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Taylor Marie Buchanan

2018

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**‘What I have to say is important:’ Including Youth Voices in  
Conversations about Sexual Violence**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

---

George Sylvie, Supervisor

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Kathleen McElroy

**‘What I have to say is important:’ Including Youth Voices in  
Conversations about Sexual Violence**

**by**

**Taylor Marie Buchanan**

**Report**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**The University of Texas at Austin**

**May 2018**

## **Dedication**

For my husband, who encouraged me to pursue my dreams and finish my degree.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to a number of people whose insight, encouragement and pragmatism carried this work to completion. I owe my deepest gratitude to:

Dr. George Sylvie for asking illuminating questions. His support nurtured an inkling of an idea into a thoughtful story.

Dr. Kathleen McElroy for exuding boundless optimism. Holding me to the highest standards of editing, she breathed both life and discipline into this work.

Shelby Knowles for elevating this project with stunning photography.

Meg Greene, Noah Martin and the cast of Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble for allowing me and Shelby to spend four months at rehearsals and shows. Without their candidness and generosity this project would not have been possible.

My parents for instilling in me an unquenchable love of learning. You were right; education and literacy blossom into opportunities. I cherish your unwavering guidance, love and support throughout this academic endeavor and every other chapter of my life.

My sisters for editing unpolished drafts, discussing story structure and preventing this work from stagnating. Lauren and Emily, you inspire me daily. Thank you for being the brightest of lights.

My husband for making coffee on mornings I did not want to get out of bed and for arranging bouquets of flowers to peak over my laptop through the long days and nights of revising and editing. You are the most devoted partner a person could hope to find in this world. I am tremendously appreciative.

## **Abstract**

### **‘What I have to say is important:’ Including Youth Voices in Conversations about Sexual Violence**

Taylor Marie Buchanan, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

Supervisor: George Sylvie

Sexual violence – rape, sexual assault and sexual abuse – impacts youth at an alarming rate. One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Youth are also at risk for dating violence. Twenty-one percent of girls and 10 percent of boys experience dating violence while in high school, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But adults have created a culture that discourages youth from saying #MeToo. In determining whether and how to have conversations about sex, some parents and teachers stay silent, others talk too much. Both approaches prevent youth from asking questions about healthy relationships, reporting sexual violence and seeking support if their boundaries are crossed. In such conditions, sexual violence becomes tolerated and normalized.

Youth are eager to have their voices heard. Following the Feb. 14 shooting that killed 17 students and staff inside Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, survivors

vowed #NeverAgain. These high schoolers took to the streets to speak openly against adults failing to protect them from gun violence.

Against this backdrop of youth activism, a group of teenagers stepped on stages across Austin, Texas, this spring. They devised a play about healthy relationships and consent, based on their own experiences with sexual violence. From February to April 2018, they performed their play, “Just Ask” 22 times in nine middle schools. Their work as student activists offers a window into one form of peer-led prevention with potential for change.

Sexual violence is preventable. Youth do not have to grow up in a culture of shame and silence. To get there, a holistic approach is needed. Talking about it won’t fix the problem altogether. But empowering youth to be active participants in these conversations, seen and heard, is a promising place to start.

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## **The Sexual Assaults We Still Aren't Talking About**

“Leave me alone!” Miley, a fifth grader, shouts and stomps her foot. She crosses her arms tightly across her chest.

“You know you’ll like it,” taunts Bastion, one of the three boys surrounding Miley at the bus stop.

“Just kiss me, and we’ll leave you alone,” Otis says, leaning in.

“Kiss him!”

“I don’t want to!” Miley yells. She pushes her way out of the circle, looking for her friends, an adult, someone to intervene.

Miley, Otis and Bastion are fictional characters in the play “Just Ask.” However, this scene might as well be real. The teenage playwrights and actors who created the show have been affected by unwanted sexual advances. The audience – middle school students in Austin, Texas – also is at risk of sexual assault, rape and abuse. Nearly one in five will experience sexual violence before they are old enough to drive.

Youth need outlets to talk about their relationships and support if their boundaries are crossed. Despite this need for open communication, adults have created a culture that discourages youth from engaging in conversations about sexual violence. Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble is stepping into the void. Instead of waiting for adults to tackle the problem, these teenagers are talking to their peers.

