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#MeToo and the Middle Level

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Abstract

The viral #MeToo movement of recent years eventually moved from adult celebrities to harassment in K-12 schools. While many may think of sexual activity and/or harassment beginning in high school, the truth is that many middle school students engage in these behaviors as well. Adolescents have a natural curiosity about their bodies and burgeoning sexuality, but adults often ignore this. Schools should provide more comprehensive sex education in an effort to better inform adolescents and prevent nonconsensual sexual behaviors among younger students.

Although the #MeToo movement started by activist Tarana Burke dates back to 2006, in late 2017 the hashtag had a resurgence on Twitter with a viral tsunami of #MeToo stories from adult women on social media following the Harvey Weinstein allegations. A few months later in early 2018, there was a collection of articles addressing sexual misconduct directed toward teen girls (Weiner, 2018). Most of these articles announced the #MeTooK12 campaign meant to raise awareness about sexual harassment in K-12 schools. These articles shared plenty of statistics about the rates of sexual harassment among young people, but I suspect most women would not be surprised by instances beginning at early ages. My earliest #MeToo moment happened around third grade and most of the stories I saw shared by my friends on social media began in or before middle school. As I read these stories, my thoughts turned to my former students.

When I taught high school, rumors of sexual harassment and assault seemed almost “normal.” Sex and all its offshoots – consensual or not – were extremely typical transactions that occurred in the hallways, and many students graduated as parents. In the first year I taught middle school, there were three pregnant girls in the seventh grade. All three had boyfriends who were four or five years older. A seventh-grade boy (who had been retained several times and was close to 16 years old) coerced a seventh-grade girl into a sex act. This happened during the school day, in a classroom, while other students watched...and the (male) substitute claimed not to have noticed. There was the seventh-grade girl who flipped mid-year from a high-achieving student to a constant behavior problem. During a parent-teacher conference,

she admitted to being molested by her mother’s boyfriend. These small vignettes are just the stories I can recall easily. How many more of my former middle school students would be able to join the cacophony of #MeToo?

My own personal story, my friends’ stories, and the stories from my years teaching serve to demonstrate what statistics support – young women become victims of sexual harassment and/or assault at very young ages. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) (2015) reports that 30% of women were between the ages of 11 and 17 the first time they were raped/abused. About one in seven young people report receiving unwanted sexual advances online. Among teens who own cell phones, 15% admit they have received sexually suggestive and/or nude images through texts. Eleven percent say they have shared such pictures. Among reported cases of child sexual abuse, 23% of perpetrators are under the age of 18 (National Sex Offender Public Website, 2018). Two out of three victims of sexual violence under the age of 18 are between the ages of 12 and 17 (Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network, 2018). In the 2010-2011 school year, 48% of students admitted to experiencing sexual harassment in some form (verbal, online, physical, or a combination). Girls were more likely to be harassed in all formats. Being the victim of sexual harassment had a negative effect on 87% of those surveyed. Witnessing harassment at school is much too common and can also have negative effects on students’ sense of safety and well-being (Hill, 2011). Experiencing sexual harassment or assault can lead to social isolation, poor self-image, increased risk-taking behaviors, or depression and other mental health problems (Hill, 2011; Tanner, 2019). We have documented that as a society through

anecdotes, studies, and social media. So how do we fix it? How do we prevent future generations of young girls from becoming statistics? How do we ensure that future generations of young men do not become the perpetrators? As a former middle school teacher and current preservice teacher educator, I believe it starts with comprehensive sex education beginning early in elementary school, but no later than fourth grade.

Here is a fact that most adults, especially teachers and parents, do not want to accept: Kids wonder about sex! A study by Miller and colleagues (2012) found that 46% of nine year olds (around third grade) and 70% of 12 year olds (sixth grade) state they are ready to learn about sex. When asked if they had ever thought about sex, 41% of 12 year olds responded positively. A full 25% of 12 year olds reported being ready to have sex and 20% reported they anticipated having sex within a year. Although the Miller et al. study found that many 12 year olds were thinking about or curious about sex, very few (about 1%) had actually participated in the act. Sexual curiosity is something that is common among middle school students, who are experiencing a heightened influx of hormones and rapid physical changes (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). Many of these physical changes are related to primary and secondary sex characteristics. As educators and parents, we are aware of these physical changes. We comment on them all the time: “Look how big you’ve gotten” or “I barely recognized you; you’ve grown so much.” It should come as no surprise that young adolescents are thinking about sex.

