

This article is co-written by women from multiple Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASAs) who have been working together to implement the *Sexual Assault Prevention Program for Secondary Schools (SAPPSS)* in our respective regions in Melbourne. We work in long-term partnership with secondary schools to achieve one of feminism's main goals: to prevent violence against women (VAW). In this article, we aim to share the lessons of working with schools, and we also aim to contribute to the debate within feminism about what makes 'best practice' prevention education. The terms 'teachers' and 'school staff' are used interchangeably in this article to acknowledge the range of school staff who are involved in prevention education.

Feminism in schools

Exploring the prevention of sexual assault in school communities

by Lesley Hyde, Renee Imbesi, Emma Price, Susan Sharrock and Toltu Tufa



(L-R rear)
Toltu Tufa, Renee Imbesi
(L-R front)
Emma Price, Susan Sharrock
Inset
Lesley Hyde

Lesley Hyde

Lesley has extensive experience in the development of school and community partnerships through the VicHealth-funded project, *School as Core Social Centres Initiative*, through the education sector as a teacher and also working in the sexual assault field as crisis counsellor. She is currently undertaking a Masters in Public Health with a focus on Women's Health and has co-ordinated SAPPSS at West CASA.

Contact Lesley at: Lesley@westcasa.org.au

Renee Imbesi

Renee is currently working at VicHealth in the Preventing Violence Against Women team. Previous to this, she worked at CASA House for several years leading the development of school-based and other prevention programs.

Contact Renee at: rimbese@vichealth.vic.gov.au

Emma Price

Emma is the SAPPSS Project Co-ordinator for CASA House's Federal program. As part of the Commonwealth Government's *Respectful Relationships* agenda, CASA House works in conjunction with Canberra Rape Crisis Centre to implement SAPPSS into the ACT. An ex-teacher and community welfare worker, Emma has worked in a variety of community and educational settings both in Australia and the UK.

Contact Emma at: emma.price@thewomens.org.au

Susan Sharrock

Sue works at Northern CASA, primarily in sexual assault prevention and with SAPPSS. Over the past 15 months she has worked with a number of schools, both to implement SAPPSS and to support them with sustainability of the program. Sue has previously worked in schools for over five years in Health Promotion and Health Education.

Toltu Tufa

Toltu Tufa has co-ordinated SAPPSS in the CASA House region. Her background in Psychology and Education, coupled with nearly ten years of cross-cultural training and community work with women, underlies her commitment to grassroots violence prevention education. She was also part of the committee to develop a sexuality educators' forum in Victoria.

Contact Toltu at: toltu.tufa@thewomens.org.au



Introduction

The phone rings at three o'clock on Friday afternoon. It's the Student Welfare Co-ordinator from one of the local secondary schools and she sounds distressed. "There's been an incident of sexual assault at our school," she says. "We need someone to come and talk to the students." She tells you students need to understand the definition of sexual assault so that it will not happen again. "Can you come in next week?" she asks. "We can give you half an hour at school assembly."

The scenario described here may sound familiar to workers in the VAW and sexual assault sector. Many school staff—in fact many people in our community—believe that a session or two delivered by the experts will stop incidents such as this from occurring again.

This knee-jerk reaction, however, is not consistent with a feminist approach to the prevention of violence; nor is it effective in creating real social change. Rather, the research and frameworks that are informed by feminism say that long-term, holistic structural and cultural change is required if we want to stop violence against women before it starts [11].

Several CASAs in Melbourne have been working with their local schools for a number of years to implement SAPPSS. The SAPPSS model provides a framework for school-based sexual assault prevention and involves the development of a long-term partnership between schools and specialist agencies.

In this article, sexual assault is seen to belong to a continuum of behaviours that constitute VAW or gender-based violence. Although the dynamics and consequences of sexual assault may be specific and the response system is unique, we recognise that the underlying causes of sexual assault are similar to other forms of gender-based violence—namely, the unequal power relations between women and men at the individual, community and structural levels. Hence, the terms 'sexual assault' and 'VAW' are used interchangeably.

Here, we seek to answer some of the questions raised by undertaking violence prevention and respectful relationships education programs in schools: *How can community agencies form successful partnerships with busy schools? How can agencies be flexible to schools' needs while maintaining a principled approach? What is the role of teachers? And what are the challenges of implementing a feminist framework in a mainstream setting?*

Why violence prevention in schools?

