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## An Educational Dilemma: To Touch or not to Touch

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ABSTRACT

AN EDUCATIONAL DILEMMA:  
TO TOUCH OR NOT TO TOUCH

By

Ronald G. Jeffries

August, 1999

The purpose of this study was to aid both pre-service and in-service teachers in solving the dilemma of whether or not to touch students in the classroom environment. The harmful effects and consequences of the use of inappropriate touch by teachers, which tend to cause teachers and administrators to say, "Hands off!", were examined. However, numerous studies were researched which support the use of appropriate touch in teaching children. In addition, educators from fourteen schools in North Central Washington were surveyed to determine the consensus of whether or not teachers today continue to employ touch and for what purposes. The results showed overwhelmingly that teachers still feel the need to touch children under various circumstances and in various ways, as an aid in classroom management and to show care and support to students. Recommendations were given as to how to properly incorporate appropriate touch into the classroom, in order to ensure a full educational experience for the student.

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## CHAPTER I

### THE PROBLEM

#### Statement of the Problem

The upcoming Saturday was Valentine's Day, and Julie Anne Feil was determined to make it a memorable one. On a note pad from her classroom desk, she scribbled a wish list for the evening ahead. "Here's what I want," wrote the Hastings, Minnesota, high school English teacher. "1. Go to our place. 2. Great sex! 3. Dinner out-Olive Garden? Planet Hollywood? We dress up! 4. Dancing or a movie? Or our place and more great sex?" When Feil wrote that note last winter, she was a 31-year-old wife and the mother of an 8-year-old son. Her valentine, though, was a skinny 10<sup>th</sup>-grader half her age, a boy who played with superhero action figures and had barely started to shave. For the previous four months, the two had been carrying on a secret sexual relationship that included trysts in her home and car, passionate love letters, and frequent talk of marriage (Hendrie, 1999, p. 21).

Being arrested and subsequently fired from her teaching position did not dissuade Mrs. Feil. Four months after being arrested, she was out on bond pounding on the boy's window at two in the morning. She proceeded to kiss, fondle, and unsuccessfully coaxed him to have sex with her on the neighbor's lawn. She was again arrested and jailed, pending trial (Hendrie, 1999).

Within our schools there are far too many cases of teachers using inappropriate touch while interacting with students and as a result, facing sexual misconduct charges. The result is a tendency for teachers and administrators to overreact and recommend a "Hands off!" policy in working with students, which can have a detrimental effect on the learning process.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to aid both pre-service and in-service teachers in solving the dilemma of whether or not to touch students in the classroom environment. The harmful effects and consequences of the use of inappropriate touch by teachers were examined. Numerous studies were researched which support the use of appropriate touch in teaching children. In addition, educators from fourteen schools in North Central Washington were surveyed to determine the consensus of whether or not teachers today continue to employ touch and for what purposes. Recommendations were given as to how to properly incorporate appropriate touch into the classroom, in order to ensure a full educational experience for the student.

### Limitations

One limitation of the study was that thorough research revealed very few studies on the benefits of touch and how to properly apply it in the classroom.

As an undergraduate, I was particularly attracted by my courses on sensation and perception. But I noticed that there was almost nothing written about the sense of touch. This struck me as odd because touch is our reality sense and is such an important way to communicate (Verry, 1998, p. 67).

Much has been spoken and written about what is right and wrong pertaining to touching in the school environment, and although ethical standards like these have established guidelines around inappropriate touching, little attention has been paid to non-erotic contact and appropriate touch (Holub & Lee, 1990, p. 116).

During the first part of December, 1998, a questionnaire was prepared and sent out to 14 different public schools in North Central Washington, see

Appendix A. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather data on whether or not teachers would touch their students on certain parts of their body and for what reasons.

Limitations of the study were that questionnaires were sent to only 14 schools, all in Washington State, and all in the north central portion of the state. Furthermore, not all schools contacted chose to distribute the questionnaire to the teachers, and not all of the teachers cooperated in filling out the questionnaire.

Each school principal reviewed the questionnaire before allowing the secretary to distribute them to the teachers. Both the Wenatchee and East Wenatchee School Districts required the questionnaire to be approved by their district superintendent before distribution. Each individual school principal could then decline to distribute the survey within his/her building. The Eastmont High School principal chose to not distribute the questionnaires, even though Dr. Bigby, the East Wenatchee School District Superintendent, had approved them for distribution to all East Wenatchee schools.

Of the 498 surveys that were given out, 124 were completed and returned, amounting to a 25% response. If the 50 forms which were given to Eastmont High School were excluded, since they were not actually distributed, 124 out of 448 surveys, actually distributed, were completed and returned, amounting to a 28% response.

It was difficult to understand why so few of the teachers chose to fill out



the survey. Perhaps the nature of the survey, pertaining to touch in the school, raised a red flag to some teachers who chose not to complete the survey. Perhaps the approaching Christmas break and the pressure to complete the posting of student grades conflicted with teachers' desires to complete the survey. Whatever the reason, a low percentage of teachers receiving the form actually completed it. Therefore, the results of the survey could not be generalized to the entire population of teachers, but were very specific to the population who did respond. Consequently, the summary, conclusions, and recommendations in Chapter V were based upon the responses of that very small, specific population of teachers.

#### Definition of Terms

Active touch – touch in which the subject initiates and performs the act of effecting skin-object contact.

Affectionate touch – touch which expresses generalized positive regard beyond mere acknowledgment.

Appropriate touch – touch which aids in the educative process by showing concern and support, usually a pat on the back, a touch on the shoulder or arm, or a hug.

Attention-getting touch – touch which serves to direct the recipient's perceptual focus.

Compliance touch – touch which attempts to direct behavior and attitudes or feelings of others.

Inappropriate touch – touch on parts of the body, or performed in a way that could

easily be misunderstood as having a sexual connotation.

Passive touch – touch in which contact with the subject's skin is effected by some external agent.

Social touch – touch which fosters social bonds, attachment, and emotional integrity.

Support touch – touch which serves to nurture, reassure, or promise protection.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

#### Inappropriate Touch by Teachers

Caroline Hendrie, in writing for Education Week, (1998), conducted a nationwide search through newspapers and computer databases of active cases over a six-month period, from March through August of 1998. A sample of these cases follows. A 34-year-old head football coach from Banning, CA, was convicted in August of taking a 16-year-old girl out of class to have sex at local motels. A 37-year-old home economics teacher in Rome, GA., resigned from her middle school in May amid charges that she had sex with a 15-year-old male student during spring break in Florida and at her home. A 28-year-old coach pleaded guilty in October to secretly videotaping one of his high school volleyball players as she changed clothes in a school bathroom in Anita, Iowa. A 37-year-old high school English teacher and track coach from Norfolk, Va., was convicted in September of indecent liberties with a minor after fathering a baby born to a 16-year-old student last year. A 52-year-old high school principal in Oakland, Maine, pleaded no contest in May to coaxing a girl to join him for sex in his hotel room at an out-of-town conference. A 46-year-old former principal and sixth grade teacher pleaded guilty in August after he admitted to having sex with four 11-year-old boys in Alexandria, Va. between 1977 and 1991.

The unthinkable happened in the Mary Kay Letourneau case in which a 36-year-old teacher had an affair with a former student and had become pregnant. She received a

suspended sentence after pleading guilty to second-degree child rape. One month later, the two were found again in a parked car, and it soon emerged that she was once again pregnant with the boy's child (Hendrie, 1999).

According to Hendrie (1998), more sexual misconduct takes place, and far more students are made victims, than is ever made public. In addition, despite growing awareness in the past two decades, of the indelible scars sexual abuse creates in young lives, little concerted national attention has been paid to the problem in schools or to the need for aggressive efforts to curtail it.

In the past, women teachers who have sex with students have rarely been seen as predators guilty of a crime, however, cases such as Julie Anne Feil's cast female educators in the culturally unfamiliar role of sexual predator. Traditionally, such stereotypes have contributed to what could be seen as a reverse double standard when it comes to sexual misconduct by educators. For years, schools, courts, and even the victims themselves have viewed women involved with male students less harshly than men who commit similar transgressions. But as more of these cases surface, the response appears to be shifting. "Society is being confronted by the fact that both men and women can behave inappropriately, and that young boys are just as vulnerable to abuse as young girls," says Robert Shoop, an expert on sexual-harassment prevention at Kansas State University. "The issue is exactly the same: No adult should be having a sexual relationship with any child" (Hendrie, 1999).