And it's working. High school students in the year-long program, a collaboration of non-profits Expect Respect and Creative Action, learn to be actors and activists. Ninety-five percent of cast members said the program equipped them to make a difference in their schools and their communities. Their peers are listening and learning, too. In a post-performance survey, 86 percent of audience members said "Just Ask" increased their knowledge of abusive relationships. Nearly three out of four respondents said they were now motivated to speak up when witnessing harassment at school.

Youth need to be allowed, even encouraged, to speak up about this issue. Sexual violence impacts them at an alarming rate. One in four girls and one in six boys will be sexually abused before their 18th birthday, according to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center. Youth are also at risk for teen dating violence, an issue so prevalent the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared it a public health problem. Twenty-one percent of girls and 10 percent of boys experience dating violence while in high school.

Assault and harassment occur in classrooms, locker rooms, at bus stops and in homes. Without opportunities to talk openly about these experiences, victims begin to believe sexual violence is normal. Compounding this, in schools and society more broadly, few are held accountable for committing acts of sexual violence. Out of every 1,000 rapes, 994 perpetrators walk free, according to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network. The message from the criminal justice system is clear: Perpetrators of sexual violence rarely go to jail for their crimes. Adults amplify this message to youth when they downplay or ignore the realities youth face around this issue.

In the absence of constructive dialogue between youth and adults, young people instead look to popular culture for guidance. Media portray men as dominant, strong and silent and show women as submissive and sexually attractive to men. These roles shape attitudes about power differences between men and women. They undergird widespread acts of sexual violence.

Changing Lives is trying to disrupt these cultural messages. The 30-minute show, “Just Ask,” explores the theme of consent at a level appropriate for middle school students. The main character, Miley, is a freshman in high school who needs tutoring to boost her English grade. Her teacher introduces Miley to Zach, an older student, who, as it turns out, is interested in Miley. When the two date, they have to decide how to act on their feelings. One night, in Zach’s car, he kisses Miley without her permission. She feels confused and audibly processes her feelings for the audience.

“You can’t just tell him to go away, right?” she thinks aloud. “He’s a nice guy, and you don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

But then, Miley pauses, and corrects herself.

“Just because he’s a nice guy doesn’t mean he’s entitled to be all up in your space.”

She asks Zach to take her home.

Youth rarely see scenes that model healthy relationships. Through this play, Changing Lives is hoping to disrupt a cycle of sexual violence.

“We’ve kept sexual assault and sexual harassment hush-hush through the past generations, to the point where women and men fear coming forward when these things happen,” said Mylo Bissel, an ensemble member with Changing Lives and a freshman at

Akins High School. “So, why not have these conversations as young as you know we’ll understand?”

## **Conversations, Not a New “Talk”**

As parents and teachers decide whether and how to engage youth in conversations about sex, some stay silent, others talk too much. Both approaches prevent youth from contributing to change.

The 2014 poll “Let’s Talk: Are Parents Tackling Crucial Conversations about Sex?” found that 82 percent of parents talk to their kids about topics related to sex. But less than half of parents feel comfortable doing so.

“Parents often lack the background to know how best to do this,” said Rebecca Bigler, professor of psychology at the University of Texas. These conversations, she said, “come out of the blue. They don’t always know developmentally what a kid can handle at certain ages.”

Today’s parents, as the youth of decades past, lacked clear guidance from their own parents, and lack models for approaching these conversations, according to Bigler.

“It’s a big problem because parents won’t even talk about consent, period,” said Frank Campbell, an ensemble member with Changing Lives and a junior at Hendrickson High School in Austin. “I guess me and my dad had the talk when I was 8. It was pretty simple. Like, ‘sex is for reproduction.’”

Nearly three out of four parents polled in the 2014 survey said they talked with their children about consent. Youth disagree, saying they feel lectured rather than included in a conversation.

“If you give a lecture about consent, we won’t listen,” said Isaiah Devon Rogers, Changing Lives ensemble member and a junior at Del Valle High School, south of Austin. “I don’t want to hear it, don’t want to hear it, don’t want to hear it.”

High school students Rogers and Campbell say they are open to conversations about consent and healthy relationships, not a new “talk.” Bissel, the Akins High freshman, agrees, urging adults to listen to youth experiences.

