

An Action Research Study: Using Classroom Guidance Lessons to Teach Middle School Students about Sexual Harassment

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a three-part classroom guidance lesson that teaches middle school students the definition of sexual harassment, the difference between flirting and sexual harassment, and the harmful effects of sexual harassment. An action research study evaluated the effectiveness of the lessons in decreasing referrals for sexual harassment in the grade level studied. Suggestions for further research are provided.

AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY: USING CLASSROOM GUIDANCE LESSONS TO TEACH MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ABOUT SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Sexual harassment is not a new problem in our society. In accordance with ethical and legal norms, the middle school described in this study adopted a zero tolerance stance on sexual harassment and implemented a school policy for

dealing with it. In spite of these measures, students continued to engage in sexually harassing behaviors. Because of the high number of referrals for sexual harassment at this school, this action research (AR) project was undertaken. One seventh-grade team had a very high number of referrals for sexual harassment. Prior to the classroom guidance series intervention adopted for this AR, two of this team's referrals resulted in out-of-school suspensions, and one in a tribunal hearing that placed the student in an alternative school.

According to school discipline records, the average number of referrals for sexual harassment per team is approximately 4 to 5 a month, with differing levels of severity. When interviewed about the proposed project, the principal and assistant principals agreed that some form of action needed to be taken regarding sexual harassment. One seventh-grade team had an average of 8 referrals per month – with an unusually high percentage of referrals considered to be more severe offenses according to the school discipline records. The teachers on the seventh-

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grade team realized the problem and voluntarily decided to have their classes participate in the classroom guidance activities for the pilot study.

Literature Review of Sexual Harassment in Public Schools

The literature regarding sexual harassment in public schools demonstrates that sexual harassment is a pervasive problem with far-reaching consequences. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) Educational Foundation's 2002 survey on sexual harassment in grades 8 - 11 reported that students were afraid in school, and the self-confidence of harassed students was adversely affected. Further, only 7% of those harassed reported the incident(s), 59% of students admitted to being offenders, most harassment occurred out in the open, and 85% of students surveyed had been sexually harassed. Wasserman (2003) reported that sexual harassment can seriously affect children's self concept. Additionally, many students who have been harassed reported not wanting to attend school, having trouble concentrating in class, and having a harder time studying or earning lower grades. According to Stone (2000) numerous areas of students' lives are affected by sexual harassment, including self-concept, growth, development, identity confusion and popularity. Stone also reports that embarrassment, self-consciousness, self-blame, helplessness, and self-doubt may be by-products of sexual harassment. Harm caused by sexual harassment has been well documented (Grube & Lens, 2003). Sexual harassment has been noted to interfere with a student's ability to learn and harmful effects such as depression,

insomnia and other psychological problems have been diagnosed. Further, harassment can adversely affect a person's future – possibly leading to chronic health problems or affecting career outcomes (Grube & Lens).

Noting such adverse effects of sexual harassment, the question arises "what can be done to prevent it?" Common themes throughout the literature regarding the prevention of sexual harassment in the schools included these suggestions for educators: have open communication, explain reporting procedures, protect students who come forward to report, and ensure that each school or system has a sexual harassment policy in writing and make it easily accessible (AAUW, 2002; Stone, 2000; Wasserman, 2003). AAUW's guidelines for preventing sexual harassment in schools recommended that principals get everyone "on board" including other administrators, teachers, parents, counselors and students in order to put an end to the problem. It is also recommended that anyone who witnessed or was told about sexual harassment should be required to report it. Further suggestions included: educating parents and enlisting their support; making it clear that harassment or retaliation against those who report it will not be tolerated; creating and teaching a sexual harassment curriculum; encouraging students to form leadership groups to educate others about prevention of sexual harassment; putting sexual harassment on the agenda for PTO meetings; encouraging students to speak up for themselves; educating students about how to report harassment; teaching students to interrupt any harassment they observe; and reminding victims of sexual

harassment that it's not their fault (AAUW).

Wasserman (2003) stressed the importance of helping students distinguish between wanted versus unwanted behaviors, as well as understanding that sexual harassment is illegal and should be reported. Other studies emphasized the importance of creating a school policy on sexual harassment that outlines specific behaviors that will not be tolerated, including sexual harassment of teachers toward students, and stressing to everyone in the school that the policy will be enforced ("Stress school policy", 2004).