Education Week, the sister publication to Teacher Magazine, conducted a search

of newspaper and computer databases and reviewed active cases of alleged staff-on-student misconduct over a six-month period, from March through August of 1998. Of the nearly 250 cases turned up in the search, 43, or nearly one in five, involved female employees. Jane Kinder Matthews, a Minneapolis-based psychologist, researcher, and author has noted striking differences between men and women in her work with sex offenders, including about 60 women over the past decade. Women seldom use force to compel sex or threaten victims to keep them silent, she says. They are less likely to deny their actions and tend to commit such offenses later in life. Another difference, Matthews adds, is that women who target teenagers tend to be the least deeply disturbed of all female sex offenders, while men who target that age range are generally more troubled and difficult to treat. The romantic attachment of such women contrasts sharply with the attitude of many male school employees who abuse girls. Men in such cases tend to justify their relationships by saying merely that the girls were willing sex partners; it is usually the girls who are the ones in love, Shoop notes. Moreover, it is far more common for men to seduce more than one girl and to abuse a series of students over time. Such behavior is rare among women (Hendrie, 1996).

Winks (1982) gives us an historical perspective in a study of teacher misconduct at the college/university level. Many of her findings apply to the middle and high school level as well. The professor dominates by virtue of his gender and his position in the academic hierarchy. He is viewed as very intelligent to a young lady who has been placed into a somewhat scary environment in which she must perform academically. A

student may feel security from her professor and desire to draw closer to him. After all, he is the one which will be giving her a grade, whether good or bad. A young lady, reenacting her earliest unqualified love, the love she felt toward her parents, may transfer those feelings to the teacher and may accede to a sexual relationship with him solely because of psychological needs. The consequential emotional injury is not easily measured, but is severe and enduring.

In earlier generations a young lady was neither expected nor allowed to act upon her sexual feelings. Now, however, the expectations of her peers and occasionally the complicity of her parents push the girl into early sexual gratification. Promiscuity seems to offer a reliable measure of worth: proof of adulthood and sexual attractiveness. To be desirable is to be rich in value. The girl who cannot find even this validation of her worth from her peers will seek it elsewhere. If her home life is unstable, she is particularly vulnerable to any manifestation of concern (Winks, 1982).

#### Consequences of Inappropriate Touch by Teachers

The long term effect of teacher misconduct goes well beyond damaging the affected student emotionally, possibly forever, firing the teacher, revoking the teacher's certification, and sentencing the teacher to prison. The remaining teachers, students, and parents are all affected. Students may live in fear of the same thing happening to them, while their parents lose confidence in the public school system. Parents particularly lose confidence in the administrators who are supposed to hire good teachers and carefully monitor their performance as they interact with students in their classrooms.

Fibkins (1996) reflects that whenever a case of sexual misconduct develops, regardless of guilt or innocence, the mere fact of the case has a chilling effect on teacher/student relations, generally. The message conveyed to other teachers, sometimes directly stated by administrators, teachers' union officials, or colleagues is, "Pull back. Don't become involved." Clearly this message diminishes teachers' ability to work with students who need close contact that is positive, helping and affirming.

One of the most harmful effects of teacher sexual misconduct is that many teachers become afraid to ever touch a student for any reason, fearing false accusations and the loss of their jobs. According to Prete (1998) in light of increasing lawsuits, accusations of molestation, and sensationalized news reports, we might want to start thinking about whether it's ever appropriate to touch a student. In an effort to keep one step ahead of sexual offenders, more and more schools are sending the message to adults everywhere, "Hands off!" It is almost as if touching has become taboo. However, not touching children could be considered another form of abuse – neglect, which may create a whole new set of problems for our children as they wrestle with what is and is not acceptable social behavior. By modeling an aloof interpersonal style and becoming less humanistic toward our youth, we may be sending the message that violent and aggressive touching, as seen on TV, movies, and video games, is acceptable, but hugging and patting someone on the back is not. This paradox is a slap in the face of healthy touching.

It seems that as we become more and more technologically advanced, we move farther away from the interpersonal interactions that were once commonplace in our

schools (Prete, 1998). However, now that we've raised awareness and begun educating people, including children, about molestation and abuse, do we want to reintroduce touch of any kind in our schools? If the essence of good teaching is effective communication and if touching can improve that communication, it could serve as a useful educational tool, and therefore should be reintroduced (Steward & Lupfer, 1987).

#### Why Teacher Inappropriate Touch by Teachers Occurs

One has to wonder why a teacher on staff, whom we thought we knew very well, and who is an excellent teacher, gets involved in an inappropriate sexual relationship with a student. We are just people with hormones, very powerful chemicals produced by the endocrine system, flowing through our veins. By nature, male and female are attracted to one another, and when they have a lot of contact, as in the daily scenario of the school environment, the odds of some type of sexual encounter increase slightly. Perhaps a student does not receive the needed love at home, from parents, and turns to another source for love. Young ladies can very easily create confusion by wearing clothing and using language at school, that are far too suggestive. The case of a male physical education teacher can be particularly difficult as female students lie on the gym floor doing sit-ups, wearing loose-fitting shorts that allow anyone to see their underwear. However, the teacher should have the maturity and self-restraint to extinguish any and all inappropriate thoughts and certainly never act upon any of them.

According to Fibkins (1996), working effectively with at-risk students demands that teachers take on new roles as advisors and helpers. These roles often bring teachers



into closer, more intimate contact with their students than is customary in normal classroom interactions. While such close contact is necessary and beneficial, it also can create problems if teachers do not clearly understand their professional boundaries. When teachers say, "I'm not trained to help students with their personal problems," they are usually right on target. In a very real sense, many teachers are ill-prepared for the advisory tasks that many administrators and parents now expect them to perform. When teachers are poorly prepared as advisors and helpers, they are themselves at risk of making costly mistakes that can damage their professional and personal lives and the lives of their students and the families they are trying to help. Two specific hazards must be addressed:

1. When untrained teachers take on roles as advisors and helpers, they risk stepping across professional boundaries and becoming too personally involved with students, which can lead to actual or alleged sexual misconduct.
2. When untrained teachers take on roles as advisors and helpers, they sometimes ignore, or may be uninformed about legal liability issues, which can lead to lawsuits based on charges of malpractice or misconduct.

When teachers take on the role of advisor, they can inadvertently create an appearance of intimate personal involvement with their students. For example, the teacher-advisor may take a student to lunch or dinner regularly, write daily or weekly notes of support, serve as a friend and confidant for decisions, and even give the student presents or money. Some would describe this teacher behavior as inappropriate.

However, such behavior may be simply naïve, and an untrained teacher may be unaware of the potential problems that can arise from such conduct (Fibkins, 1996).

Hendrie (1999) offers an explanation of why sexual abuse of students occurs by categorizing the offenders. She writes that women who sexually abuse minors generally fall into three categories:

1. women who were sexually molested as children and therefore are predisposed to commit such offenses,
2. women who are coerced to take part in such abuse by men, and
3. women which she calls teacher/lovers, who often fall deeply in love with the teenagers with whom they are involved.

The teacher has a responsibility, like a therapist, to perform an important function by responding as a loving parent who accepts the child without granting every wish. But the teacher must carefully circumscribe the boundaries of that love so as to not satisfy the student's erotic fantasy. Otherwise, the student's emotional maturity may be blocked. The teacher, after all, is in control and can set the tone. No teacher is not absolved of responsibility when it is the student whose behavior is seductive. It is up to the teacher to maintain the role of parent and counselor, rather than abandon it for the role of lover and peer. The very fact that this idealized relationship is in essence a parent-child relationship, makes an erotic exchange altogether inappropriate, and symbolically incestuous (Winks, 1982).

### Benefits of Appropriate Touch

States and school districts within states have developed policies concerning sexual misconduct. Much has been spoken and written about what is right and wrong pertaining to touching in the school environment, and although ethical standards like these have established guidelines around inappropriate touching, little attention has been paid to non-erotic contact and appropriate touch (Holub & Lee, 1990).

Given the potential good use to which educators can put touch, it is strange that so little research has been done on touching in the educational setting. Except for the descriptions and observations of touching behavior in the classroom, little has been done to investigate the greater impact of touch in teacher/student relationships. Perhaps researchers fear that physical contact between teacher and student would have sexual overtones, especially in cross-sex scenarios. Whatever the reasons, the impact of touch in education has been largely overlooked (Stewart & Lupfer, 1987).