If sex characteristics, and the accompanying sexual thoughts, are a normal part of development, why do so many schools delay (or outright avoid) teaching about sexual health topics? Only 24 states and the District of Columbia require sex education to be taught in public schools (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). Nationwide, the median percentage of sixth graders required to take a health course is only 55.5%. The median numbers for seventh and eighth grade are not much higher, at 68.1% and 66% respectively. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (2017) recommend 19 sexual health topics for grades 6, 7, and 8, but avoiding unwanted pregnancies and preventing STIs seem to make up the bulk of the topics taught in required health classes. Few states teach consent, sexual assault, or human sexuality (de Melker, 2015; Maxouris & Ahmed, 2018;

Shapiro & Brown). The sex education our students, particularly those at the middle level, are receiving across the nation is widely variant. I believe this is a detriment to the sexual health and mental wellbeing of young people across the nation.

Schools, in my opinion, should be the institutions to take on the responsibility of educating young people about sexuality. As a former middle level teacher and current teacher educator, here are my suggestions for how to improve sex education across the country:

- *Make sex education an integral part of a required class, like science or health.* Too many schools relegate sex education to a few days of a guest speaker or a field trip to a local health center. This serves to stigmatize the conversation around pubescent bodies. Middle schoolers are curious – they have lots of questions. If they are only allowed to ask on one special day or required to direct questions to a traveling teacher, their questions will go unanswered (or worse, answered by the internet).
- *Science or health teachers will use the proper names for body parts when teaching sex education during an academic class.* This normalizes discussion about rapidly changing adolescent bodies and reduces shame around sex. Furthermore, research shows that using standard language around body parts dissuades child molesters and sexual perpetrators. If a young person does experience abuse, proper terminology assists in the eventual disclosure and interview process (Moore, 2014). According to the NSVRC (2015), standard terminology also encourages self-confidence and a positive body image – two factors that are important helpers in navigating middle school. The CDC recommends that schools provide materials and ongoing professional development to teachers in order to improve the teaching of sexual health.
- *Along the same lines of teaching sex education in a required class – boys and girls should not be separated.* Too often, the special sessions around sex

education divide the class, sending girls to one room and boys to another. I have never understood the reasoning behind this. Boys and girls learn about their own specific bodies and are sworn to secrecy so they do not share their information with the other side. Why do we do this? By the time they graduate high school (age 18), almost 70% of young people will have had sex (Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2009). Most of that sex will be heterosexual. Every human should have a basic understanding of how the human body works, even if they do not have that particular body part. Teaching in pink and blue silos increases stigma around sex, puts shame on discussing puberty, and denies our children of vital knowledge.

- *Sex education should be age appropriate, but it should not just focus on body parts and STI prevention.* Other countries teach sex education in a progressive manner, adding a variety of topics related to intimacy and sexuality to the curriculum as students move through school years (de Melker, 2017). In the Netherlands, kindergarteners might learn about crushes, while fourth graders would learn about consent around touching and kissing. Gaining consent and expressing emotions are typically lacking in sex education in the US (Tanner, 2019). A majority of public school students in the US cannot differentiate between healthy and unhealthy behaviors in relationships (Maxouris & Ahmed, 2018). Particularly at the middle level, we have to teach our youth how to navigate relationships and obtain consent (no matter how innocent the acts in which they may be engaging). If we teach both male and female students the importance of respect and open communication, we can take steps in curtailing harassment.
- *Lastly, waiting until the end of middle school (or sometimes high school, depending on the state) is too late.* Between 25-30% of our nation's youth will have sex before ninth grade. A very small percentage (between four and seven) will have sex before age 13

(Cavazos-Rehg et al., 2009; CDC, 2017). Roughly half of adolescents begin to have sex before learning about appropriate contraception (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). This is unacceptable. Adults are so squeamish about pre-adolescents and tweens contemplating the idea of sex, but it is a natural part of development. Just because we are uncomfortable with the idea does not mean we should ignore it. Comprehensive sex education must begin in elementary school and should not begin any later than fourth grade.

Perhaps the best methodology for sexuality education is a rights-based approach. There are four major components to this strategy: young people have bodily autonomy, the curriculum must go beyond contraception and STIs, social issues around sexuality (LGBTQ topics, gender norms, harassment, and pleasure to name a few) should be included, and relationship dynamics ought to be explicitly taught (Berglas et al., 2014). Most tweens have innocent thoughts about sex without engaging in sexual acts. They have a natural curiosity and they deserve to know more than our schools are currently teaching them. If we want to have an impact on reducing instances of #metoo, we should teach adolescent sexual health like other academic topics.

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