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Exploring Trauma, Healing, and Accountability through Music

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Literary Review SEC303

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Teaching with Trauma:

Combatting Sexual Violence in the Classroom

In 2006, Tarana Burke, a survivor of sexual harassment, founded the “metoo” movement to help survivors of sexual violence, particularly Black women and girls from low income communities, find pathways for healing and activism.¹ Once it became a hashtag (#metoo), conversations around sexual assault and harassment became part of the national dialogue, exposing sexual violence from Olympic doctors to movie producers.² Now, a couple years later, we are seeing changes in legislature, such as states banning nondisclosure agreements that cover sexual assault and congress reforming some of its processes for staffers reporting sexual harassment. We’ve even seen top dogs who have been committing acts of sexual violence for years such as Larry Nassar and Harvey Weinstein be brought down. Looking back at the progress activists such as Anita Hill have made over the past decades shows us that conversations around sexual harassment and assault have forced legislative change and public debate; however, the commonality, understanding, and perception of sexual violence have seen

¹ Sexual Violence is any sexual act or attempted sexual act that is obtained through violence or coercion, acts to traffic a person, or acts directed against a person’s sexuality (DVSAS, 2019).

² Sexual Assault can occur any time a person is forced or coerced into sexual acts without his/her clear consent. Sexual behavior where a person is forced, tricked, or coerced into sexual behavior, or feels violated sexually is widely considered instances of domestic violence and/or sexual assault. It includes obscene phone calls, unwanted exposure to pornography, sexual harassment, unwanted physical touching, unwanted sexual touching, rape, sexual mutilation, and even death. In these situations, individuals feel victimized, often experience effects described in Rape Trauma Syndrome (DVSAS, 2019).

very little change. Every two minutes, someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted. 75% of women who reported rape did not identify their experience as rape and 1 out of 12 men admit to fulfilling the definition of rape or attempted rape, yet do not identify themselves as rapists (DVSAS, 2019).³ It is easy to overlook the open wounds of society when sloppy band aids such as small political change are applied to mask the gore, but the change that needs to be enacted is closer to the roots of the problem. What furthers this abuse is the sexual violence continuum, which is built on a foundation of sexism and gender socialization. Without this foundation, sexual violence would not be tolerated in such a high rate in society. One of the most prevalent ways society feeds this foundation is through education, especially of our youth. The reality is, we haven't given youth tools to be able to identify or prevent sexual violence themselves. To break the continuum, we must change the educational system that misinforms students about their bodies, their identities, and their rights by initiating discussions around consent and gender and allowing activism and self-expression in the classroom.

Even after the #metoo movement exposed the commonality and consistency of sexual violence around the world from the workplace to the classroom, education around sexual violence is still lacking. A study in 2019 asked college students to identify cases of sexual assault in eight scenarios. For each scenario, the students gave reasoning for why consent was or wasn't given and were rated on a scale of 1 (not at all accurate) to 7 (completely accurate) of how their definitions of sexual assault for each scenario compared to the legal definition of sexual assault. The study found that students were much more likely to identify sexual assault in cases of drugged drinks than intoxication and physical intimidation than emotional intimidation. The

³ Take from: Men Against Sexual Assault, Sept 2001

study also found that students had more trouble identifying sexual assault in more “ambiguous” scenarios, even in scenarios where verbal consent was not given (Franiuk, 2019). Activities such as the one conducted in this study are rarely seen in classroom settings, even though students reported as a majority that the activity was helpful in assessing and understanding consent. Furthermore, these discussions around sexual assault are introduced too late and often further misconceptions around sexual health, consent, and sexual violence. Parents and educators have imperative roles in fostering sexual literacy and sexual health (Shtarkall, 2007). Though parents should play a primary role in introducing social and cultural values regarding intimate relationships, health and educational professionals must provide information around sexuality and social skills. Sex education in particular is lacking in providing students such as the college students in the study with a consistent and healthy definition of consent as well as examples of healthy and unhealthy relationships. Schools need to provide safe spaces for students to discuss their own sexual identities and sexual health as well as critical and accurate discussions around consent and teen dating violence. But this isn’t the only work that can be done in secondary schools. How can educators in different subject areas- such as history, math, or music- combat sexual violence in the classroom? As educators in secondary schools we must incorporate consent and healthy socialization, encourage self-expression and activism, and be advocates for our students.

What does consent look like in the classroom? Though consent is often spoken about in a sexual context, it is essentially giving permission (a “yes” or “no”) to do something (Terassi, 2017). As educators, we can set an example by asking consent from our students. For example, in the music classroom, this might look like asking permission to touch a student since a lot of musical technique is taught through physical touch and modeling. This can then be implemented

between students: asking for consent in group projects and student interactions. The concept of consent can be applied to the concept of participation as well. Each assignment, activity, or project is a choice participation, as long as students understand that they will be assessed or graded on that participation, giving students the choice to partake or not. The importance of teaching consent stems not only from teaching survivors of sexual violence agency over their bodies, but also reaching current or future perpetrators to prevent further violence. Research conducted on men who have not been convicted of rape suggests that most rapists start young, either in high school or college, likely crossing a line with someone they know. Men who express remorse are less likely to offend again, but those who blame the victim are more likely to continue (Murphy, 2017). Educators can prevent these ideologies that blame victims and blur boundaries by teaching consent at younger ages and continuing education through secondary education, thus preventing perpetrators from continuing or even starting offending in the first place.