Man is a primate, and according to Willis and Hoffman (1975), primates differ from many other animals in that their interactions are characterized by frequent physical contact. Human infants are similar to other primates by showing a strong preference for frequent and prolonged touch. For many years physical contact between two living organisms has been considered a domain of behavior that is fundamental to healthy physiological, psychological, social, and emotional development. If one accepts that physical contact is of critical importance to the healthy development of the individual, and that it is the basic form of communication between two living organisms, then it can be

argued that physical contact is a powerful device. The problem is this power can be used for either promoting the healthy development of the organism or damaging it (Pearce, Martin, & Wood, 1995).

Surely, physical contact, especially touching, is a powerful tool that needs to be put to good use in the classroom to promote the healthy development of our students. Extreme care must be exercised to ensure the power is never used to damage any student under our care. Cochrane (1990) suggests that positive, or "good," physical contact has one common factor upon which its goodness is ultimately dependent: acceptance. Talk of acceptable touching certainly has to include what is acceptable in the eyes of our students, not just what teachers and parents feel is appropriate.

Nannburg and Hansen (1994) tested the effect of touching on an adult group. They monitored the sample's willingness to respond to various social issues, such as abortion, euthanasia, discrimination, and politics. Their goal was to determine what effect, if any, touching would have on people as they answered sensitive questions. The results indicated that the "touched" people completed more items than those people who were not touched while answering the questionnaire. While the nature of their responses was not significantly different, the number of questions they answered was considerably higher. Were they stimulated by touch? Did touching have a positive effect on their behavior? Would touching have the same effect on children answering written questions? No one can be certain. Yet this study and others like it may shed light on the importance of touching in communication.

Many theorists, clinicians, and many educators contend that physical

contact is critical to human development and is necessary to ensure proper growth. Holub and Lee (1990) also point to studies and research such as that conducted by Field and Schanbert that suggest "the absence of touching [also] may account for an infant's failure to thrive" (Prete, 1998, p. 62).

The effect of instructor touch on students' ratings of the instructor and students' performance in the classroom was investigated by Steward and Lupfer (1987). A total of 171 male and female college students participated in individual conferences with their instructors following the first examination in the course. Half were touched by their instructors during the conference, the other half were not. Students then evaluated the instructor, the instructor's teaching effectiveness, and the utility of the conference. Students in both the experimental and control groups responded favorably to the instructors, as evidenced by their ratings, and the conference was seen as beneficial by students in both groups. Analysis of results revealed that students who were touched during the conference gave their instructors significantly higher ratings than those who were not touched. In addition, students who were touched showed superior performance on the next course examination, scoring .58 standard deviations higher as compared to the untouched students. The authors conclude that touching, when conducted in a conference situation to help students improve class performance, can be a highly effective teaching tool. The addition of touching in the experimental condition led to a significant increase in the positive response of the students. Here, the effectiveness of touch as a form of communication can be seen. Not only were the instructors telling the students how to improve, but they were also communicating non-verbally through the use of touch.

Touch served to emphasize the instructors' concern and commitment.

The results of this study are very interesting and lead a person to wonder if the touch of a teacher helps motivate a student to study harder and emphasizes the teacher's genuine concern and care for his students. One also wonders if this effect could be generalized to other learning situations, especially to younger students. The answers to these questions would improve our understanding of when and how touch could enhance teacher effectiveness. Van Houten, Nau, MacKenzie-Keating, Sameoto, and Colavecchia (1982) found that a verbal reprimand accompanied by physical contact was more effective than a reprimand alone in decreasing disruptive behavior in problem children.

Dr. Martin Reite and his colleagues at the University of Colorado Medical Center performed experiments on both bonnet monkeys and pigtailed monkeys in which infant monkeys were separated from their mothers for a period of two weeks, while being properly fed and watered. The ingredient they lack, as compared to the control groups of monkeys, was mother's tactile stimulation. Both types of monkeys suffered from reduced immunological functioning. Upon being returned to their mothers, all the infant monkeys returned to normal lymphocyte proliferation (Montagu, 1986).

Drs. Schanberg and Butler, of Duke University Medical Center, performed experiments on ten-day-old rat pups, in which they compared a control group of pups to a group that had been separated from their mothers. Once, again, the only difference between the two groups was that the control group had received normal tactile stimulation from their mothers. After only one hour, they discovered a significant decline in heart,

liver, brain function, and output of ornithine decarboxylase, an enzyme necessary for growth regulation (Montagu, 1986).

Surveying the research studies on animal and human responses to touching, one is impressed by how frequent are the marked advantages in health, alertness, and responsiveness of those who have been "handled" as compared with those who have received minimal or no handling. The findings of these and other investigators provide the experimental evidence for what has long been suspected -- namely, that there are significant biochemical differences between humans who have enjoyed adequate tactile stimulation and those who have not, a statement that will probably be found to hold true throughout life. The unloved person, taken at any age, is likely to be a very different biochemical entity from those who have been adequately loved (Montagu, 1986).

Pearce, Martin, and Wood (1995) conducted an important study by sending home a self-report questionnaire to 142 male and 129 female students between the ages of 13 and 15. The students were enrolled in a randomly chosen metropolitan high school and a coeducational private school. The students were to respond to the frequency of positive and negative touches they received from either friends or family members. Positive touch was characterized as a hug or a pat on the back. Negative touch was characterized as being hit, punched, or slapped. Depression, delinquency, aggression, and somatization were measured by the Achenbach Youth Self-Report. The results showed that when negative touch frequency was high, the students were generally more depressed, delinquent, aggressive, and complained more of somatic disorders. This was true of both

male and female students. The results also showed that when positive touch frequency was high, only the female students showed less depression, delinquency, aggression and complaint of somatic disorders. The study indicated that whereas both sexes experienced an adverse affect from an increase in negative touch, only the females experienced a positive affect from the increase of positive touch. The classroom implications are that it is possibly more important to give good touch experience, in the form of pats on the back and hugs, to female students than to male students. However, this study did not address the use of touch in the classroom for the purpose of behavior management.

According to Jones (1994), there are several different variables which affect the quality of a touch and its meaning. These include duration, frequency, intensity, breadth, continuity, rhythm, and sequence. Other variables include the type of touch used, body parts involved, the setting in which touch occurs, the relation of touch to other communication signals, who initiates touch, whether touch is reciprocated, whether an expected touch is omitted, how individuals respond to touch, and the relationship and roles of the individuals involved. All of these factors pertain to receptivity of the touch, and therefore, the meanings attached, and therefore, have direct affect on how a teacher would use touch in the classroom.

In their studies, Jones and Yarbrough (1985) tried to deal with such an issue, that is, the multiplicity of meanings to touch. In doing so, they found touch may not have one specific meaning, but rather a number of meanings or interpretations. It is, therefore, incumbent upon the teacher to be careful and use touch wisely to minimize the chance of



misinterpretation by the student.

Status also seems to play a part in predicting how touch is received by both males and females. According to Major (1989), five earlier studies had been conducted in regards to a person of higher status touching both male and female subjects. The findings of these studies suggested that when the toucher is of obviously higher status than the recipient, both male and female respond positively. Both sexes viewed the touch as appropriate and positive, when the toucher was of a higher status. If these feelings could translate to younger people, then the classroom teacher, being higher in status than his students, should be able to have a positive effect upon his students as he employs appropriate touch.

Sanderson and Jorgensen (1997) conducted a touch study involving 382 students from a large mid-western university. Of the total, 180 were men and 202 were women. They viewed a videotape of various touching scenarios between a college professor and a student, sometimes a male student and sometimes a female student. The students then responded to a questionnaire as to whether the various touching in the scenarios was appropriate or inappropriate. Four types of touch were identified: support, attention-getting, compliance, and affectionate. The results of the study showed that even though their levels of appropriateness did differ, females found the support touch, the attention-getting touch, the compliance touch, and the affectionate touch more appropriate than males did. Both males and females found the affectionate touch to be the least appropriate. The relationship between a professor and a student usually is arguably not

strong or close enough to find affectionate touch acceptable to most of the respondents.

The attention-getting touch was found to be more appropriate than the affectionate and compliance touch, but less appropriate than the support touch. The support touch was found to be the most appropriate by both sexes. This perhaps demonstrates how students are more susceptible to this type of touch from professors. The support touch might display what Anderson and others find critical as to why a professor might employ this type of touch with their students. Even though most universities have a “no-touch” policy, Anderson (1986) nonetheless believes that the use of this particular type of touch by teachers shows students that they really care about them and accept them for whom they are. If done in a positive and correct way, it might be argued that this touch could promote better work from a student.