Multicultural issues were also addressed in the sexual harassment literature. Harassment adversely affects learning opportunities across ethnic groups, and noted that 39% of African Americans, 33% of European Americans, and 29% of Hispanic Americans reported not wanting to go to school due to sexual harassment. Further, 42% of African Americans, 30% of European Americans, and 35% of Hispanics reported not wanting to participate in class after the harassing incident occurred (Stone, 2000). These statistics highlight the negative impact of sexual harassment on learning. Stone recommends an advocacy role for school counselors to help alleviate sexual harassment. Further suggestions for counselors include: 1) staying current on laws, ethical standards and district policies, 2) acquiring professional development about sexual misconduct issues, 3) placing sexual harassment on the agenda of local school board meetings to raise awareness, 4) implementing a policy to protect gay, lesbian and bi-sexual students from harassment or other

misconduct, 5) forming a committee to address harassment issues, 6) publicizing that the counseling office is a safe place to disclose incidents of sexual harassment, 7) encouraging parent involvement, 8) providing sexual harassment workshops for staff, 9) conducting a survey for staff and students, and 10) promoting the inclusion of sexual harassment issues in the school's curriculum (Stone, 2000).

Raising awareness of sexual harassment by 1) reviewing policies, procedures, and behavior expectations with faculty, staff and the student body, 2) reinforcing the message against harassment in handbooks, 3) administering a survey on the prevalence of harassment, 4) instructing students and staff on how to report sexual harassment and to whom, and 5) communicating policies and procedures to parents are prevention strategies suggested by Flynn (1997). Grube and Lens (2003) suggested infusing a no tolerance message throughout the informal environment of the school. Such a policy would ensure that students know the procedures for reporting sexual harassment and are comfortable in doing so. Developing a workable definition of sexual harassment, consistently vocalizing support for victims and publicizing knowledge of interest in eliminating sexual harassment are additional strategies for prevention. Keeping parents informed and involved, as well as supporting students who report instances of harassment while ensuring fair treatment of them and protecting them from any backlash are other prevention strategies. Educating personnel and students about sexual harassment and what it looks like is also important. Yaffee (1995) recommends

teaching students to confront the harassment instantly and to immediately report it. Yaffee points out that when students report incidents of sexual harassment or misconduct, they often are met with disbelief or are blamed for the harassment; therefore, staff must be taught to support and protect students. Equally important, as Yaffee suggests, is that the staff be familiar with laws and school policies regarding harassment if students are being taught to report it. This study attempted to implement some of the strategies suggested by various authors and to document their impact on sexual harassment referrals.

METHOD

Because of the pervasiveness of the problem of sexual harassment, a plan was developed to present a classroom guidance series on this topic. By informing students of the definition of sexual harassment and teaching them to respond appropriately to incidences of harassment, it was hoped that incidences of sexual harassment in one seventh-grade team would be reduced.

Participants

Students served by this classroom guidance series were in the seventh grade at a suburban middle school in the Atlanta area. All participants were members of one team. A total of 97 students received the classroom guidance series. Approximately 68% of the students served were Caucasian, 30% were African American, and 2% were Hispanic. Ages of the students ranged from 12 to 14 years, with a mean age of 13 years.

Evaluation

The method of evaluation for this project was the comparison of the number of discipline referrals for the selected team before, during, and after the classroom guidance series where each student received all three lessons. The counselor obtained information about referrals for sexual harassment from the assistant principal (AP).

Procedure

Resources used for this guidance series included the book *Group Activities for Counselors* (Elliot, 1994) and the Sunburst video, *Sexual Harassment: It's Hurting People* (National Middle School Association & Quality Work Environments, 1994). The resources and materials used for each lesson are listed in the Appendix. A series of three guidance lessons was taught over a period of 4 weeks, with each lesson taught to four classes. In the first lesson, students participated in defining sexual harassment, were taught how to distinguish between sexual harassment and sexual discrimination, and shared and discussed examples of sexual harassment. Students were asked to give their definition of sexual harassment, and the counselor wrote student's suggestions and ideas on the board. The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's (EEOC) (n.d.) official definition of sexual harassment was then posted on the board. Discussion about what constitutes "unwelcome behaviors", "sexual advances", and "sexual favors" was held. Examples of sexual harassment were given. Next, an explanation of the difference between sexual harassment and sexual discrimination was provided. Finally, short vignettes were read aloud

from the “What If...?” lesson, and students participated in determining if the story was an example of sexual harassment, discrimination, or “other”.

