Crossing the Line with Students:

An Ethical Case Study of Student-Teacher Relationships

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Abstract

The paper will serve to examine the ethical dilemmas concerning student-teacher relationships, focusing specifically on the implications of negative student-teacher relationships. Student-teacher relationships are an important aspect of effective teaching, but those that “cross the line” can mean negative consequences for the teacher, student, and the school district. First, this study will identify the contextual factors shaping the ethical dilemmas in question. Within this case study will be a discussion of the underlying value conflicts that make the particular case one that is complex and that poses many ethical and moral questions about who is responsible for preventing and reporting these unprincipled incidents between teachers and students. Finally, potential solutions and suggestions will be provided for solving the ethical dilemmas at hand, along with a critique on the applicability and effectiveness of the solutions.
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The study of student-teacher relationships has been the focus of educational philosophies for many years. Most professional educators agree that having relationships with students creates a positive learning climate and boosts many educational advantages for students. According to Hamre and Pianta, forming positive and supportive relationships with students allows them to “feel safer and more secure in the school setting, feel more competent, make more positive connections with peers, and make greater academic gains” (2006). But what happens when teachers and/or students cross the lines between student-teacher relationship boundaries? Student-teacher relationships that go beyond the professional scope of teaching can have negative effects on student performance in school as well as the social and emotional development of the student(s) involved (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). The next section will look specifically at the case of a student-teacher relationship which violated teacher professionalism, teacher codes of ethics, and relationship boundaries between teachers and students.

The ethical case in this discussion is of a Citrus Valley High School teacher, Laura Whitehurst, who was arrested for unlawful sexual intercourse with a minor in July of 2013. Whitehurst was accused of allegedly developing a personal and sexual relationship with a 16 year old male student, which resulted in her becoming pregnant with the students’ child. The relationship between Whitehurst and the male student, who was referred to as “John Doe”, began while Whitehurst was helping supervise a school-sponsored trip to Disney World, where the two were said to have begun their intimate relationship. The male student, “John Doe”, told police that he knew about the pregnancy and attended the birth of the child. What creates an even bigger ethical dilemma is that according to records, district officials knew about the relationship
Whitehurst was alleged to have with “Doe”, but did not report it immediately to the police (Pamer & Shin, 2013). As the following discussion will analyze, this case involves several ethical dilemmas concerning the actions of Whitehurst and that of the district officials of the Redlands Unified School District.

The first ethical dilemma encompassing this case is the educator sexual misconduct facilitated by Whitehurst, the student’s teacher and advisor. Many school districts have a personnel “Code of Ethics” in place to ensure all school employees do not have inappropriate relationships with students. Whitehurst however broke the “Code of Ethics” by developing a relationship with the student outside of school and school activities, engaging in sexual intercourse with the student, and continuing the relationship by having his child. Although it is important for teachers to develop close relationships with students, there are relationship boundaries that should not be crossed. These boundaries exist to “distinguish between what is appropriate and inappropriate in relationships” and act to constrain and limit issues of control and influence on students (Aultman et al., 2009). Teachers have a professional duty to put students’ best interest as priority, but the actions of Whitehurst show her lack of professionalism, self-control, and ethical and moral principles.

In addition to the educator misconduct involved in this case, the second ethical dilemma concerns the actions, or rather inactions, of district officials. According to the news article of Whitehurst’s story, district officials including the Assistant Superintendent of Redlands Unified School District, are being investigated for failing to report this incident to the police (Pamer & Shin, 2013). An article on educator sexual misconduct states that district policies concerning these incidents should be “clear about the requirements for investigating and reporting to local law enforcement and to state educator officials”, and should explain what constitutes as sexual
misconduct (Shakeshaft, 2013). Although teachers are required to know how to identify and report incidents of child abuse in schools, it is just as important for the district to protect the student by reporting it to the abuse to the police. Because the district is ultimately responsible for the actions of its employees and what happens in the schools, there is a question of who is liable in this particular case since the incident was not reported immediately after being discovered.

Within the two ethical dilemmas presented for this case, there are several contextual factors which help shape these ethical dilemmas. The first contextual factor is the role Whitehurst held as a teacher, in that it is unethical for teachers to have sexual intercourse with students. In Charol Shakeshaft’s article, “Knowing the Warning Signs of Educator Sexual Misconduct”, she states that “verbal, visual, and physical misconduct is unacceptable when directed by an adult, especially by a school-based authority figure, toward a student” (2013), which was the direct action Whitehurst took as the student’s teacher. The factor of her being a teacher escalates her unethical actions because as a teacher, she is trusted by the district, school, parents, and community to put the educational, emotional, and physical health of students first. However, by becoming romantically and sexually involved with this student, Whitehurst broke the trust bestowed upon her. Teachers are often as seen as authority figures who have a certain degree of control over students, so it is possible that as a teacher, Whitehurst was better able to influence the male student to become romantically involved. However, in deliberately crossing the relationship boundaries between herself and “John Doe”, she violated the values of education and professionalism.