The concept of immediacy stems from the work of Mehrabian (1967), who characterized immediacy as the behaviors which reduce physical and psychological distance between interactants and enhances closeness to one another. Often the behavior patterns of teachers affect the behavior patterns of students. This certainly seems to be the case with teacher immediacy. Much of the research on teacher immediacy has focused on nonverbal cues and indicates that immediacy does increase teaching effectiveness. The results of prior studies have indicated that teacher immediacy has been found to positively impact student cognitive, affective and behavioral learning. The primary effect of teacher immediacy is an increase in student motivation.

Crump (1996), conducted a project involving seventy students enrolled in a

community college in the southwestern region of the United States. Thirty-five of the students were male and thirty-five were female. They responded to an author-generated questionnaire, in which the students listed the teacher immediacy behaviors and/or characteristics they felt were effective, and ranked them as to their effectiveness. The list and ranking from high to low are:

1. humor
2. dynamic delivery
3. vocal variation
4. personal examples
5. friendliness
6. eye contact
7. time outside of class
8. using "our" and "we"
9. learning student names
10. close proximity
11. physical appearance
12. appropriate touch

It is interesting to note that even though, according to this study, the use of humor was ranked as the most effective tool and physical touch was ranked as the least, the students still included touch as an effective part of teacher immediacy. After examining the vast amount of research concerning teacher immediacy, it seems fair to say that

teacher immediacy is a positive teaching strategy that can be learned and used by teachers everywhere, and part of that strategy is appropriate touch.

It should be noted, however, that touch is viewed as unacceptable by many students and many cultures. Learning how students evaluate descriptions of instructor immediacy behaviors is vital in order to eliminate the remote chance that immediacy could be misinterpreted as sexual harassment. This is an important issue because immediacy and harassment involve similar behaviors but generate drastically different outcomes.

Wurtlel, Kast, & Melzer (1992) enlisted 172 Head Start preschoolers in an awareness-building program that attempted to improve their ability to recognize inappropriate touch requests. Some children received training from their parents and teachers; others participated in only a safety skills course in class. The children who were also taught by their parents were better able to recognize "What if?" situations than those taught only by teachers. This may suggest that unified effort and greater understanding among adults can help children help themselves and lessen the need to eliminate all manner of touching. Proper training of school children increased the likelihood of them being able to recognize not only inappropriate touch, but also the situations which could lead to inappropriate touch being attempted.

## CHAPTER III

### PROCEDURES

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#### Data Collection

The purpose of this study was to aid both pre-service and in-service teachers in solving the dilemma of whether or not to touch students in the classroom environment. Educators from fourteen schools in North Central Washington were surveyed to determine the consensus of whether or not teachers today continue to employ touch and for what purposes. Recommendations were given as to how to properly incorporate appropriate touch into the classroom, in order to ensure a full educational experience for the student.

During the first part of December, 1998, a survey was prepared and sent out to 14 different public schools in North Central Washington, (see Appendix A). The purpose of the survey was to gather data on whether or not teachers would touch their students on certain parts of their body. In addition to a yes or no response, the teachers had the opportunity to comment on why they would or would not employ the specific touch. The data were then compiled, analyzed, and charted in order to give other teachers, especially new teachers, information to help them decide how to properly and safely interact with their students pertaining to touching.

The building secretaries placed the surveys in teacher mailboxes, then collected them when completed by the teachers. The name of each school, the type of school, and the number of surveys left with each school as well as the number returned are listed in the following tables.

Table 1

## Elementary Schools

School Name	Location	Surveys Distributed	Surveys Returned
Cascade Elementary	East Wenatchee	25	11
Kenroy Elementary	East Wenatchee	19	2
Manson Elementary	Manson	25	12
Morgon Owens Elementary	Chelan	31	14
Robert E. Lee Elementary	East Wenatchee	18	4
////////////////////////////////////	Total	118	43 (36%)

Table 2

## Middle Schools

School Name	Location	Surveys Distributed	Surveys Returned
Eastmont Jr. High School	East Wenatchee	41	11
Foothills Middle School	Wenatchee	35	5
Orchard Middle School	Wenatchee	32	6
Sterling Middle School	East Wenatchee	50	18
////////////////////////////////////	Total	158	40 (25%)

Table 3  
Combined Middle/High Schools

School Name	Location	Surveys Distributed	Surveys Returned
Chelan Middle/High School	Chelan	45	11
Entiat Middle/High School	Entiat	30	4
Manson Mid/High School	Manson	20	13
////////////////////////////////////	Total	95	28 (29%)

Table 4  
High Schools

School Name	Location	Surveys Distributed	Surveys Returned
Wenatchee High School	Wenatchee	77	13
Eastmont High School	East Wenatchee	50	0
////////////////////////////////////	Total	127	13 (10%)
////////////////////////////////////	Grand Total All Schools	498	124 (25%)

Of the 498 surveys that were given out, 124 were completed and returned, or a 25% response. If the 50 forms which were given to Eastmont High School were excluded, since they were not actually distributed; 124 out of 448 surveys, actually distributed, were completed and returned, or a 28% response.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### Participants

During the first part of December, 1998, a questionnaire was prepared and sent out to 14 different public schools in North Central Washington, (see Appendix A). The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather data on whether or not teachers would touch their students on certain parts of their body for any reason, as a part of the education process. In addition to a yes or no response, the teachers had the opportunity to comment on why they would or would not employ the specific touch. The data were then compiled, analyzed, and charted in order to give other teachers, especially new teachers, information to help them decide how to properly and safely interact with their students pertaining to touching.

#### Demographic Information

An attempt was made to distribute the questionnaire to all the teachers of each of the 14 schools, regardless of experience level, race, gender, or religion. The schools were a mix of elementary, middle, and secondary schools. The size of the schools varied from 120 students to well over 1000 students.

#### Data and Analysis

In referring to Figure 1, it was clear that all teachers, in general, were highly inclined to touch students -- ranging from 60-98% -- with the exception of touching them either on the rear or thigh. The responses to those two areas of touch were