“Anytime an adult tells me something, I’m automatically a little skeptical,” Bissel said. “Most adults think that just because we’re younger, we don’t have a voice, and we don’t know what we’re talking about.”

In the closing scene of “Just Ask,” a student, Dmitri, and his teacher, Ms. Brooke, address the principal during a faculty meeting.

“Lately, it seems like every day somebody comes forward online or in the media to say ‘me too’ and share their story of sexual harassment or abuse,” Ms. Brooke says. “But, it’s not just celebrities that experience these things, it also impacts students here -- at our school.”

“It’s kind of messed up that so many people experience it day after day, but no one really teaches or talks about this kind of stuff,” Dmitri says. “Why don’t we talk about it?”

This talk is not just tough at home. Educators have long grappled with what to say about sex at school, too.

“I mean, what else happens in schools?” Campbell said. “Kids snort cocaine in the school locker rooms, have sex in the school bathrooms. Students hook up with teachers. They think if we don’t talk about sex, nothing bad will happen, and that’s ridiculous.”

Texas prescribes strict rules for sex education in schools. UT professor Bigler said few educators dare to discuss topics that involve sex or even healthy relationships off script. The Guttmacher Institute, a research and policy organization, reports that 29 states say that sex education must meet certain requirements such as being age-appropriate or medically accurate. Texas is one of 26 states that requires information on abstinence be included, even stressed.

While sex education is highly prescriptive, talking to youth about sexual violence is not. With “issues this sensitive,” individual school districts have discretion on how to best serve their students, according to Lauren Callahan with the Texas Education Agency. In Chapter 37 of the Texas Education Code, lawmakers require districts to adopt and implement sexual harassment and dating violence policies. Beyond this, the state has made few resources available to K-12 districts. Meanwhile, 5.4 million Texas students attend school five days a week, the most common location of peer sexual victimization, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Even the Texas School Health Advisory Committee, a group appointed to advise school boards, had little to say about sexual violence impacting kids in schools. “Sexual violence is not a topic in which [TSHAC has] expertise,” Anita Wheeler, school health coordinator and committee member, wrote in an email.

Still, sexual violence impacts youth, often within the very walls of school buildings. In such conditions, youth seek answers elsewhere.

Hours after kissing Miley, Zach stares at his phone. He is waiting for Miley to respond to his text. His friend, Dmitri, sits next to him on the couch. They are playing video games.

“It was just a kiss,” Zach says, raising his hands in a gesture of frustration.

“But you didn’t check in with her first, or ask her how she was feeling after?” Dmitri asks.

“Okay, look I didn’t have to ask. It was going really well. So, I leaned in.”

Dmitri shakes his head and looks down at the floor. “Dude.”

“What about in the movies?” Zach presses. “Do you think the action dude really leans over after saving the world and says in his smooth voice, ‘Can I kiss you?’ No, my boy Brad Pitt just goes for it. It’s in the moment.”

“A big thing that gets [youth] is the media,” said Monet Munoz, director of Generation YW, a prevention program facilitated through the Austin YWCA. “After that, it’s their peers, modeling the same behavior that comes from the media. It’s constantly perpetuated in all aspects of their lives, and then it becomes a norm.”

Media messages inform perceptions about behavior in romantic relationships. The CDC says on its website: “These examples suggest that violence in a relationship is normal.” Media teach boys that they have to be “super masculine, tough and powerful,” according to Munoz. Hollywood blockbusters teach that to be a man is to have control over women, she said.

*The Mask You Live In*, a 2015 documentary, reported that the average boy spends 40 hours a week watching TV, 15 hours a week playing video games and two hours a week watching pornography. Eighty-five percent of video games contain some type of violence, according to the American Psychological Association. A 2015 study by the APA linked violent video games to increased aggression and decreased empathy. Sixty-eight percent of young men use pornography weekly, with one in five accessing it daily, the film



producers found. Watching pornography can excite sexually violent behaviors, according to a 2012 pornography and sexual aggression study.

“A lot of students don’t know what a healthy relationship looks like,” Munoz said. “They see what’s out there for them on TV or in their community, and they’re just mirroring that.”

