Ethics Regarding Student Teacher Relationships

Michael S. Morris

Philosophies of Education

Spring 2009
Ethics Regarding Student Teacher Relationship

Relationships are built on trust and the understanding that people will not take advantage of each other especially when faced with a role model position. The area of study regarding unethical situations involving student teacher relationships continues to plague many school districts throughout the United States and abroad. “According to researcher Charol Shakershaft professor in Foundations and Leadership Policy at Hofstra University released in the report Educator Sexual Misconduct: A Synthesis of Existing Literature (2004), estimates that 4.5 million students are likely the target of some form of sexual misconduct ranging from a joke to sexual intercourse, from school employees some time during their school years “as reported in the article Protecting the Teacher’s Pet by Angela Pascopella. The ever increasing number continues to startle the general public and is no longer making headline or front page news because of all the incidents that are occurring. The frequency of these relationships especially female teachers that are seducing young male students puts all teachers on the forefront of speculation even though most are not and will not cross the line between mentor and mentee. These boundaries that are being crossed continue to hurt the profession and often make people wonder what types of educators are being hired in today’s schools. Society continues to emphasize improper relationships through shows such as Jerry Springer and Maury Povich which unfortunately desensitizes the improper nature of the acts being committed. According to the article “Shadow over U.S. Schools” (Education Week, October 24, 2007), sexual misconduct between teachers and students is at an all time high when compared to other periods in history. With the ever loosening of morals in society, I am sure that this is a true
statement and one that should alert every parent who has a student in schools. With that being said, most educators are never going to cross these boundaries and are as frustrated as the general public with the ones who do. Student teacher relationships are very unique. The dynamics of the teaching profession continue to change and more responsibilities are being thrust upon educators than ever before. We continue to be friends, parents, mentors, motivators, and a host of other impacting role model facilitators that influence the minds and personalities of those we teach. The purpose of this case study is to look at the dilemmas involved with the whole crisis of improper student teacher relationships, including possible reasons or factors, the impacts or the value conflicts on those involved, ways to increase healthy role model relationships, and reasons why with all the knowledge regarding the damages they cause to all involved these improper relationships can still occur.

We have heard the names from Pamela Smart to Mary Kay Letourneau and how their improprieties with their students continue to impact education in negative ways. Their leadership qualities influenced the unsuspecting minds of their young male students and placed their families, their careers, and their livelihood into precarious situations. All involved have suffered and will continue to suffer as their situations will continue to play out in the media. These examples create situations of deceit, mistrust, dishonesty, and allow all educators to be often judged or at least looked upon suspiciously when completing everyday tasks in appropriate ways with their students. Many teachers give up time before, during and after school to mentor, coach, or counsel students and should not have to deal with these unnecessary distractions. It only takes one false allegation to ruin a career, family, or one’s self-
esteem and negatively will affect all future relationships with one’s students. It also only takes one improper incident to ruin lives forever.

The focus of this section is on the improper relationships between teacher and student and why they may occur. No longer are teachers looked at as authoritative administrators of knowledge but more as working collaborators with students to help them understand the information. This friendship role often blurs the boundaries between ethical and non-ethical teaching practices such as working together after school one on one without others around. I don’t understand why professionals would put themselves in these situations but they continue to occur even though they are discouraged. You are not a student’s friend and confidant you are their teacher and I think that the educational field sends mixed messages to our students in this regards. Because educators continue to fill this need to many of our students a closeness may develop that crosses the boundaries because too much personal information is distributed and that is not what a teacher’s role should consist of. A teacher is there to teach and not be the entire emotional support for their students. Because so much time is spent with students, healthy relationships should be focused on. Relationships that treat others with proper respect and compassion that is built upon trust. Many students do not see examples of these outside of the classroom and because of this can be manipulated or become easy targets of unethical educators. Many continue to look for emotional support and will take any attention that they can get. To examine this further, there needs to be a discussion regarding the emotional roles that both student and teacher play in these relationships. Teachers are often looked at as all knowing, protective, compassionate, and nurturing. Schools are supposed to be safe places where students can grow learn, and develop without fears of being taken advantage of.
Students are continuing to be influenced at younger ages by the media including TV, movies, the Internet etc. and may not have the innocence that one would expect. Because of society’s less restrictive moral code, feelings of confusion often plague today’s students in terms of proper relationships and boundaries between adults and children. From baby beauty pageants to teen movies, many of today’s youth do not look their chronological age but continue to want to be older and have the same “relationship roles” that they see from others in the media such as Brittany Spears, Lindsay Lohan and others. They may look older, but their emotional age is still what is driving their desire to fit in and often times they are unable to handle the responsibilities that come with these adult emotional experiences. That being said, improper relationships continue to occur even though there are safeguards in place to prevent them.