All Teachers

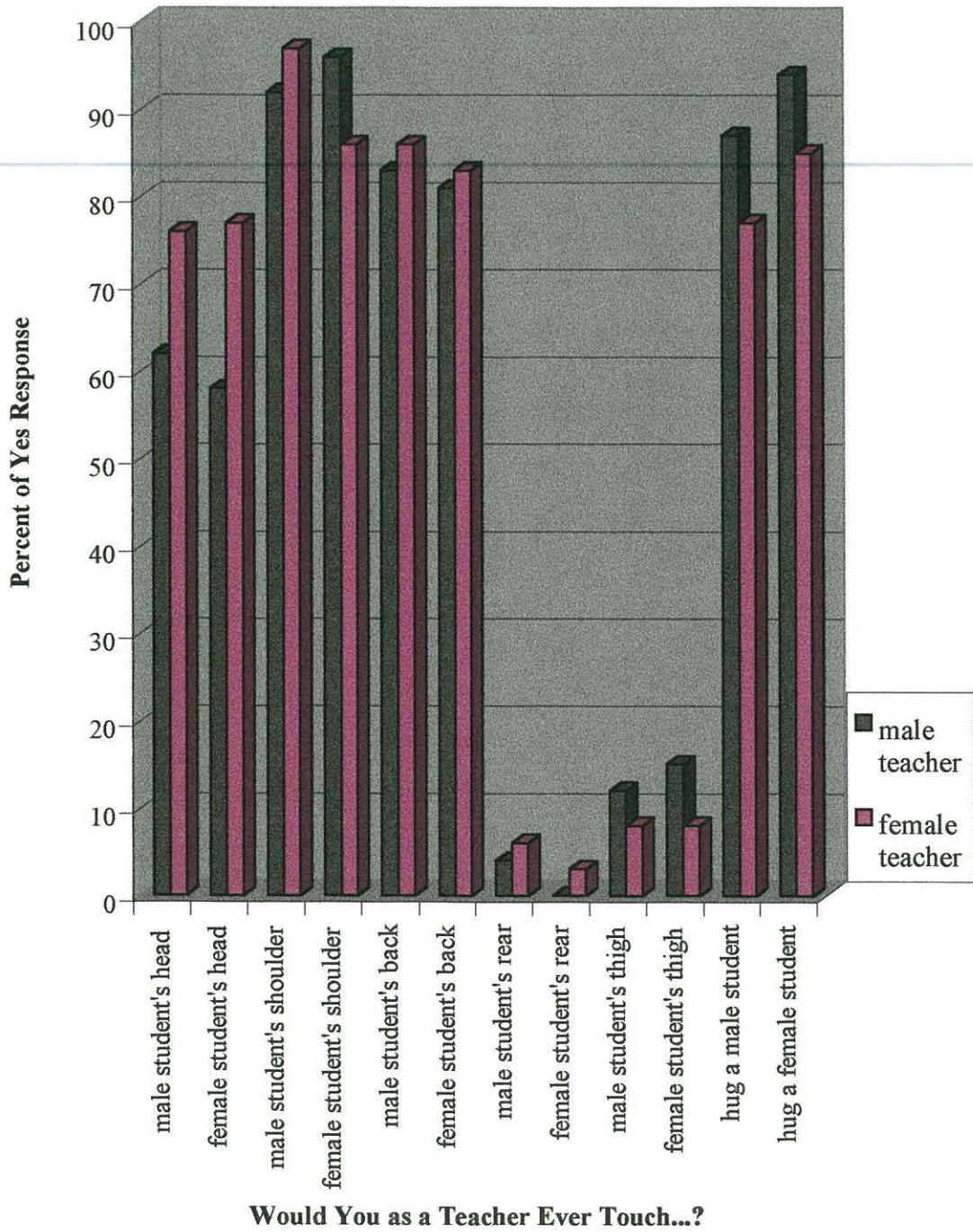


Figure 1

understandably low, regardless of the gender of the student, with only 0-15% of the teachers saying they would touch a student on the rear or thigh. Comments on touching the rear came from both male and female teachers who also were coaches. Male coaches said they would pat a boy on the rear as encouragement to “get back into the game and hustle.” They never would, however, pat or touch a girl on the rear in any case. A few female coaches said they would pat a girl on the rear with the same encouragement expressed by the male coaches with boy athletes. They also stated no fear in touching a boy on the rear in the context of assessing an injury, as long as there were plenty of witnesses present. It seemed very predictable that 5% and fewer of either male or female teachers said they would touch a student on the rear.

The response to touching students on the thigh was also quite low with only 8-15% of all teachers replying in the affirmative, again a very predictable response. Once again, the majority of the comments were from male coaches who had done so in the past as a means of checking for injury, in the case of both male and female athletes. Several women teachers said they would from time to time place their hand on the thigh of either sex student while they knelt beside the student’s desk while he/she worked, as a way of showing care and support.

Both sexes of teachers responded very highly, and quite evenly – approximately 85-95% -- to touching students on the shoulder or the back. Many of the comments from both male and female teachers were that the shoulder touch was very effective in classroom management, to get a student’s attention or get him/her back on task. They

said it was also very effective in saying “good job” or “I am proud of you.” Both male and female teachers responded about 10% less to touching on the back, compared to touching on the shoulder, although still very high at approximately an 85% yes vote. The use of a pat on the back was more congratulatory than corrective. Furthermore, many of the male teachers expressed the need to pat a female student only on the upper part of the back to stay away from the bra strap. The lower back was also mentioned as an area to avoid, for the sake of propriety.

Male teachers were significantly less inclined, 15% less, to touch either sex student on the head, compared to female teachers. The men expressed a reluctance due to the unnatural feeling of a man touching a student’s hair. However, the scenario of ruffling a male student’s hair was mentioned as a way of showing affection appropriately. Female teachers spoke of a much greater tendency to admire a new haircut on either a boy or girl than did the male teachers. It seemed more natural for a woman to show motherly affection by touching a student’s hair or head in general.

Male teachers were about 10% more likely to hug a student than were female teachers. Both male and female teachers said they would not give out hugs on a daily basis, but rather it would be for a special occasion such as graduation or congratulations related to an award or athletic performance. Female teachers, almost exclusively, said they would give side hugs instead of a full front hug to either sex student, since they were aware of their own breasts and did not want any student to feel uncomfortable with an inappropriate hug.

A comparison between lesser experienced female teachers (see Figure 2), and more experienced female teachers (see Figure 3), revealed very little variation. Both categories gave a high “yes” response, generally 80% and higher, to touching male students on the various parts of the body, except for the rear and the thigh. The response pertaining to these parts of the body was always 17% and lower, and 0% among the more experienced teachers, pertaining to touching a male student on the rear. The lesser experienced female teachers were 7%, 3%, and 5% less likely to touch a male student on the head, shoulder, and rear, respectively. The lesser experienced female teachers were 5%, 3%, and 8% more inclined to touch a male student on the back, thigh, and to hug, respectively. The 8% difference in the tendency to hug was noteworthy, keeping in mind that the more experienced female teacher also recommended side hugs only. The increase and decrease of tendency to touch male students was just about a tradeoff, when comparing female teachers of the two categories of experience level.

Female teachers from the two categories of experience level also responded very comparably on touching female students. Teachers with less experience were 4% less likely to touch female students on both the head and the rear. They were 8%, 6%, 7%, and 13% more inclined to touch female students on the shoulder, back, thigh, and to hug, respectively, as compared to the more experienced female teachers. A 13% difference in the tendency to hug a female student seemed significant. The less experienced female teacher was significantly more inclined to touch a female student, compared to the more

Teaching Experience (7 years or less)