In addition to her role as a teacher, the fact that she was an advisor to the victim is an important contextual factor in shaping this case. Aultman, Williams-Johnson, and Schutz discuss in their article the boundaries that exist within student-teacher relationships, with relationship
boundaries being the most applicable to this case because it involves acts such as sexual intercourse, intimate gestures, and calling a teacher by first name (2009). The article explains that teachers who have “dual relationships”, such as being a teacher and a coach to one particular student, spend more hours with a smaller number of students and it is possible for boundary violations to be more prevalent (Aultman et al., 2009). Not only was Whitehurst the male student’s teacher and advisor, but she also supervised the school trip with “John Doe”, offering more opportunities for her to violate relationship boundaries and begin to create an intimate or sexual relationship with this student. Shakeshaft identified this type of abuser as an opportunistic abuser, which is an adult who takes sexual advantage of a situation and who has “boundary and judgment problems” (2013). Opportunistic abusers also tend to be emotionally arrested and operate at a teenage level (Shakeshaft, 2013), offering yet another possible contextual factor that may have shaped the unethical actions of Whitehurst. If Whitehurst’s emotions were developed only to that of a teenager, it may have made her more likely to desire a relationship with “John Doe” and ultimately cross the boundaries in their relationship.

The next two contextual factors that shape this ethical dilemma are specific to personal factors of Whitehurst. Whitehurst was 27 when she began to develop the relationship with “John Doe”, and therefore could only have up to 5 years of teaching experience, limiting her expertise in dealing with student-teacher relationship boundaries. Aultman et al. explain that some teachers feel the need to be liked or to be friends with students, especially if the teacher is young and in the first few years of teaching, stating that “a smaller age gap between student and teacher can lead to loss of control, boundary crossing, or even boundary violations” (2009). In the case of Whitehurst, her relatively young age and experience could have made her more prone to think that being friends with students or having them like her meant creating a positive climate in her
While the contextual factors contribute to shaping the ethical dilemmas in question, identifying the underlying value conflicts allows for examination of the ethics of actions and behaviors involved in this case. The first underlying value conflict is whether Whitehurst’s
decision to become intimate with a 16 year old male student was appropriate considering her roles and responsibilities as a teacher. Most people would agree that having a sexual relationship with a student, whether they are a minor or not, is unethical, illegal, and breaks the trust bestowed upon teachers when they enter the classroom. However, to understand the scope this value conflict thoroughly, it is important to look closely at the benefits and effects of student-teacher relationships. Pre-service teachers are taught early that developing rapport, a relationship based on trust and emotional affinity, with students is essential for effective teaching. Studies have shown that positive teacher-student relationships with “low conflict, a high degree of closeness and support, and little dependency”, have been shown to contribute to the improvement of students’ social skills, promote academic performance, and are more engaged in learning (Rimm-Kaufman). The goal is to create a supportive and caring learning environment, and teachers are often encouraged to become interested and involved in students’ lives by getting to know them on a personal level, talking with them one-on-one, and self-disclosing information about yourself to be more genuine with students. However, as discussed previously, it is possible to disclose too much personal information where students begin to think you are their “friend” rather than teacher. Thus, the lines between students and teachers can blur, and boundaries may often be violated by the student or the teacher.

But what happens when these “positive relationships” cross the line of student-teacher relationship boundaries? Hamre and Pianta report that teachers who experience depression in their personal lives often have difficulty establishing emotional or behavioral boundaries with their students (2009). These teachers often rely on their relationships with students for emotional support and comfort, shedding light on why Whitehurst may have chosen to develop such an intimate relationship with “John Doe”. Much research shows that a lack of boundaries in student-
teacher relationships can be harmful to students’ social development and overall academic performance. The Adverse Child Experiences Study found that “victims of sexual abuse are more likely than nonvictims to have problems with adult relationships, a history of drug or alcohol abuse, the risk of suicide or other harm, and health problems” (Shakeshaft, 2013), which can produce numerous academic problems including a decrease in academic performance, withdrawal from participating in school, and even school dropout. As a teacher, Whitehurst had the professional duty to put the interest of her student’s first, and would have been trained on the ethics of relationships with students as well as the effects of negative student-teacher relationships. Her intimate and sexual relationship with “John Doe” directly conflicts with the values of education which guide teachers to respect and care for students’ well-being. In addition, the Redlands Unified School District website lists the Sexual Harassment Policy for district personnel, stating that “any district employee who permits, engages in, or participates in sexual harassment of another district employee or student shall be in violation of this policy” (“Redlands usd sexual”, 1999). Considering Whitehurst would have been presented this policy upon gaining employment from the district, her relationship with “John Doe” proved to be a direct conflict with the ethics of teaching and the policies enforced by the school district.