The issue of respectful relationships education in schools is gaining increasing attention within State and National governments. The rationale for prevention of VAW in schools is now reasonably well-established, but is worth re-visiting here:

- Almost one in five women has been the victim of sexual assault since the age of 15 [8].
- Younger women experience sexual violence at higher rates than older women [7].
- Around 38% of sexually active Year 10 and 12 female students have

experienced unwanted sex [9].

- One in five young women report experiencing sexual coercion, one-half before the age of 17 [4].
- One in seven young men aged 12-20 believe it is okay to make a girl have sex if she has flirted with him [8].

Further to this, adolescence is a time when young men and women develop attitudes, expectations and practices concerning relationships and intimacy [1] and is therefore seen as an ideal time to introduce respectful relationships education. Respectful relationships programs in schools have been identified as one of the most effective interventions for the primary prevention of VAW [11].

What is a feminist framework for prevention in schools?

Feminist—and particularly structural feminist—research provides a sound analysis of the causes of VAW and can also provide core principles to guide program implementation. Recent frameworks for best practice and public policy demonstrate the importance of feminist principles in school-based prevention. Of note here are the *National Standards for the Primary Prevention of Sexual Assault through Education* [2] and the criteria established for good practice in the Victorian *Respectful Relationships Education in Secondary Schools* report [5]. Both guidelines acknowledge the importance of a feminist approach in violence prevention frameworks; specifically, they acknowledge that primary prevention of VAW requires a fundamental shift toward gender equality and toward equal power relationships between men and women at every level. To move towards this, according to the research, prevention interventions must be long-term, gender-sensitive, informed by evidence and research, supported by cross-sectoral partnerships and should produce structural as well as interpersonal changes [11].

Feminist research has informed the development of CASAs across Victoria and has certainly shaped the development of the SAPPSS model. Next, we illustrate the main components of the SAPPSS model including the student curriculum.

What is the SAPPSS model?

SAPPSS was initiated by CASA House in 2004 and has now been identified as a leading practice program in Victoria [5]. It is a comprehensive, whole-school model which aims to develop a long-term working partnership between the sexual assault service and the school so as to sustain culture change over time. SAPPSS is currently active in 20 schools across metropolitan Melbourne, each in a different phase of implementation. CASAs and other sexual assault services in regional Victoria and other States and Territories are also beginning to pilot SAPPSS in their local areas.

The aims of SAPPSS are threefold: firstly, to reduce the incidence of sexual assault in school communities; secondly, to establish safe environments for young people and school staff to discuss relationships, consent and communication; and thirdly, to enhance the capacity of secondary schools to respond to sexual assault and provide young people with access to support.

SAPPSS is delivered through a series of phases and components, including:

violenceprevention

One in seven young men aged 12-20 believe it is okay to make a girl have sex if she has flirted with him.

- whole-of-staff professional development on the issue of sexual assault and the aims of the SAPPSS model;
- six-session, gender-specific curriculum for Year 9/10 students;
- Train-the-Trainer workshops for key groups of teaching and support staff;
- development of school policy and procedures to support the program;
- peer educator training for students in Years 11 and 12; and
- evaluation embedded throughout the model.

The Year 9/10 curriculum includes activities such as small group work, DVDs and scenarios. The activities are designed to encourage dialogue and thoughtful discussion about each topic, to vary the mode of learning for students and to inject some fun and energy into the learning process. At the conclusion of the program, students often mention that they enjoyed the activities and want more!

The topics in the Year 9/10 curriculum include:

- *Definitions and statistics regarding sexual assault.*
Students are generally very surprised to find out about the high prevalence of sexual assault and the broader range of behaviours that constitute sexual assault.
- *Consent and communication, including the legal definition and ages of consent.*
This is usually co-delivered by a trained police officer from the Victoria Police Sexual Offences and Child Abuse Unit (SOCAU). The topic includes discussions about pressure and coercion, the barriers to speaking up about what you want (or don't want) in a sexual situation and the importance of non-verbal communication.
- *Respectful relationships and communication.*
Students have the opportunity to brainstorm what respect and non-respect look like in different types of relationships and explore the role of sexual consent in this.
- *The impacts of sexual assault for victim/survivors.*
This includes exploration of the barriers for victims to speak up and the ways that young people can help a friend who has experienced violence.
- *Actions and strategies to prevent sexual assault.*
Students look at the responsibility of bystanders and how they can intervene safely to prevent violence. They also develop slogans and social messages that could be used to prevent sexual assault in the broader community.