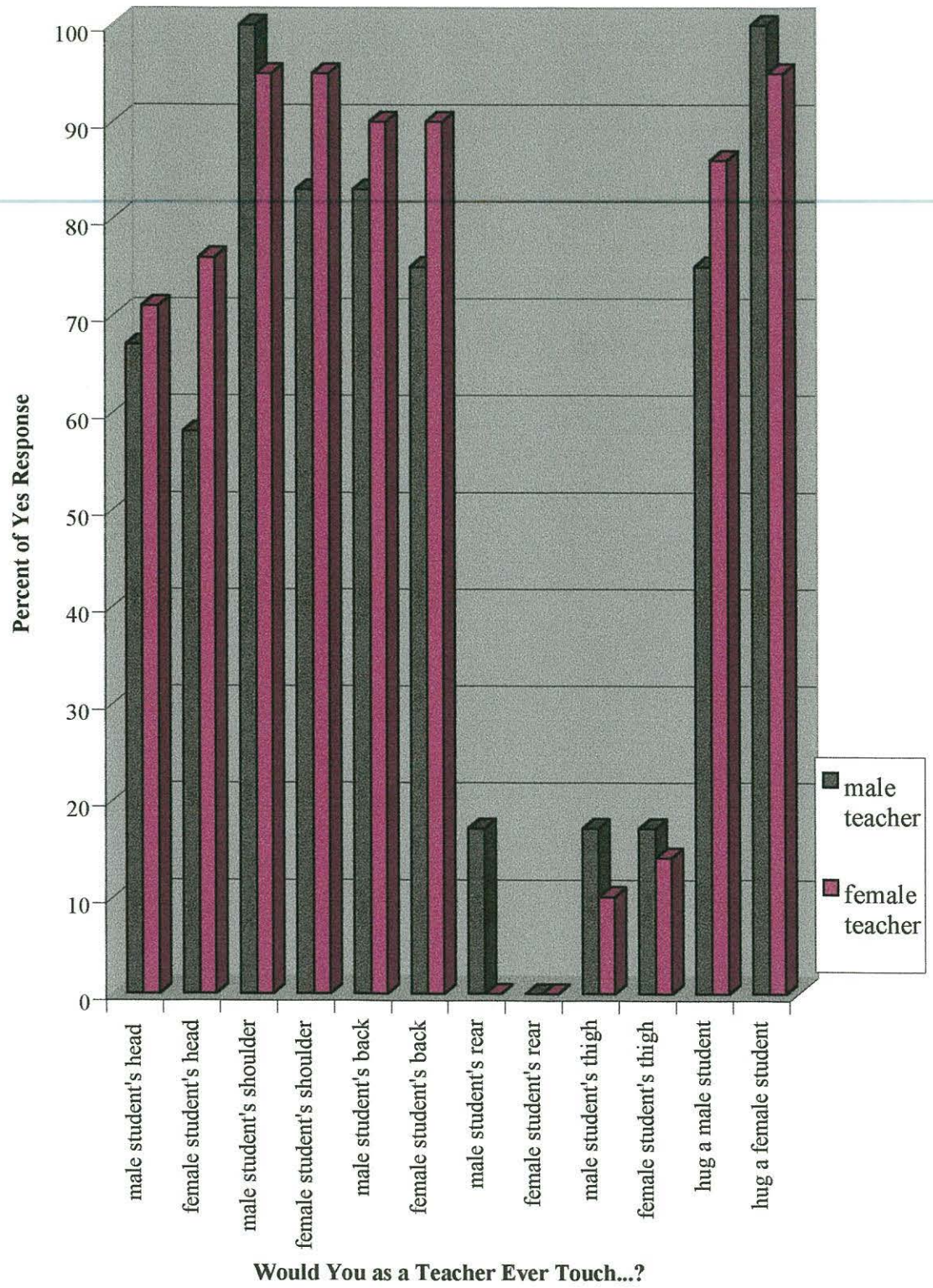
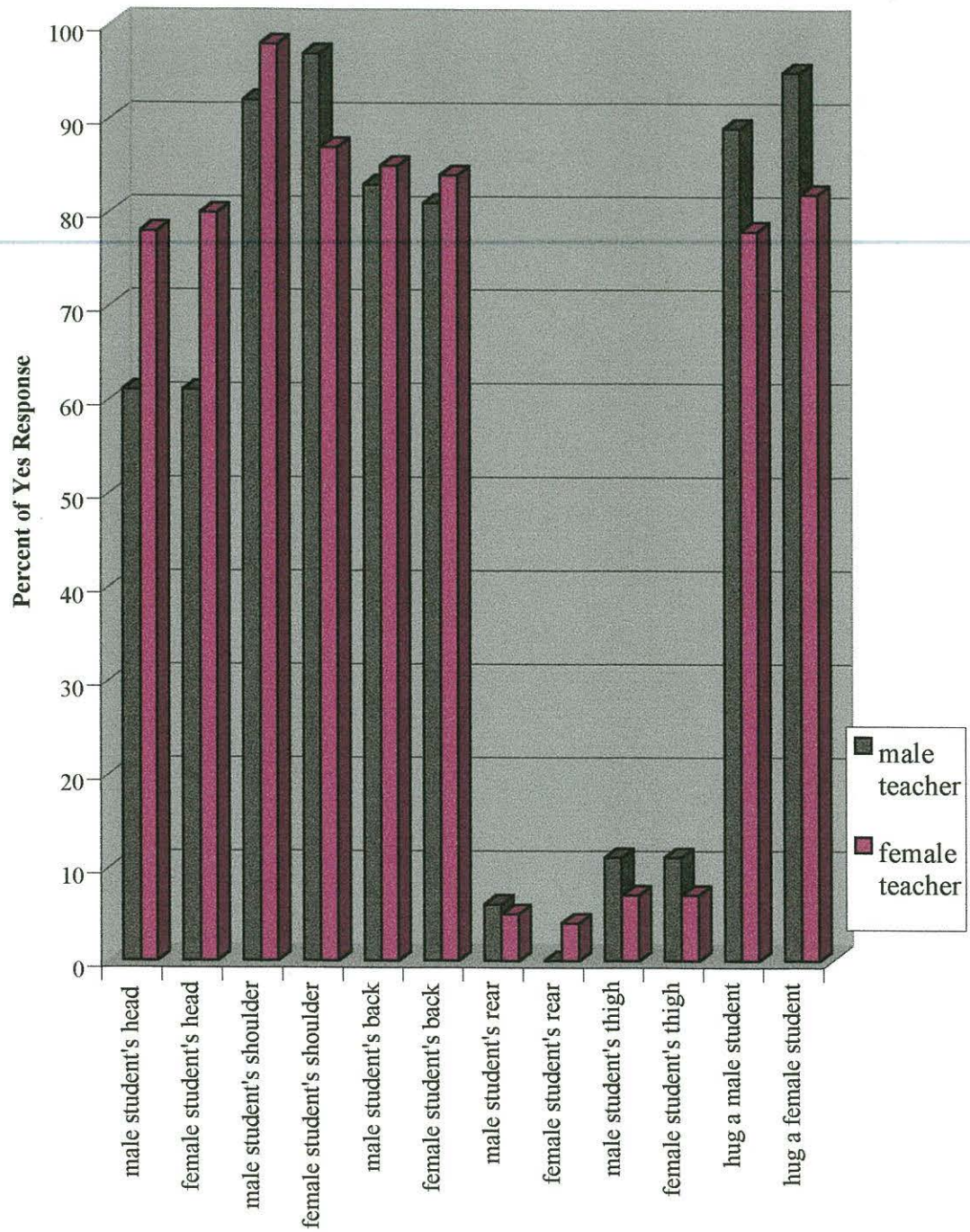


Figure 2



Would You as a Teacher Ever Touch...?

Figure 3

experienced female teacher. Once again, the women teachers recommended hugging from the side only.

In the category of male teachers with seven years or less experience (see Figure 2), the numbers are similar, regarding touching male students, to the responses of teachers with more than seven years experience (see Figure 3). There are some exceptions, though. The overall picture was still a high tendency to touch students, except on the rear or the thigh. The lesser experienced male teachers were 6%, 8%, 11%, and 6% more inclined to touch male students on the head, shoulder, rear, and thigh, respectively, as compared to the teachers with more than seven years experience. Male teachers with less experience responded with the same percentage on touching a boy's back, but 5% less than the more experienced teachers on hugging a boy. The men with less experience in the classroom seemed to show a much greater tendency to touch male students.

The comparison of the two categories of male teachers, pertaining to experience, revealed that the teachers with less experience were 3%, 14%, and 9% less likely to touch a female student in the areas of the head, shoulder, and back, respectively. Both categories of male teachers responded the same, 0%, to touching a female student on the rear, but the lesser experienced teachers were 5% more inclined to touch a girl on the thigh or to hug her. Male teachers with less teaching experience showed a much reduced tendency to touch female students.

Female teachers at the elementary level (see Figure 4), were compared to female teachers at the secondary level (see Figure 5), regarding the touching of male students.