Knowing the high numbers of acts of sexual violence and victims in the classroom also means that there is a high chance that we will also have current and future survivors in the classroom. Whether that violence is recent or not, there will be long term effects that affect the student's ability to learn. Hyperarousal from trauma often induces chronic stress that can induce neurobiological changes in the brain that are associated with poor physical and cognitive health. Trauma can impede physical, social, emotional, and academic development and can result in a fragmented sense of self and leave victims prone to anxiety and depression (Terassi, 2017). "Acting out" in the classroom can often be a manifestation of trauma symptoms or an attempt to resist. Youth with trauma often refuse to comply with oppressive pedagogies and discourses to ensure social control (Pyscher, 2012). So how do we support these students with trauma? First,

educators can approach students with trauma as individuals with their own stories and perspectives, rather than disordered youth (Pyscher, 2012). Second, educators can use trauma-informed care and healing centered engagement in the classrooms to engage survivors of sexual violence in the classroom. Trauma-informed care in classrooms offers support such as counseling or therapy instead of harsh disciplinary measures when students with histories of trauma act out. Beyond this, educators in the classroom can offer aid to their students in need instead of trying to force them into the desired classroom behavior through healing centered engagement, which focuses less on the trauma itself and more on the well-being of students. In other words, healing centered engagement requires educators to help students figure out how to live with their trauma rather than having to fight it. What this might look like in the classroom is building empathy between adults and youth, encouraging self-expression of students, and providing tools for students to analyze oppressive policies and procedures that traumatize (Ginwright, 2018). Acts of sexual violence are about power and control and survivors have had their agency over themselves stripped from them. By simply allowing self-expression in the classroom for students who may or may not have experienced trauma, educators can give their students back agency over their minds, bodies, and identities to tell their own story. In a math or science classroom, this might look like engaging individual students in projects that they can relate to and discuss from their own point of view. In an art classroom, this might look like self-expression through visual art or musical composition. Often times, these self-discovery projects can lead to individual activism, especially through art.

As educators incorporate healing center teaching and trauma informed care into our classrooms, we must not forget that educators are first responders. Educators can be advocates for their students in several ways such as knowing their resources, understanding mandatory

reporting, and leading their students to self-empowerment. Teachers gain trust as they form bonds with their students, which means often times they are informed of the home lives of their students. When dealing with sexual violence and trauma, educators must know their resources such as local organizations that can help students navigate their situation, such as DVSAS (domestic violence and sexual assault services) in Whatcom County. Additionally, they should know the laws and policies surrounding underage survivors as well as perpetrators on campus. When the law or school administration can't protect individual students, educators must step in to see what they can do to help safety plan for students when help is lacking from counselors, school administrators, or guardians. Safety plans might include planning around student's movements to, from, and in home or classes. Educators should exercise caution in giving student survivors advice and should try methods of self-empowerment. Survivors know their situations better than anyone and will know what is safe and not safe for them; therefore, advocates for survivors can help them navigate around survivor's discussed needs and concerns. With that being said, students should also be aware of the educators' roles as mandatory reporters. The purpose of organizations such as CPS (child protective services) are to protect children, but often times CPS is not able to remove a child from harm based on the information given. Educators should know the limitations and rules around mandatory reporting and be absolutely transparent with students so that the students can make the decision to come forward for help. If a student or guardian chooses to disclose information that requires mandatory reporting, then the educator can inform them of their rights and even can ask if they want to call CPS together- giving the survivor the agency to move forward. A majority of the time, educators will see symptoms of sexual violence before the student reports or chooses to disclose information to a mentor. Educators should look for symptoms of fear, anger, guilt, and embarrassment that can cause

sleep and eating disturbances as well as social isolation, low self-esteem, blurring of boundaries, developmental delays, and acts of self-harm (DVSAS, 2019). Reaching out to those students to support them and not push disclosure of information can give these students a chance to gain control over their situation. At the same time, educators should also be aware of the limitations of their roles and be willing to ask for outside help from counselors and local organizations that combat sexual violence. In conclusion, educators should be informed of local organizations and policies and provide advocacy and support through self-empowerment for their students.

Victims of sexual violence are often categorized, but the reality is anyone can be affected by sexual violence. 1 out of 3 females and 1 out of 6 males will be sexually assaulted by the time they are 18 years old (DVSAS, 2019).⁴ As much as we would like to believe our students are innocent children, they have seen and experienced more than we know and often times educators are walking into classrooms of students with their fair share of trauma. Statistically, whether educators are aware of it or not, there will be both current and future survivors and perpetrators of sexual violence in the classroom. It is our job as educators to protect our students in what ways we can, arming them with the tools to fight back against oppressive pedagogies and policies that doom them to follow the paths of survivors and perpetrators instead of individuals. By changing gender socialization and oppressive ideologies in the classroom, educators can combat sexual violence by self-empowering students to break the sexual violence continuum through healthy sexual education, healing centered and trauma informed care, activism, and advocacy.

⁴ Take from: Men Against Sexual Assault, Sept 2001

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⁵ DVSAS Advocacy Training is a more than 50-hour training required for DVSAS volunteers

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