In the second lesson, students learned to distinguish between sexual harassment and flirting. They also discussed the feelings each produces, and the importance of intention and interpretation in determining the difference between harassment and flirting. First, the counselor reviewed the definition of sexual harassment from lesson one, then students were asked about flirting and what that looks like. Students were then broken up into four groups and each group was given an assignment. Group 1 listed examples of sexual harassment, group 2 listed examples of flirting, group 3 listed feelings produced by sexual harassment, and group 4 listed feelings produced by flirting. Groups 3 and 4 were given feeling words sheets to help facilitate the list of feeling. (Note: The first of the four times Lesson 2 was conducted, the students were broken up into two groups – with group 1 listing both examples of and feelings produced by sexual harassment, and group 2 listing both examples of and feelings produced by flirting. It was decided that the groups were too large for participation by all students; thereafter, four groups were used.) Once the lists were produced, they were posted at the front of the classroom and compared, with emphasis placed on the meaning of intentions and interpretations. In closing, discussion questions were asked to review the difference between harassment and flirting.

In the third lesson, students were shown visual examples of sexual

harassment on video, were reminded of how to report harassment and to whom it should be reported. The lesson began with a review of the previous two lessons. Next, the class viewed the video showing student actors and actresses portraying examples of sexual harassment that occurs in schools. Discussion followed about the realistic nature of the vignettes, as well as of the importance of reporting sexual harassment. The fact that sexual harassment is illegal was stressed, the school policy on sexual harassment was reviewed, and a review of how to report sexual harassment was conducted. Students also listed the people to whom they could report harassment, and the counselor listed the suggestions on the board. In closing, the counselor asked for any other questions that the students might have regarding sexual harassment.

RESULTS

Before the classroom guidance series was implemented, the team had an average of 8 referrals for sexual harassment per month from August through October, with 9 referrals in August, 8 in September and 8 in October. The classroom guidance series began in late October and ended in mid November. During this period, a total of 5 referrals for sexual harassment were made for the team– a reduction of 3 referrals from the previous average. Only 3 sexual harassment referrals were made for this team from the time the guidance series ended until the start of winter break (approximately 3 weeks).

DISCUSSION

According to the reduction in number of discipline referrals for this team from November to December it appears that the classroom guidance series on sexual harassment may have a positive impact in reducing the number of incidents of sexual harassment. This reduction could be the result of fewer incidences of harassment because students know what it is and that it is illegal. Reduced incidences of referrals could also be the result of students being more assertive about stating that harassing actions were inappropriate. However, it would not be surprising if the number of referrals were to increase temporarily due to the newly acquired knowledge about sexual harassment, resulting in a higher rate of reporting, which in turn would result in more referrals. It is too soon to make any conclusive statements of findings.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this action research. No comparison or control group was used. It would have been helpful to compare sexual harassment referrals to another seventh grade team or to another grade level. Although the lessons seemed to be effective with seventh grade, it is not known if they would have been effective with other grade levels. Referrals were tracked for only a few weeks after the intervention; a longer tracking time would have been informative.

Recommendations

Most of the activities carried out during the classroom guidance series went well, and the guidance lessons are worth repeating. However, there are some revisions that might make the series more effective. It would be beneficial to conduct the series

earlier in the semester or school year. This would allow for more time to gather data at the conclusion of the lessons, as well as provide more time to observe the effects of the guidance series. Including a brief staff or team teacher training program about sexual harassment would also be appropriate. This could be done during a planning period, and include a review of the school's policy on sexual harassment, a brief review of examples of sexual harassment, and procedures for reporting incidences of harassment. This would benefit both the team teachers and the students by having the teachers "all on the same page". Finally, conducting a pre/post test regarding knowledge about sexual harassment, as well as a confidential survey on sexual harassment behaviors would be helpful. The test would help measure the amount of student knowledge gained from the guidance series, and the survey would shed light on how prevalent sexual harassment actually is on the team.

CONCLUSION

With the increased emphasis on academic achievement and testing programs, it can be difficult for teachers to find time for classroom guidance, especially if the guidance lessons do not directly pertain to academic achievement. However, this guidance series consists of only three lessons and has the potential to decrease incidences of sexual harassment, leading to fewer discipline referrals and a school environment more conducive to learning. More data needs to be gathered over a longer period of time to determine if three lessons on sexual harassment are enough to decrease sexual harassment in a middle school setting.

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APPENDIX

Resources Needed for Sexual Harassment Guidance Lessons

Lesson Number	Resources Needed for Each Lesson
1	Chalkboard and chalk Guidance lessons from Elliot's book - Defining Sexual Harassment What If...?
2	Chart paper and markers Handout with feeling words Guidance lesson from Elliot's book - Flirting and Harassment: What's the Difference?
3	Chalkboard and chalk TV and VCR Sunburst video – Sexual Harassment: It's Hurting People