

* Hints - See them / look closely
 * make sure there is an open channel
 * leave the topic to those who own the story

Demystifying taboo: Consequences of dancing with or around the topic of sexual abuse as educators

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Context

In our work as educators, we are troubled by the taboo associated with confronting and frankly discussing the topic of sexual abuse. Within our S-STEP community, we hear our colleagues and we ourselves espouse rhetoric exalting the value of knowing and honoring the life experiences of all learners. This theoretic frame shared by those who identify as social constructivists (i.e., Samaras, 2002), humanists (i.e., Allender & Allender, 2008), and critical theorists (i.e., Schulte, 2009) argues learners should not be taught in a manner requiring them to deny or hide who they are or what they have experienced. However, there seems to be an exception made when it comes to the particularly painful and, culturally defined, shameful experiences of sexual abuse. Arguably, more than any other 'baggage' learners may carry with them into classrooms, they are expected to pretend they have not been impacted by sexual abuse. While we know consequences of sexual abuse can reach across individuals' psychological, social, and intellectual lives (Levenkron, 2007), we allow sexual abuse and its scars to hide in plain sight in our classrooms everyday.

Aim/objectives

Depending on which reports are deemed reliable, it is estimated that as many as one in six boys and one in three to five girls will be the victims of sexual abuse before they reach adulthood (Bolen, 2001; Corwin, 2002; Levenkron, 2007; Rossman, 2005; Russell, 1983). Our college classrooms and the classrooms our preservice teachers are preparing to work in are not immune, no matter how much we wish to pretend otherwise. Some (i.e., Bolen, 2001; Freeh Report, 2012; Giggan, 2012; White, 2011) assert our reticence as educators to openly acknowledge and discuss sexual abuse puts us in the position of colluding with perpetrators of these crimes.

We, the authors of this paper, have come together to study this dilemma from different backgrounds and relationships with the topic. Two of us are practicing teacher educators, one is a former teacher educator and current clinical health psychologist, and one is a retired schoolteacher and practicing psychotherapist. We have not come together because we share a perspective, but rather because we have agreed to make public our struggle with dancing with or around the topic of sexual abuse. We feel we owe this much to students and to our communities. Acknowledging the repulsive nature of the topic, we invite our peers to enter into dialogue, though uncomfortable, that may serve to make us all more attuned to the lives of learners in ways that have positive consequences for them and our society.

Methods

Data have been gathered for this self-study over the course of our lifetimes, in our own familial experiences, in our professional work, in our personal/professional journals, and in our dialogue and silence with one another. Beginning at Castle IX, we have talked around and about sexual abuse and its implications for our work and identities as educators across numerous face-to-face meetings and electronic communications.

Below we present a fictionalized student response to an assignment one of us received during fall 2011. We are using it to stand for any number of nodal moments (Magee, 2008; Tidwell, 2006; Tidwell, et al., 2006) we have had relative to the topic of sexual abuse. A nodal moment is defined as "a particular moment in time that has importance or value in some way that is perceived as a significant occurrence" (Tidwell, et al., 2006, p. 257). In this case, it is a moment that causes us to grapple for an appropriate response, one congruent with our ideals of social justice

and advocacy. Following the student's excerpt, we each lay claim to the experience and share our reactions and rationales.

Jenny: *When I was six or seven... I didn't tell anyone about it, at least not for a very long time. It was when I got into middle school that it really seemed to start playing on my mind. I couldn't seem to stop thinking about it and feeling ashamed, different from the other girls in my class. I felt like I wanted to hide. Books became my hiding place. (09/2011)*

Valerie: *Jenny was my student. As I look back on how I responded, I am left feeling disappointed in myself and yet stymied in what I might have done differently. On Jenny's paper I wrote some sort of (what I hoped she would read as) affirming responses. As was my practice with student papers, I compiled a list of the themes present across all the students' papers, so I could share and discuss the themes with the class when I returned their work. I chose to not explicitly include Jenny's comment in the compilation of themes. Instead, I sanitized it by grouping it with other students' comments I labeled as "difficulties." It didn't feel accurate, but it did feel safe. I rationalized that Jenny had written the paper with the assumption I would be her only audience, and I imagined she wouldn't have shared so easily if she had known how I might share her text with others in the class - a large mixed-gender group.*

The issue was complicated. It was the beginning of the semester, and I didn't yet know the class members as individuals or how the dynamics of the group would unfold. At the time I was a pre-tenure faculty member at a private, selective college known for its 'polite' culture. Furthermore, I had a colleague who ran into trouble with our department and our students by being too open and honest about the topic of sexual abuse with a class. In short, I did what I perceived as being best for my own professional well-being, not what might have been best for Jenny, her classmates, or their future students.

