOGY, HEALTH, PEER COUNSELING, AND FAMILY AND CONSUMER SCIENCES" (GRADES 7-12) by Nan Stein and Dominic Cappello with contributions from Linda Tubach and Jackson Katz. Published by Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (January 1999) (\$25.00 plus postage and handling).
2. "FLIRTING OR HURTING? A TEACHER'S GUIDE ON PEER-TO-PEER SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN SCHOOLS (GRADES 6-12) by Nan Stein & Lisa Sjostrom (1994). (\$19.95 plus postage and handling). Published by the National Educational Association Professional Library.
3. BULLYPROOF: A TEACHER'S GUIDE ON TEASING AND BULLYING FOR USE WITH FOURTH AND FIFTH GRADE STUDENTS by Lisa Sjostrom & Nan Stein. (\$19.95 plus postage and handling). Published by Wellesley College Center for Research on Women (1996).
4. CLASSROOMS AND COURTROOMS: FACING SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN K-12 SCHOOLS by Nan Stein November 1999) Published by Teachers College Press.

Teaching Guide Available

The new teaching guide, Gender Violence/Gender Justice, picks up on the themes that the sexual assault and domestic violence staff most often discuss in classrooms: 1) boundaries (as in how to establish boundaries in relationships); 2) friendships and

relationships; 3) violence in relationships; and I always add another theme which is 4) courage - meaning the courage on the part of bystanders and witnesses. However, what is unique about this teaching guide is that it is literature based, allowing both the teachers as well as the sexual assault and domestic violence staff to connect the urgent themes and subjects to the books that the students are already reading. So, whether the students are reading Jane Austen, Maya Angelou, Anne Frank, Judy Blume, Chaim Potek, Toni Morrison, Sandra Cisneros, Amy Tan, Malcolm X, John Steinbeck, Ernest Gaines, Harper Lee, Anne Moody, or William Shakespeare, the teachers can deepen the discussion that the sexual assault and domestic violence staff begin. Moreover, teachers in various departments and from different disciplines can teach these subjects in an interdisciplinary manner, re-enforcing the themes echoed in the books and from the sexual assault and domestic violence staff.

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