On a recent Friday afternoon, four sixth-grade boys weaved through a crowded hallway in Covington Middle School in Austin. They yelled “slap ass Friday!” and hit each other on the butts with their open palms. “That’s gay!” one of the four boys hollered as a female teacher walked by. “Go to your sixth-period class,” the teacher said. “Your sixth-period class, please.”

Munoz says teachers commonly turn a deaf ear to homophobic and sexist comments, rather than confronting behaviors that bely a culture of sexual violence.

“Boys think it’s OK to walk the halls and smack girls on the butts or put their hands up girls’ shirts,” Munoz said. “The schools are really not doing much about it, because they don’t see this as a problem. They think of it as ‘that’s what boys do.’”

Girls notice this normalization of sexual harassment. Munoz has counseled girls who say the adults in their schools fail to support them. Munoz said when the students tell a counselor or principal, the issue persists or worsens.

“This happens to them in middle school, and then as they grow up they think, ‘When I was 12, nobody did anything,’” Munoz said. “It perpetuates that this behavior is OK.”

When she was 9, Georgia Boutot, now a junior at the McCallum Fine Arts Academy in Austin, was playing in her backyard. A roofer on the neighbor's house catcalled her. Disturbed, she went inside and told her parents about the man's comments.

"What I got out of that experience is that [sexual harassment] was going to happen," Boutot said. "That was just how it was going to be, for the rest of my life. And I was told that, by my parents."

When youth experience sexual harassment or assault that goes unacknowledged and unpunished, they begin viewing these incidents as normal parts of their lives, according to the nonprofit Texas Association Against Sexual Assault.

"We have people who grow up and finally outcry, and society says, 'Why didn't you ever tell anybody?'" said Melanie Ramirez, primary prevention specialist with TAASA. "We already question the validity of young people in our society, that their experiences aren't real, that their feelings aren't valid."

Munoz says students need more support in schools. Boys and girls need to know that school administrators will take sexual harassment, assault and violence seriously. This will encourage more frequent reporting of these crimes and discourage perpetrators, contributing to a safer environment for youth, she said.

"I wish that there wasn't such a big gap between kids and adults so we could actually have conversations instead of them talking to us like we're stupid," said Campbell, the Hendrickson High junior. "Because we're not. I promise you we at least know when there's something they're not talking to us about."

## A Troubled Past

It's Taco Tuesday at Miley's high school. She sits down to eat lunch with her older sister, Jasmine, and their friend Chance. They ask Miley about the date.

"You got kissed!" Chance exclaims, spilling his tray of tacos.

Miley's shoulders sag. "I didn't like it. I didn't really want it."

"Seriously?" Chance replies. "The most romantic thing to happen to any of us, and you ruined it."

Jasmine asks Chance to cool off, to go get more tacos. As he walks away, Jasmine tries to comfort her sister.

"But what if he's right? Am I overreacting?" Miley asks. "I don't want to be some kind of drama queen. I just feel weird, like I'm not normal or something. It's just a kiss, right?"

In their work with Texas youth, TAASA found that teenage boys and girls express difficulty in talking about sex and sexuality with partners, parents and peers.

"I've definitely been in situations where I'm alone with a person, and I can feel them advancing, and I don't want it," Boutot said. "And, if they're not interested in asking for my consent, then I'm not sure how to communicate that."

As youth begin dating, each person brings expectations and experiences into new relationships. Every context impacts attitudes about dating violence. "So, yeah, I've had experiences," Boutot said. "I know a lot of my friends have been in the same situation too."

Teenage dating violence and child sexual abuse do not exist in a vacuum. The United States was founded and sustained through sexually violent acts. European settlers raped and murdered Native Americans. Slave owners raped African women. White men have long established power through violence.

There, too, is a history of resistance. In the late 1800s, women of color led anti-lynching campaigns, many challenging false accounts of black men raping white women. Conversations about sexual violence resurfaced in the late 1960s. In 1972, the first rape crisis centers opened in Berkeley, California, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington D.C. Today, RAINN has more than a thousand rape crisis centers registered. But not until 1990 did federal legislation addressing sexual violence get first introduced. And in 1994, the Violence Against Women Act passed. Congress reauthorized VAWA in 2013.