The truth of the matter is that I don't know what I should have done instead. Even though I was a victim of sexual abuse at approximately the same age as Jenny, I don't know how I could have responded to her in a more empowering way. Even now, I try to imagine being brave enough as a 20-year-old to write about my abuse and its consequences in a paper to my professor. Because I never was, I can't imagine what Jenny hoped for and needed from me. How could I have used this 'teachable moment' to work toward altering norms that result in victims feeling shamed and perpetrators being safely hidden?

Laurie: *When Jenny wrote this in her paper, I had no idea what to say or write. I set the paper aside, read those of the other students, and eventually came back to it. Still, I was unsure. I knew I should respond and knew I wanted to, but had no idea how to respond. I wrote nothing, but with the intention to come back to it after some time and reflection since I would not see the students for another week. The comment weighed heavy on me over the next few days and I found myself thinking often about Jenny and her plight.*

The day before I saw the students for class again, I made the decision to write something, anything. I did not want to completely ignore her statements, as it could further her feelings of shame and isolation. I wrote only a small comment to let her know I was sorry she had experienced this and that she should not feel ashamed. I let her know that I was willing to talk, if that was what she wanted. Writing this, I meant it, yet I hoped she would not take me up on that offer. I wanted to empathize and let her know that I, too, had experienced sexual abuse as a child. However, I did not feel the margin of her class assignment was the right time or place to begin that conversation. Nor did I

know enough about her situation from her comment; the last thing I wanted to do was claim a common experience when ours could be drastically different. I wanted to be an advocate for Jenny, because advocacy is something in which I believe wholeheartedly. As a middle level educator, advocating for students and being a caring adult role model are essential. The position paper of the National Middle School Association (2010), which outlines the beliefs we espouse as an education community, states, "Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate" and that "advocacy is an attitude of caring that translates into actions big and small" (p. 35). While college students are 'adults,' many still need the guidance, advice, and caring an adult can provide. As a middle level educator, I not only believe this is important for my students, I also strive to model it in all interactions so that students know how to be advocates for their own students.

Jenny never sought me out for a conversation about this issue, nor did I seek her out. As I think about it, I was fearful of hearing her story and somewhat worried about the potential awkwardness of the relationship had we gone down that path. I realize, though, that the relationship we did forge was not one based in truth, honesty, and mutual understanding. I feel that I missed such a valuable opportunity to have an impact on the life of a student. I hope, if ever provided that opportunity again, I would respond in a way more aligned with my beliefs and more true to the values I hope to inspire in my students.

Michael: As I read Jenny's response, fleeting, fractured shards begin to flicker at the edges of my awareness. I am disoriented, confused. What's happening? The fragments don't make sense. Lacking coherence, I wonder, Am I dreaming? Where are these images coming from? Juices in my gut begin to churn and well. And then, gradually, a dawning crystallizes in my awareness.

Framing the present self-study around a hypothetical nodal moment is an intentional safety maneuver, one designed to shield our selves as we tread toward truly dangerous territory. Meanwhile inner tension, rooted in my integrity and conviction to honor self, compels me to strike a different tact. Ah, perhaps another nodal moment? Inside, the present, in-vivo nodal moment aligns with self by casting aside the hypothetical veil and shadows of shame to embrace, to honor my lived experience, what is authentic from my childhood as well as my direct experience as a teacher educator.

In fall 2011, as the Jerry Sandusky scandal surfaced at The Pennsylvania State University, students in one of the courses I instruct were considering the value of teachers enacting a listening stance with their students (Schultz, 2003). While examining the role of listening for silence and acts of silencing, an eerie hush enveloped the room as students viewed a short Today Show clip of the unfolding situation at Penn State. Efforts to engage students in further discussion surrounding silence and acts of silencing only led to more resolute silence. At that moment, standing before my students, I was convicted to disclose that which, prior to that moment, had only been revealed to precious few. A profoundly nodal moment. One that made clear, across the intervening years of my own silence, I have been a co-conspirator, unwittingly standing in shame filled solidarity with all those who perpetrate abuse.