While the topics aim to build students' knowledge and create discussion about attitudes, the open format of the student program also allows students to build respectful relationship skills *within* the classroom. To this end, teachers and educators are trained to actively model these skills—for example, by respecting students' opinions, by challenging attitudes that support violence, and by maintaining group safety and openness.

The SAPPSS student curriculum has been extensively evaluated and the results have shown positive shifts in students' knowledge, skills and attitudes towards sexual assault and respectful relationships over both the short and medium term [6]. Students consistently reported that the curriculum allowed them to talk about sensitive issues that they were not able to discuss elsewhere. Here are some examples of young peoples' comments:

It's the only place we ever get to talk about this stuff."

"I believe that everything we learned in these sessions we will be able to use to help ourselves or someone else some day."

They also commented that it felt more comfortable talking about these issues in a girls-only or boys-only group, with the opportunity to bring the genders together for discussion at the end of the program.

Evaluation has also clearly demonstrated that the most effective way to achieve and sustain positive shifts in young peoples' knowledge, skills and attitudes is to implement a whole-school approach. The SAPPSS model incorporates a number of strategies as part of this approach, acknowledging that young people cannot be expected to change in isolation from the broader context of their lives and communities. Some of these strategies include discussions with the school about policy and procedures that support non-violence, partnerships with local agencies, training for all staff and more specific training for selected staff, and development of leadership within the school to maintain cultural change [6].

One of the vital features of the SAPPSS model is the ongoing partnership between sexual assault services and schools. SAPPSS is a vehicle that allows schools and CASAs to engage in a long-term process of communication, mutual learning, experimentation and growth. In the next section we will explore the importance of partnerships and some of the challenges in forming and maintaining them with schools.

What is the role of partnerships in SAPPSS?

Partnerships are important in bringing together organisations to achieve mutual goals and in establishing a process based on shared objectives and vision [13]. Partnerships need to be carefully planned, have a clear purpose and meet the needs of everyone involved. The VicHealth Partnerships Analysis Tool (2004) [10] describes mutual trust between partners as a crucial element in developing sustainable and successful partnerships.

Following initial contact with a school, CASAs' experience with SAPPSS has demonstrated the importance of developing trust between the agency and school, and has also demonstrated that the partnership must be established before the model can be implemented. We will happily spend many hours in phone conversations, email contact and face-to-face meetings with schools just to establish the working partnership.



Next, the development of longer-term focus with schools is paramount in effectively implementing SAPPSS. In the earlier years of SAPPSS, schools tended to seek out a partnership with CASA in reaction to an incident of sexual assault in the school community, or when safety issues had come to light for some other reason. As the model has become more established, however, and its reputation has spread through promotion and word-of-mouth, schools have been taking a more pro-active approach to respectful relationships.

When they seek out a partnership with CASA in this pro-active sense, they are more ready for the long-term commitment that SAPPSS requires. Our strategies for building long-term commitment include having frank conversations about school culture, generating an understanding of the sensitivity of sexual assault issues, and building commitment to staff training.

A mini-audit process is also used to evaluate the school's readiness for SAPPSS and to identify potential resistance or barriers to change. The mini-audit consists of a questionnaire about features of the school environment (such as communication and well-being structures, policies and procedures that deal with sexual assault, availability and openness to whole-staff training, and curriculum openings for the student component of SAPPSS) and is used during a face-to-face meeting with school leadership. These early conversations also allow the school community to gain more information about the program and to clearly set out their expectations and requirements for the partnership.

What are the challenges in our partnerships with schools?

Partnership-building with schools can be enormously challenging and can take considerable time. However, like many challenges, the hard work that is put in through the initial, preparatory stages almost always pays off and can be satisfying on many levels. Some of the challenges are discussed below.

Our experience in implementing SAPPSS has shown that gaining commitment from the school principal and leadership team is crucial for the success of the model. Without this, it can be difficult to gain support from staff, students or the wider community, or even to find a place in the school's busy schedule. Conversely, a sense of optimism and commitment from the school lead to a school culture that is open to new ideas and approaches.

