Participatory Action in Schools: Incorporating Sexual Violence Prevention into English Classes in Findlay, Ohio

Practitioners and Advocates Featured:

Victoria Dickman
EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY-BASED ACTION RESEARCH
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EDUCATOR
Findlay City Schools

The 2014-2015 school year marked the beginning of a partnership between Victoria Dickman-Burnett, a PhD candidate at the University of Cincinnati and Maribeth Geaman, an Advanced Placement and college-prep English teacher at Findlay High School. Their partnership started with the development and delivery of mini lessons on sexual violence prevention, and has since turned into a full curriculum being implemented in Maribeth's English classroom. They are using arts-based approaches and encouraging participatory action among students to take on sexual violence to make it a school prevention issue.

FROM IDEA TO PILOT

Victoria and Maribeth first met back in 2014 at Findlay High School when Victoria was hired as a writing support professional. Through conversations then they realized that there wasn't enough dialogue in schools to help students navigate high school and prevent sexual and other forms of violence. A few years after this conversation, Victoria was pursuing her PhD and reached back out to Maribeth about the topic of her dissertation, "Sexual assault and its prevention through the use of literature." Together, they decided to develop a pilot of a multi-faceted curriculum that is participatory, interdisciplinary, and adaptable.

COUPLING SEXUAL VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND ENGLISH LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Victoria and Maribeth went about an action research process starting with structural ethical reflection. This involves rooting one's partnership and actions in shared values. These are determined in the early stages and continue to serve as benchmarks through the subsequent steps

of planning and implementation. Some of the values that rose to the top in their work include openness, humility, and critical thinking.

Once Victoria and Maribeth aligned their values, they began to integrate sexual violence learning objectives with English learning objectives. The sexual violence learning objectives ranged from understanding sexual violence and how society normalizes sexual violence, to understanding affirmative consent. Students were asked to read The Mockingbirds by Daisy Whitney, complete journals about the novel, participate in class discussions, as well as partake in photography, artwork and action planning exercises to further engage with the content. The classes even offered the opportunity to share their artwork about the normalization of and myths about sexual assault in an arts showcase.

STUDENT ACTION PLANS AND STEPS MOVING FORWARD

Students in Maribeth's classroom not only discussed the issue of sexual violence, but were asked to create action plans for preventing and addressing the violence in their school and community. Some students opted to create a survey with questions asking about sexual violence education or lack of education in health classes as a way to assess needs in the school. They posed questions such as, "Do you remember talking about sexual violence in health class?", "What did you learn?", and "Are you happy with what you learned?"

Another group of students produced posters and hung them up in the bathrooms, hallways and breezeways to reach everyone in the school, including staff and visitors. They chose these locations because they wanted to make the information accessible while still providing privacy to read them in locations like bathroom stalls. A student involved in the project shared that sexual abuse and violence "may be looked at as a private matter, but we still wanted to make it a schoolwide issue." She said, "It was important to have something tangible that students could look at every single day through the hallways."

Maribeth and Victoria are trying to work towards a school climate where sexual violence is seen as a community issue and where every student has a trusted person to turn to if ever in need. The curriculum being implemented in Findlay High School is showing how schools can be a place of change and how students can be leaders in their





Student artwork was presented in an art showcase. Students use arts-based approaches which encourage participatory action among students to take on sexual violence as a school prevention issue.

community. The program is even offering opportunities for deeper engagement among those who feel a personal connection to the issue. One student shared how the program helped her find her voice and become a leader within her community to prevent sexual violence. Victoria and Maribeth hope to expand their curriculum to other English classes in the spring of 2019.

Victoria Dickman-Burnett turned to Action Research after almost a decade of campus feminist activism. She holds a BA in Philosophy from Ohio Northern University, an MA in critical theory from Ohio University, and is currently a PhD candidate in Education and Community-Based Action Research at the University of Cincinnati. Victoria's research focuses on feminist sexual assault education in secondary and post-secondary settings, particularly using participatory methods in feminist sexual assault education. Her dissertation features the use of a participatory-developed curricula in a high school classroom that uses YA literature and YPAR to teach students about sexual assault.

Maribeth Geaman teaches Advanced Placement and college-prep English at Findlay High School. She has a Bachelor of Arts in English and a Master of Arts in Education, both from the University of Findlay. A Master Teacher and a Teacher Leader, Geaman has taught at the high school level for over twenty years. She is passionate about social issues and utilizes literature and discussions within her classroom to help develop the social consciences of her students. In the spring of 2018, she and Victoria piloted a sexual assault prevention unit in her AP English classroom and they have plans of expanding the program to all of her classes in spring of 2019. She and her husband reside in Findlay, Ohio.

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RESOURCES

- News article on Victoria and Maribeth's participatory action work
- Action Research Reading List
- Structured Ethical Reflection Worksheet Example
- Curriculum Matrix Template

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