That moment was as a crucible, steeling my resolve to publically step out of the shadow of our collective shame for the first time. I stated, "I identify with the children Sandusky and others who have been violated." And while the details of my lived experience were not relevant or appropriate to disclose, self was unshackled. Risky business, indeed it is. My students remained silent that day. At the beginning of the next class, I asked them to anonymously record on index cards their thoughts, feelings, and reactions to what occurred during the previous class. They expressed a range of responses, from disbelief and discomfort to identification and admiration. Through the lens of time it is clear one's attempt to break the chains of silence that shroud abuse, speaking one's truth, are met with fierce, forceful resistance.

And so I no longer abide with employing window dressing to sanitize what is truly base and abhorrent. As noted earlier in this manuscript, "... learners should not be taught in a manner requiring them to deny or hide who they are or what they have experienced." How can we expect more of them than we are fundamentally committed to enacting in and through our selves? Now indeed is the time. Now is the nodal moment, and more than ever before, to thine own self be true. There, in that place, shame can no longer dwell.

Donna: From my point of view, the paper written by Jenny was a cry for attention, a request that the reader, her professor, engage her in a dialogue about the sexual abuse that was perpetrated on her when she was a small child. I imagine she felt that the professor was a safe person

with whom she could share. I also imagine that she hoped that in sharing she might relieve some of the shame that she incorporated as a result of the abuse. The cruelest part of this kind of abuse is the internal burden it places in the abused child/person who feels responsible for the abuse and so very ashamed of her/himself for having allowed it to happen. So, what are we to do as people who are committed to supporting our students to risk being authentic and not hiding what is essential for them to share? It is a critical question we must face.

Somehow, we must create an environment where the shame is placed firmly and totally where it belongs, on the perpetrator of the abuse. The many Jennies need to learn that as long as they carry the shame, it is not where it belongs. They need support in returning it to their abusers.

Because the belief that speaking out and publicly exposing sexual abuse is not a universally shared belief, we as teachers and teacher educators find ourselves in a very difficult position. It falls to us to explore our own fears and resistance to exposing this taboo subject in our classes with our students. We need to have the courage to model what we want them to do with the students they teach. We need to be the first to risk, exploring our own shame and revulsion in talking openly about sexual abuse. This is our self-study.

In publicly revealing their own abuse as children, my colleagues show the first critical step in working through this taboo. I imagine that were they able to explore with their students what it was/is that helped them heal from abuse, it would provide a very potent learning for those in their classes. And for their students who had been sexually abused, it would be an opening. Wouldn't it be a wonder if we could get to the place where when sexual abuse was brought up in a class, a young woman or man could speak up shamelessly and say, "I was sexually abused when I was child, and I want to share with you how this impacted my life and what we as future teachers can do to help those who are now feeling as I did when I was six years old."

Above, our reactions and rationales reflect our extended dialogue and current best attempts to understand our selves and practices as they align, or fail to, with our beliefs when faced with the reality of sexual abuse. They are anchored to our personal and professional histories and to our sincere efforts to study our selves and our practices as teacher educators.

In our Castle X presentation, we will ask our peers to consider the consequences of the stances we have presented and struggle with us to identify and analyze our moral obligations to our students and their students when it comes to the insidiousness of sexual abuse.

Outcomes

SEE: Our students bring into our classrooms signs of sexual abuse. We hope we all will become more willing to see what is before our eyes. HEAR: When they are courageous enough to tell us of their experience and pain, we will be willing and able to truly listen. RISK: We will handle our own shame, fear, and resistance to dealing with this terrible issue, and encourage them to say as much as they need to say and be. We will learn to ask them what they feel would be helpful to them for us to do and be honest about the boundaries of our abilities. ADVOCATE: We will help them find the resources in our communities that may be helpful. In doing all of this for our own students, we hope to find ways to help our preservice teachers become aware and able to do as much for their students when they are teachers.

The S-STEP community embraces the values of advocacy and social justice and has demonstrated through its history a commitment to bringing to the stage the voices of learners who have been ignored or silenced in other forums (i.e., Kitchen & Bellini, 2012; Tidwell & Fitzgerald, 2006). Speaking up for a population of learners who cross all demographics is among the most important work we can engage in. We wish to call our colleagues to work with us in breaking the silence that shrouds victims of sexual abuse and emboldens its perpetrators.

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