It may be a challenge for schools and agencies to prioritise primary prevention, as the focus on discipline and responding to disrespectful behaviours consumes so much staff time and energy. Additionally, teachers often raise concerns about barriers to implementation and sustainability, feeling that they are under increasing pressure to address issues that historically were seen as family or community responsibilities. In developing

a positive partnership, it is important for discussions about these topics to take place, to allow staff to express their concerns and to take the time to explain how SAPPSS encourages respectful relationships across the school community.

A further challenge in relationship-building is the diversity amongst schools and amongst students in terms of culture, literacy and behavioural expectations. Within the partnership, program adaptation and tailoring are often necessary in order to be relevant to the school community; however, there are limits to what can be adapted. For example, some schools have asked us to alter the student program so that it addresses other kinds of violence, or so that it avoids an explicit focus on gender and power. But we know these changes would lessen the effectiveness of the model in reducing violence against women specifically. In this instance, we would re-visit the specific aims of SAPPSS with the school, hoping to work our way back to an agreement about the focus on gender and power, and to work out the sources of resistance or confusion.

In addition to the partnership formed between the agency and school, teachers and other staff have an important role to play as partners in the implementation of the model and delivery of the curriculum in particular. The following section will look at the role teachers play in SAPPSS and how we foster this relationship to promote the best outcomes for the school and its students.

What is the role of teachers in prevention?

During evaluation of the SAPPSS student curriculum, many young people commented that they were doubtful about teachers' capacity to deliver prevention education. They felt unsure as to whether teachers could create an open, non-judgemental learning environment and the level of trust required for students to share their views about sensitive issues (6). They identified that the SAPPSS student curriculum is different to other classes and that a particular style of facilitation is required to make it work.

There are, however, a range of reasons to make sure school staff are involved in prevention education. Firstly, violence prevention and respectful relationships education need to be part of mainstream curriculum in the long-term, both at an individual school level and at State and National level (5). The involvement of school staff in development and delivery means prevention can be integrated into the mainstream curriculum in a more meaningful and effective way.

Secondly, the involvement of school staff is crucial because they are present in the school community full-time—unlike visiting community educators—and this means they can provide follow-up, reinforcement and support



to students about issues of respect, relationships and communication. School staff are also able to model respectful relationships and respectful communication within their school community. While some staff are very skilled and confident in this area of their work, others require more training and support.

Finally, school staff need to be involved in prevention education because they live and create the school culture. Through their conversations and their actions, they are able to influence other staff, school leaders, students and parents in significant ways. There have been many school staff involved with SAPPSS who have, for example, challenged their colleagues to engage in more respectful relationships both in and out of the classroom. Likewise, many school leaders have sent a powerful message of non-violence to their school community simply by committing their time and energy to SAPPSS.

While the involvement of teachers in the SAPPSS model has been vital to its achievements, the notion of teachers leading prevention education is perhaps a newer area of development in the VAW sector. In their review of current practice in sexual assault prevention education, Evans, Krogh and Carmody (2009) [3] found that the role of teachers was a significant issue for school-based programs and approaches. Practitioners reported several key issues in this area, including “caution about the role and contribution of school teaching staff, the significance of the community educator in the school context, and working with teachers as partners in prevention” [3, p.13]. Many program co-ordinators wanted to involve and empower teachers but were unsure of how to do this effectively. SAPPSS offers a range of strategies to engage and support school staff, and this has led to other positive outcomes for schools and individuals. These outcomes are described in the next section.

What does SAPPSS offer for teachers?

There are several mechanisms within the SAPPSS model that support teachers to play an active role in prevention education. Firstly, the SAPPSS introductory professional development session/s are delivered to all staff who are employed by the school. These sessions provide an overview of sexual assault issues and the principles for responding effectively to disclosures, as well as an introduction to the SAPPSS model.

Next, the *Train the Trainer* (TTT) workshops are delivered to selected groups within the school. Following the initial phase of piloting the student program, schools identify staff that will be trained to deliver the student curriculum. Some schools will ask teachers to self-nominate based on personal interest, whereas others need to select staff based on their curriculum area or responsibility.