“Preducators “or predators who are educators may look for students with these traits. They can be easily manipulated into a false sense of security by preying on their emotional needs and wants even though they are not mature enough to deal with their feelings. People who are emotionally less advanced are often preyed upon by predators because they cannot explain the feelings surrounding the situations they are placed in. They may view their relationship as positive even though it continues to cause harmful effects on the emotional stability. A teacher’s age may also be a factor in looking at inappropriate relationships. Many fresh out of college are only a few chronological years older than some of their students. They may even have same peer group relationships based on common interests and this could lead to potential difficulties when their worlds coincide. Maintaining proper etiquette outside of the educational setting when their lives cross must remain the responsibility of a professional educator. Even though one may have common interests, likes, or hobbies, these boundaries cannot be crossed.
Once the trust factor is broken or damaged one cannot ever get it back. The student-educator relationship is sacred. It is one that involves trust, honor, and respect and any violations of that relationship are unacceptable and cannot be tolerated. Because many students are easily manipulated, many “preducaters” continue to beat the system and move on from victim to victim. In the past many districts choose to reprimand these individuals behind closed doors or allow them to leave their district quietly along as they left. Many moved to other districts to continue their obsessions with other students often times with no indication that they had improper relations with others at previous places of employment. Presently, there is a much more focused effort in maintaining and prosecuting teachers who choose this lifestyle. Jail sentences are becoming longer and lives continue to be disrupted and this needs to be the focus for anyplace a child has the potential, to be taken advantage of by a superior with or without their consent. Many students are willing participants in these improper relationships and feel that they are exciting and since they are willing no one is getting hurt. What they don’t realize because of their emotional involvement is that eventually as they mature the damage will already be done. Males or females continue to be preyed upon by the deliberate violations of trust by their teachers. These relationships destroy self-esteem, families, and careers and can no longer be tolerated in today’s educational atmosphere. According to the article States Weigh Plans to Address Educator Sexual Abuse, “Many states are actively seeking to toughen the punishments given to teachers as a result of their sexual misconduct. U.S. Representative Adam Putnam would like to see a national data base of convicted sex offenders” to disallow predators to move from distinct to district in various states to continue their mistreatment of students. “In Florida there is pending legislation for an ethics bill that would create a state
wide standards for hiring, screening, and misconduct reporting to try and crack down on sexually and physically abusive teachers” according to the article in Education Week Florida Bill would Create Standards for Reporting Teacher Misconduct. The same article acknowledged that “Districts would no longer prohibit schools from entering into confidentiality agreements with unethical educators who otherwise would be allowed to quietly leave their district and get jobs in other counties or states.” In the article from Education Week, Teacher Sex with Teenage Students Would Be a Felony under S.C. Bill, states that “South Carolina teachers who have sex with students 16 (age of consent) and older could be sent to prison for up to five years and be charged with felony sexual abuse for any school employees in supervisory roles who have sexual misconduct with students under the age of consent.” These are indeed just a few of the plans that are currently being addressed by the US government in regards to teacher misconduct. There are also numerous states with pending legislation similar to Florida and South Carolina in regards to these incidents.