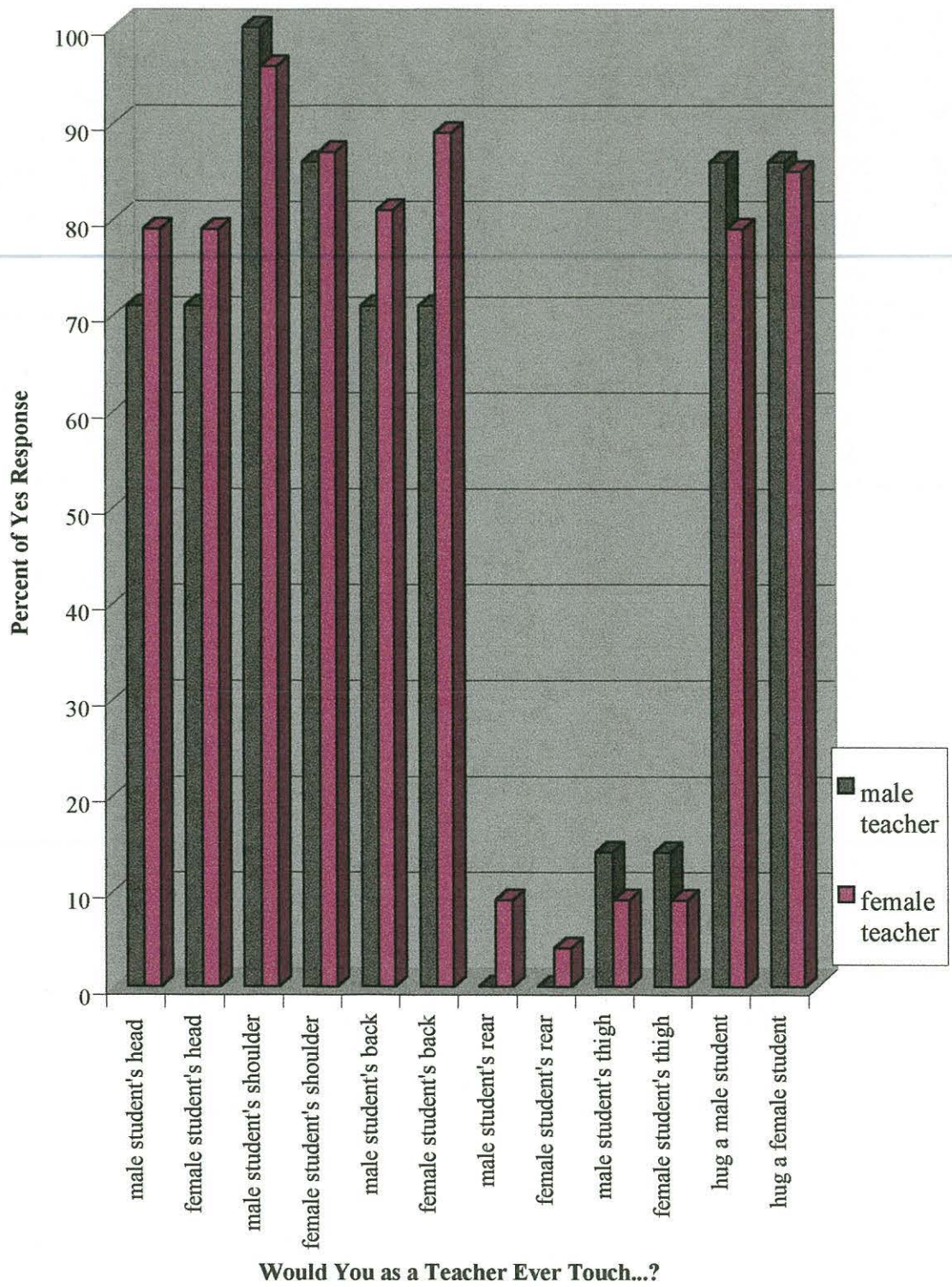


Figure 4



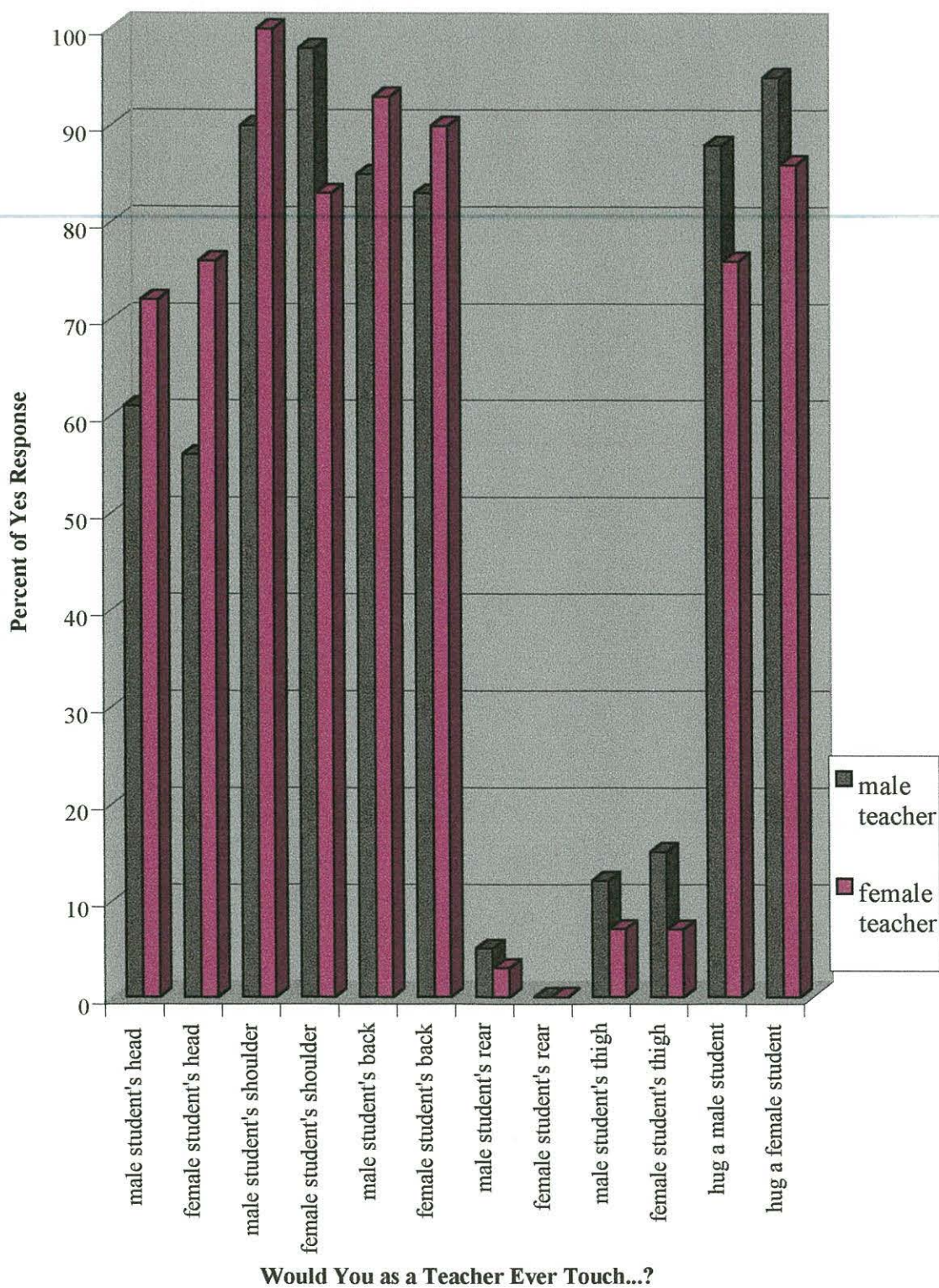


Figure 5

The elementary teachers showed a 7%, 6%, 2%, and 3% greater inclination to touch a male student on the head, rear, thigh, and to hug him, respectively, compared to secondary teachers. However, the elementary teachers showed a 4% and 12% lesser inclination to touch a male student on the shoulder and back, respectively. The increases and decreases pretty much balanced out when comparing elementary female teachers to secondary female teachers, regarding touching male students.

In comparing female teachers at the two levels, regarding the touching of female students, once again there was pretty much a trade-off in the increase and decrease of “yes” responses to touch. The elementary female teachers were 3%, 4%, 4%, and 2% more inclined to touch a female student on the head, shoulder, rear, and thigh, respectively when compared to the secondary female teachers. However, the elementary teachers were 10% and 1% less inclined to touch a female student on the back and to hug her, respectively, compared to secondary teachers.

Male teachers at the elementary level (see Figure 4), were compared to male teachers at the secondary level (see Figure 5), as to touching male students. Elementary male teachers were 10%, 10%, and 2% more inclined to touch male students on the head, shoulder, and thigh, respectively, when compared to secondary school teachers of the same gender. However, the elementary male teachers were 14%, 5%, and 2% less likely to touch male students on the back, rear, and to hug them, respectively, compared to male teachers at the secondary level. These increases and decreases in touch tendency pretty

much balanced when comparing elementary and secondary male teachers on the subject of touching male students.

A comparison of male teachers from the two types of schools, regarding female students, revealed a 15% greater inclination for the elementary teacher to touch the student on the head. However, there was a 12%, 12%, 1%, and 1% lesser tendency for the elementary male teacher to touch a female student on the shoulder, back, thigh, and to hug her, respectively, compared to the secondary male teacher. The response from each level of male teachers was 0%, pertaining to touching female students on the rear. There was a significantly reduced tendency for elementary male teachers to touch female students, compared to secondary male teachers.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

It is clear then from the results of this survey, that the population of teachers who responded still intend to touch students in the classroom, even though some might view the risks as being quite high. It is also clear that the results cannot be generalized to the entire teacher population, given the low percentage of teachers who completed the survey. This summary, then, is specific to the teachers who did complete and return the survey. However, since touch can be so effective in the classroom, how can any teacher completely abstain from it? Some of our effectiveness as teachers will be compromised if we do not have our priorities properly aligned.

In view of the survey results, to the vast majority of educators in North Central Washington who completed the survey, the benefits of using appropriate touch outweigh the associated risks. One female teacher felt so strongly about the need to be able to touch students, that she commented, if she could not touch students while teaching and interacting with them, she would not want to continue in the profession.

The survey showed the women respondents had a slightly stronger tendency to touch students, regardless of their experience level or grade level taught. This was no surprise, since from my own experience, women tend to have more of a compassionate, motherly, loving way about them. The men respondents, however, were more inclined to give out hugs to both sexes of students. As mentioned in Chapter 4, women are aware of

their own breasts, and therefore, tend to hug less. When they do hug, they give a side hug, rather than a front hug. Lesser experienced male respondents showed less of a tendency to touch students on most areas of the body.

The general overview of the survey results was a very high likelihood that the teachers who completed the survey will continue to touch student as they interact with them in the school environment. Touching the rear and thigh of students scored very low. This was as it should be. Touching in those areas could very easily be interpreted as inappropriate touch and should get the attention of school administrators and law officers.