Activists say strides have been made in serving victims and educating the public. But TAASA contends that gains toward actually ending sexual violence have not been as successful. Violence prevention work has focused more on women taking responsibility for their own safety rather than on addressing the factors that lead to sexual violence, the group says.

“Every single one of my friends that’s a girl has multiple experiences with sexual assault, or people intruding on their boundaries,” Boutot said. “It’s definitely a stereotype that girls will stay quiet. We stay in the background; we do what we’re told.”

Efforts to challenge gender norms, inequality and a long history of sexual violence are necessary for change, according to TAASA. This includes conversations among youth and between adults and youth. It also requires a culture of communication where consent is asked for and given. Accountability and protection must become the rule, while harassment and assault become the exception.

## Longing to be Heard and Believed

Leaves and a discarded Cheetos bag scraped across the concrete basketball court behind Austin's Covington Middle School. An eighth-grade student pointed to a small doorway leading to the back of the school, a nook tucked out of sight.

"This happened to my friend," Karolee Jones said. "It was in sixth grade. She was dating this guy. Obviously it's middle school, and I didn't take it that seriously. And she didn't at that time either."

Jones shuffled her feet and tucked a section of hair behind her ear before continuing.

"She was with her boyfriend, and he took her behind the school. She didn't want to go behind the school. He tried to make out with her and tried to touch her, and she didn't want to."

The wind shifted, blowing her hair back across her cheek.

"Eventually they broke up."

The basketball goals creaked in the wind. Otherwise, it was silent behind the school.

"I didn't realize how wrong that was," Jones continued. "It's happened to a couple other friends, too. So it's definitely prevalent."

She said that several of her friends have had boys kiss or touch them without their consent. "They think it's fine," she said. The girls' reactions to these stories were sympathetic, but none were compelled to tell to an adult.

"It's like we're kind of taught that even if you voice your opinion, that doesn't mean there's going to be a change," she said.

With youth discouraged from discussing sexual violence, acts go unreported and unpunished. Adolescents and young adults make up 21 percent of the U.S. population today. Understanding their experiences with sexual violence is key to preventing the widespread, national problem. Youth are particularly high-risk for violence. Girls between 16 and 19 are four times more likely than the general population to be raped or sexually assaulted, according to RAINN. In Texas, 15-to-19-year-olds engage in dating violence more often than any other age group, TAASA found.

Violent experiences have negative effects on developing teenagers. Depression and anxiety, using drugs and alcohol, withdrawing from social activities and thinking about suicide are just a few of the effects the CDC found. Youth cause and receive harm during their formative years. And adults don't want to hear about it.

## **A Platform for Youth Voices**

Zach and Miley stand centerstage, facing the audience.

“Why don’t more people just ask?” Zach says.

“What could consent look like? What could it sound like?” Miley wonders aloud.

Despite the prevalence of the issue, preventing sexual violence is possible. The ultimate goal is social change with hypermasculinity, gender inequality and sexual violence no longer normalized.

Youth are particularly sensitive to social contexts surrounding them, and as such, their peers have profound influence. Teens spend most of their days in school with each other and, in their free time, spend more time together than with adults. The desire to fit in and be liked heightens in adolescence, and teens begin to rely on each other as a primary source of support and guidance.

“The opinions of my peers are always fresh,” said Rebekah Farris, Changing Lives ensemble member and a junior at Westwood High School in Austin. “I guess that starts as a kid when your parents are always telling you what to do. You build resentment over time.”

The World Health Organization found that most effective teen dating violence interventions involve peer leadership. As youth lead other youth, they become invested in solving the issue. Involving young people in conversations about sexual violence is critical to eradicating this problem, according to TAASA.

“It’s good to have [these messages] come from someone your age,” Farris said. “You can see that reflected in the protesting that’s going on right now. It’s getting a lot of response, because it’s organized by teens, and other teens are way more receptive to that.”

Teenage activists from Parkland, Florida, recently captivated the nation’s attention. Following the Feb. 14 shooting that killed 17 students and staff inside Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, survivors vowed #NeverAgain. These high school-aged youth took to the streets, microphones and stages to speak openly against adults failing to protect them from gun violence.