The first aspect of TTT is a one-day *Responding to Sexual Assault* workshop. Feedback from school staff suggests that this is an important foundation for their knowledge and confidence in delivering respectful relationships education. The second part of TTT is a two-day workshop focused on delivery of the student curriculum. Around 300 school staff have participated in TTT and have indicated that their skills and confidence have been enhanced as a result of the training. As one teacher described:

“It has had the effect of de-personalising the issue. In a productive sense, this training has taken the emotion out of it.”

Another means for supporting school staff is program evaluation. Feedback is sought from school staff at every stage of implementation and their suggestions are utilised to make improvements. This creates a strong sense of ownership of the curriculum and the SAPPSS model as a whole. In addition, sharing evaluation results with staff allows them to reflect on the difference their work is making in young people’s lives, within their school community and—sometimes—in their own peer groups and communities.

While the provision of training and support for staff enhances prevention education, it also presents many challenges. For example, some school staff don’t see prevention education as part of their teaching role and may be resistant. Additionally, many teachers have struggled to act in a facilitator role in SAPPSS classes while having a more traditional teacher role in others. A further challenge for school staff involved with SAPPSS is that they can be faced with a heightened awareness of the prevalence of sexual assault in the community and this can be difficult to cope with.

Conversely, some teachers feel empowered to take more practical steps to address violence and to take a lead role in social change. There are also several teachers who say that it is a big step for them to acknowledge their own uncertainty or gaps in knowledge; however, exploring the issues and finding answers *alongside* young people has allowed them to build better relationships with their students.

It is important to note that as implementation continues in a school, the role of staff can change considerably. They move from being observers, to co-facilitators, to in-school program managers within a three-year period, and need different supports at different times. This is one of many important considerations for program sustainability, which is explored in the next section.

Sustainability: how do we ensure that SAPPSS remains a priority for schools?

Sustainability is integral to violence prevention work [5] and is one of the driving forces of a whole-school approach. It ensures that changes in student

learning and school culture continue into the future, and allows schools to develop ownership of the program and tailor it to their community's needs. The issue of sustainability of SAPPSS has two elements: the first is the challenge of maintaining implementation of the model in a school after the initial phases; the second is the challenge for CASAs and other agencies to prioritise school partnerships within very limited funding and resources.

The building of sustainability and long-term commitment within the school begins in the pre-implementation phase; it is discussed during the first meeting with the school. The use of selection criteria to prioritise and select schools is paramount to the viability of the SAPPSS model. As discussed earlier, a firm commitment from leadership to a whole-school approach is critical. We ensure that there is explicit, up-front discussion about the resources that will be invested in the program, the time that will be required, and the goal of curriculum integration. These strategies have meant that the school and the CASA are better equipped to meet challenges to sustainability as they arise.

Secondly, as primary prevention work gains momentum in the sexual assault field, slightly more funding has become available to CASAs and other sexual assault services to integrate this work into their core business. However, for the most part, the funding is short-term or project-based and does not necessarily allow the service to keep prevention staff, to make long-term commitment to schools or to continually develop the model. It is becoming increasingly difficult to secure long-term commitment from schools if we cannot guarantee that CASA prevention staff will be available to support them through the SAPPSS process. Furthermore, without ongoing funding CASAs are not really able to undertake more developmental work, such as evaluation of the model as a whole, or trialling of new components such as forums for parents/guardians or curriculum for junior year levels.

Conclusion

In this article we have attempted to highlight some of our experiences and learnings from a whole-school approach to the prevention of violence against women and development of respectful relationships education. We have explored the key challenges in maintaining partnerships with schools and securing their commitment. We have outlined the need to be flexible and explained the dilemmas of implementing a feminist framework in a mainstream school setting. We have also described the need for teachers to be involved in prevention and pointed to mechanisms within SAPPSS that allow the teachers' role to grow. Finally, we have explored the importance of program continuity and discussed some of the barriers to sustainability due to current funding and resources.

As schools become more engaged in respectful relationships education—or are required by government policies to do so—SAPPSS offers an effective model that has demonstrated sustainable change and development in schools. Although the SAPPSS model is quite well-established, it will continue to change and evolve as CASAs and schools continue to work together. As the model continues to grow, the involvement of CASAs will ensure that the programs are continually shaped by feminist principles and, ultimately, that they are continually servicing feminist goals.

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