#### Recommendations

How can we use touch and also minimize the risk of using this very effective teaching tool? One important way is to be aware of what Washington State laws say and conduct ourselves well within those laws. RCW 28A.410.090 of the Common School

Manual 1998 states:

Any such certificate or permit authorized under this chapter or chapter 28A.405 RCW shall be revoked by the authority authorized to grant the certificate upon a guilty plea or the conviction of any felony crime involving the physical neglect of a child under chapter 9A.42 RCW, the physical injury or death of a child under chapter 9A.32 or 9A.36 RCW (excepting motor vehicle violations under chapter 46.61 RCW), sexual exploitation of a child under chapter 9.68A RCW, sexual offenses under chapter 9A.44 RCW where a minor is the victim, promoting prostitution of a minor under chapter 9A.88 RCW, the sale or purchase of a minor child under RCW 9A.64.030, or violation of similar laws of another jurisdiction. The person whose certificate is in question shall be given an opportunity to be heard. Mandatory permanent revocation upon a guilty plea or the conviction of felony crimes specified under this subsection shall apply to such convictions or guilty pleas which occur after July 23, 1989 (Wilson, 1998, p. 3).

RCW 9A.44.083, RCW 9A.44.086, RCW 9A.089, RCW 9A.093, and RCW 9A.096 further explain that a teacher would be tried for one of first, second, or third degree child molestation for engaging in sexual intercourse with a student who is less than sixteen years old. A teacher would be tried for first or second degree sexual misconduct for engaging in sexual intercourse with a student who is sixteen or seventeen years old (Wilson, 1998). Every teacher should read and understand these laws and conduct himself within these laws.

The teacher who plans to continue touching students should carefully protect himself/herself, the students, and the administration against potential harm. The following are my own recommendations and are not based upon any research. Each teacher should develop a set of similar, useful guidelines.

1. Communicate to the class, from the very first day, just exactly what type of touch students should expect in your classroom and teaching environment in general.
2. Videotape this session and properly store it for later viewing if the need should arise. Your principal might like a copy for his/her records as well.
3. Use student volunteers to show all the examples of how they might be touched in your classroom, carefully explaining to the class what each type of touch means.
4. Explain to the class that you want to be able to pat them on the back when they have done well.
5. Tell them also that just putting your hand on their shoulder is a way of telling them to hold down the disturbance and get back on task.

6. Explain to them your desire to make them feel important in life and feel good about themselves. Appropriate touch is a tremendous aid in accomplishing that goal.
7. Ask the class to reflect within themselves, allowing them to speak openly, whether or not they feel they are positively touched enough by family members at home, or even by friends.
8. Engage the class in an interactive discussion as to whether the examples of touch covered in the demonstration are effective or ineffective and appropriate or inappropriate.
9. Ask the class if they have some ideas about better ways to touch students while effectively interacting with them in the school environment.
10. Ask the class if any of them would prefer to never be touched in any way, by you as the teacher. Let them know you respect their wishes and will honor them. Be sure to record their names and the specific requests they have pertaining to touch.
11. Try to never be alone in the classroom with a single student.
12. Explain to the class the great need of leaving the door open if any one of them should come into the classroom for individual instruction. Tell the students to remind you, in the event you should forget to leave the door open.
13. If it is at all practical, videotape individual instruction given to a student. The tape would be an excellent tool to reflect on your own teaching effectiveness, and would also be bulletproof protection in the event of false accusation ever being

brought against you. The videotaping might prove to be a nuisance to the teacher who frequently has students in for individual instruction, as in the case of a math teacher. It seems that the nature of the subject necessitates more one-on-one help than do many other subjects.

14. If your school has a dress code, remind the class of what the code says, impressing upon them the importance of not wearing inappropriate clothing.
15. If your school does not have a dress code, talk to your principal about the need of establishing one.
16. Volunteer to be on a committee for establishing or revising the school's dress code.

Being very open with your students about appropriate touch could earn their respect and cooperation. The better a teacher knows and understands his students, the more likely he will be able to safely interact with them, using appropriate touch when called for.

It would be very helpful if school administrators provided a proper atmosphere within which teachers could incorporate appropriate touch into the learning environment without increasing their stress levels. Awareness training for both teachers and students would be wise to help students understand what is appropriate and what is not appropriate, regarding touch by a teacher. Administrators should be ready to listen to a student who has a concern, and even encourage students to come forth when a teacher crosses the line of inappropriate touch. Training would also help a teacher to see warning



flags pertaining to his own conduct as well as the conduct of his colleagues.

### Conclusions

Research suggests that touch can play a very important part in the classroom, but the teacher will need to use good judgment in using it.

What kind of elementary teacher would you want your child to have, a teacher that appears cold and will not touch your child under any circumstances? Or would you prefer your child be taught by one who is willing to use appropriate touch to help your child over the rough spots, enjoy school and enjoy learning? Is not your child's first teacher an extension of the mother and home? Likewise, should not the middle school and high school teacher provided the same feelings, only to a lesser degree? These teachers should convey the same caring attitude with perhaps slightly less touching, much the same as a mother tends to reduce the incidence of touch, slightly, as her child matures.

We must be sure we are not missing out on what may be a very effective teaching and counseling technique. By joining forces, parents, teachers, administrators, and counselors can come to grips with maintaining a proper balance of appropriate touch in the classroom. All parties involved need to be sure to follow their deep-seated moral convictions concerning what is right and wrong. Then our students will be properly cared for and no teacher will be going "in harm's way" as the teacher wisely employs appropriate touch in the classroom.

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APPENDIX A  
SURVEY COVER LETTER



I am a student at Central Washington University working toward a teaching certificate and Master's degree. Please complete this survey to aid in my Master's project on teacher sexual misconduct.

If you only have time to use the express lane, just check the yes or no boxes. If your shopping cart is full of ideas, please use the slower lane and write a brief explanation after each response. Be sure to answer question #7. It is the most important question of all.

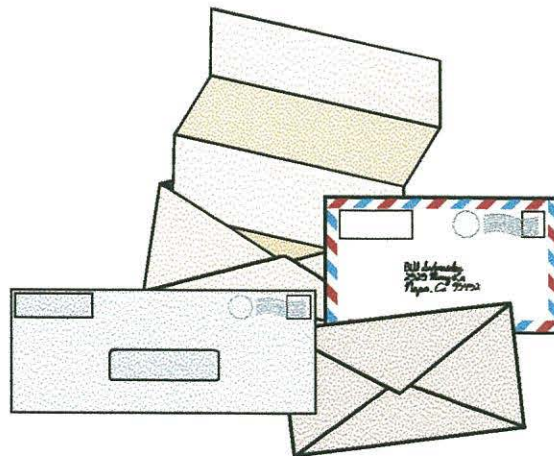
Please return this survey to your building secretary by Monday, December 14. I appreciate your help in my research.

Sincerely,

Ronald G. Jeffries  
Manson

Dear Building Secretary:

Could you please hand out these surveys to teachers you feel would take the time to complete them? Please ask them to return it to you by Monday, and I will pick them up. Thank you for your help in advance.



APPENDIX B  
SURVEY  
"TO TOUCH OR NOT TO TOUCH"

“TO TOUCH OR NOT TO TOUCH”

School Name \_\_\_\_\_ Town/City \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate Student Population \_\_\_\_\_ Grades you teach \_\_\_\_\_

Years of Experience \_\_\_\_\_ Are you male? \_\_\_\_\_ female? \_\_\_\_\_

1. Would you ever touch a student on the top of the head?

Male student

- Yes Under what circumstances?  
 No

Female student

- Yes Under what circumstances?  
 No

2. Would you ever touch a student on the shoulder?

Male student

- Yes Under what circumstances?  
 No

Female student

- Yes Under what circumstances?  
 No

3. Would you ever pat a student on the back?

Male student

- Yes Under what circumstances?  
 No

Female student

- Yes Under what circumstances?  
 No

4. Would you ever pat a student on the rear?

Male student

- Yes Under what circumstances?  
 No

Female student

- Yes Under what circumstances?  
 No



5. Would you ever pat a student on the thigh?

Male student

- Yes Under what circumstances?
- No

Female student

- Yes Under what circumstances?
- No

6. Would you ever hug a student?

Male student

- Yes Under what circumstances?
- No

Female student

- Yes Under what circumstances?
- No

7. What procedures, if any, do you follow as a teacher to reduce the chance of ever being accused of sexual misconduct with a student?