To gain trust you need to do what you say you are going to do. Unfortunately, once the trust is broken, it is almost impossible to regain it. Forming positive student teacher relationships is crucial to develop this trust. According to Patterson and Austin from the article Stop the Grooming, “Positive student-teacher relationships are characterized by open communication, as well as emotional and academic support that exist between students and teachers.” This section will look at ways to increase healthy role model relationships. Boundaries need to be in place both physically and verbally in terms of appropriate contact and conversations with students. One needs to be professional in all discussions with their students and no sexual innuendo or talk will be tolerated. This needs to be instilled in all school
employees and self-monitoring needs to be a part of one’s overall atmosphere. A system of checks and balances between cohorts also needs to be discussed and any types of inappropriate actions needs to be dealt with quickly and fairly to all personnel and students involved. Districts need to have in place policies and guidelines that will dictate how these situations will be handled if they arise. According to the article Setting Boundaries for Sexual Harassment “by Edward Dragan the 2003 federal court ruling on “cluelessness” shows that school staff seem to have a duty to be suspicious and investigate any suspicions they have and sexual misconduct is any behavior of a sexual nature that may affect the personal integrity or security of either the employee or the students or the school environment. School administrators and staff as well as students need to be aware of personal interactions in the school setting that could lead to inappropriate sexual relationships and sexual harassment litigation.” These are areas that need to be addressed with parents, administrators, educators, coaches, or any other school employee and students. To be proactive is like preventive medicine and the more one is aware of the guidelines and consequences, the more likelihood that there will be no confusion on what is and is not appropriate regarding student relationships with school personnel. According to Edward Dragan, there are definite situations that may lead to improper or improper allegations of sexual misconduct. They include “tutoring a student in a secluded area or behind a closed door, taking students home after school in private vehicles, making personal calls or texts to students, making suggestive comments to student or acting in a flirtatious manner, or inviting students to your home.” These are red flag areas that may be viewed a suspicious even if there are no improprieties going on. School employees need to be aware of how their interactions with students may be
interpreted by others. An area that has not been discussed but that is relevant to healthy relationships with students is if a school employee is confronted with a student’s inappropriate actions and what should be done if this occurs. First, one has a responsibility to him or herself, to the school, and to the students to take steps to immediately stop the behavior. A professional needs to recognize inappropriate student behaviors such as sending notes or intimate messages, making suggestive remarks or comments to the employee, calling or texting personal messages outside of school, or offering to meet outside of the learning environment. One needs to immediately inform his or her supervisors and document all incidents of inappropriate desires to protect you from future legal actions. Communication is also a component of healthy student teacher relationships. As an educator you should always keep an open line of communication between you and your student as long as it remains mentor mentee discussions. One needs to keep personal boundaries and one’s personal life and activities private. Students not need to be your friends and you don’t need to be theirs. These are some of the safeguards to consider when interacting with students and most of all; one needs to use common sense when dealing with students. You do not place yourself in situations where rumors or actions may or may not occur but ultimately could have a negative impact on students and their role models.

Even with all the reasons not to have inappropriate relationships with students, they still occur. Why? I believe that for some, they may feel that rules do not apply to them and they can continue to hurt others emotionally and physically to satisfy their own wants and desires. If successful in the past committing these atrocious breeches of trust without penalties or consequences, predators continue to be more aggressive or complete similar or even bolder
acts if allowed to operate undetected. For others, I believe that they are lacking their emotional support in their own lives and look for ways to fulfill their own needs without concerns with how this affects others. Even with knowing potential outcomes if caught, I feel that some continue to seek gratification about taking advantage of others emotionally, physically, and mentally. It may be a quest for power or manipulation or seeking control when it is missing in their own lives. The reasons may be as simple as they are sexual predators who fly under the radar, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting and naivety in emotionally starved children and will strike when the opportunity presents itself. Clearly they have severe emotional issues to maintain their thought processes regarding their personal relationships or lifestyles. They enjoy the deception of others without regards to penalties until caught.

This paper looked at the ethical dilemmas involved in inappropriate educator relationships both emotionally and sexually with students. The emotional abuse will last much longer than the physical acts that may occur. These everlasting imprints will shape their views for the rest of their lives. The hurt, shame, and devastations that they cause continue to impact the educational platforms of the world. Children often think that they can take care of themselves in terms of relationships without a lot of background or experiences to draw upon. These are ideal students for predators to victimize. Often they have low self-esteem and any attention they receive, they feel grateful for. These patterns of thinking may allow for abuses to take place. Adults should know better but often times are not influenced by rational thinking when it comes to their own desires and personal satisfactions. To gain trust can be very difficult, but to break trust is simple yet emotionally crippling to those whose trust is broken. These relationships are a no win situation for any person involved. It hurts your school, community,
family, and most of all, the active participants in the relationships. Relationships are a two way street and authority figures need to understand the damages that their improprieties cause. These types of relationships are not healthy and continue to threaten school districts across the country and world. Educators need to be the watchdogs and protectors of our students to not only maintain their safety, but to guarantee it. We are there to look out for their best interests and unethical relationships with students critically damage the bond that should be sacred through student and educator based on mutual trust.
References


Rex, J. (March, 11, 2009). Teacher sex with teenage students would be felony under S.C. bill. Education Week. 28, 4-5.

AP. (April, 2008). Florida bill would create standards for reporting teacher misconduct. Education Week. 27, 4-14.

AP. (February, 2008). State weighs plan to address educator sexual abuse. Education Week. 27, 16-18.