The second underlying value conflict of this case is the decision of the school officials to not report Whitehurst’s actions immediately to the police. According to the California “Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act”, employees of school districts are considered “mandated reporters”, who are required by law to report known or reasonably suspected incidents of child sexual abuse or neglect (State of California, 2004). These mandated reporters include school employees such as teachers, instructional aides, administrators, administrative officers, clinical or guidance counselors, and many other people who may have contact with students. The
purpose of this legal act is to protect children from abuse and neglect, a goal that should be shared by all educational professionals. School or district employees play an important role in preventing child abuse, and reporting any suspicious or illegal behaviors between teachers and students is the first step to preventing this dilemma. However, the district officials of Redlands Unified School District failed to fulfill their duty as “mandated reporters” and therefore failed to protect the well-being of students. Administrators and school officials are also responsible for leading the district and setting an example for its employees. As Charol Shakeshaft states in her article, “administrative actions need to be communicated to the school community to send the message that reports of sexual misconduct are taken seriously” (2013). However, it is clear that the actions of district officials conflict with legal and ethical principles surrounding child sexual abuse in schools.

As the previous analysis of the contextual factors and underlying value conflicts of this dilemma suggest, the actions of Whitehurst and the district officials who knew about the alleged child abuse were indeed unethical. But how could this ethical dilemma have been prevented or remediated? To solve the first ethical dilemma, the sexual relationship that formed between Whitehurst and her 16 year old male student, setting boundaries and following the ethics of student-teacher relationships could have prevented Whitehurst from engaging in sexual misconduct. In order to establish and maintain positive student-teacher relationships, the American Psychological Association suggests that teachers do things such as demonstrating knowledge about students’ background or interests, show enjoyment of working with students, and interest with students in a responsive and respectful manner (Rimm-Kaufman). It is clear though that Whitehurst went beyond the scope of positive student-teacher relationships by becoming sexually involved with her student. As an adult and a teacher, Whitehurst should have
used her moral reasoning to determine that her feelings for this student were inappropriate, thus having the potential to prevent the relationship from happening.

As an additional suggestion for this ethical dilemma, teachers should be made aware of how to properly create positive relationships with students without crossing the boundaries of the relationship. Teacher education programs and district provided professional development should train teachers on these issues, including ways to remain ethical in their relations with students. Prevention training is key in making sure school employees know and understand the expectations of the district. Sexual harassment policies as well as codes of ethics should also be included in training so teachers are aware of the personal and educational consequences of sexual misconduct, and know how to identify and report it.

The suggestion for developing training on educator sexual misconduct appears to be an effective way to prevent child abuse from happening in schools. However, determined predators such as Laura Whitehurst, who knew the policies and ethics but chose not to follow them, may not be deterred from engaging in sexual relationships with students. In this particular case, training was not enough to prevent “John Doe” from being sexually abused by his teacher. The strength of this suggestion for the case is that it would improve the likelihood for school personnel to report incidents to school officials. Although it may not prevent students from being sexually abused initially, it would prevent the inappropriate relationship from continuing and causing more mental, physical, and emotional harm to the student. Providing training on these issues also ensures that the district is not accountable for the actions of individual teachers if they choose to break the codes of ethics or policies in place. It seems that training for school personnel would not be a concrete method of preventing inappropriate student-teacher
relationships. Many times, it is up to the moral and ethical beliefs of individual teachers to determine whether the relationships they have with students are positive and non-abusive.

The second ethical dilemma concerning the responsibility of the district to report allegations of child abuse further questions whether the district was partially responsible for the outcomes of the case. As stated previously, teachers and administrators are not the only persons responsible for reporting cases or suspicion of child abuse. School officials, like the ones in the case presented, are also mandated to report these incidents to the police. Not only did they break district policies in not reporting, but broke California state laws established to prevent situations like this from happening in schools. The ultimate suggestion for this ethical dilemma is that the district personnel who knew about the case should have reported it immediately to prevent the abuse from continuing. It was not until Whitehurst gave birth to the student’s child that the police were finally contacted about the teacher and her relationship with “John Doe”. It is important for school districts to take suspicions of child abuse seriously to send a message to local communities that the behavior of the teacher in question is not encouraged or tolerated by the district.

Reporting the accusations against Whitehurst would have prevented the ethical dilemma of the district officials of Redlands Unified School District. Although it may not have prevented the relationship between Whitehurst and “John Doe” from starting, it would have warned other teachers about the dangers of becoming too involved with students. Rather than being subject to investigation, the school officials involved could have worked with police to help “John Doe” and his case against Whitehurst. The strength in this particular solution or suggestion for the case is that it would have saved the district from being viewed as partially responsible for this situation. Their inaction in reporting Whitehurst to the police raises questions of whether other
situations of child abuse were made aware to the district but not reported. This ultimately creates an unease among parents and the community concerning the safety of their students. Overall, reporting the relationship between Whitehurst and “John Doe” immediately could have prevented the extent to which the student and the district were harmed.

Student-teacher relationships are an important part of creating positive learning environments in the classroom. These positive learning environments can have great effects on the motivation and academic performance of students. It is the responsibility of teachers to make sure they do not cross the boundaries of student-teacher relationships and keep a professional distance between students and their personal lives. Student-teacher relationships that cross these boundaries begin to raise ethical questions about how close teachers are getting to students in order to create a positive classroom climate. In addition to the responsibility of teachers, mandated reporters and school officials play an important role in preventing and remediating cases of suspected child abuse. Although the ethical dilemma of inappropriate student-teacher relationships may never find complete resolve, it is essential for the physical, mental, and emotional safety of students that district employees are educated on this critical issue in education.
References