“This is a young person’s world,” said Melanie Ramirez, the TAASA prevention specialist. “Look at our society with our student walkouts, even with social media and hashtags. Young people are taking it back to grassroots movements. We’re talking about protests. We’re talking about rallies. We’re talking about modern-day Civil Rights, feminism movements.”

Twenty-five teenagers stepped up to microphones and on stages in Austin, too. Only they’re not marching for their cause. Performing a play about healthy relationships, Changing Lives features high school artists using theater as a tool for activism.

“This is a space where my view has weight,” said Farris, the Westwood junior. “What I have to say is important.”

In the fall, ensemble members learn to be activists on stage and in their daily lives. In the spring, they rehearse their play and present it to middle school students.

At the conclusion of the year-long program, ensemble members take an exit survey. Last year, all 25 students said they sometimes or often had an important role in making



decisions within the program. Ninety-five percent of ensemble members felt free to develop and use their own ideas.

“It’s a platform to give voices to teens,” Bissel, the freshman at Akins High, said. “Which is something I often complain about. Teens don’t get enough voices when we’re the ones who have to deal with the society that’s left behind.”

In 2018, Changing Lives performed 22 times at nine Austin area middle schools in front of a combined 4,140 audience members.

During a recent performance at Del Valle Middle School, the cast arrived at 8:30 a.m., an hour before the first show. They unloaded boxes of costumes, set and sound equipment from the back of a Prius and set up their materials in the gym. Sixth through eighth-grade students, wearing mesh backpacks and lanyards with their IDs poured into the gym, stomped up the bleachers and chatted with their classmates.

Several cast members walked through the crowded rows, holding small white boards and dry erase markers. They asked questions related to the play, seeking youth voices that remain unsolicited in other contexts: “What are important things to have in a relationship?” “What’s the hardest thing about telling someone you like them?”

After the show, the cast connects the fictional play to daily realities. They explain that relationships like Zach and Miley’s develop every day, but people don’t often talk about it. A question-and-answer session follows.

Asked “What is consent?,” dozens of middle schoolers raised their hands to answer.

“Making sure both people are okay,” one student replied.

Another said, “Getting the other person’s knowledge... like their permission.”

A girl from the back row added, “Not being forced to do anything you don’t want to do.”

“If adults had [performed this play], I would have felt kind of awkward,” said Mia Talavera, an eighth-grade student who watched the Del Valle Middle School performance. “But with the high schoolers, it’s more impactful, because they see things the way we see them.”

## **Breaking the Silence**

After the Del Valle show, the cast broke down the set – a rack with costumes, two spotlights, three screens and an assortment of props. Four eighth-grade audience members sat cross-legged on the newly resurfaced gym floor. Solemn and reflective, each shared personal experiences with sexual assault and harassment.

“It hasn’t happened in a really long time,” Ana Ayala Gasca said. “Someone heard me screaming. It was scary, and I was crying, but I got help. I wish I had told someone about it earlier.”

Sexual violence is preventable. Youth do not have to grow up in a culture of shame and silence. To get there, a holistic approach is needed. Talking about it won’t fix the problem altogether. But empowering youth to be active participants in these conversations, seen and heard, is a promising place to start.

In the Del Valle gym, Mia Talavera discussed a recent episode at a trampoline park. A group of boys flirted with her. She repeatedly told them leave her alone. But they continued to make advances, causing her to feel unsafe. Eddie Benavidez shared that he, too, has experienced sexual assault. He said struggled with whether to tell anyone, especially because the assault happened at school. Talavera, Benavidez and Gasca looked expectantly at Estafania Merlos, who had yet to speak. She stared down at the floor, unblinking.

The bell rang, signaling the end of a class period. The eighth-graders gathered their backpacks and stood to leave. Merlos remained silent. Perhaps we will know her story someday.

## **Glossary**

Child Sexual Abuse: forcing or persuading a minor to take part in sexual activities.

Dating Violence: a pattern of abusive behaviors used to exert power and control over a dating partner.

Healthy Relationships: relationships (romantic and otherwise) that are gender equitable, respectful and consensual.

Hypermasculinity: the exaggeration of male stereotypical behavior, such as an emphasis on physical strength, aggression and sexuality.

Sexual Assault: sexual contact or behavior that occurs without the consent of the victim.

Sexual Violence: an all-encompassing term that includes sexual assault, rape and sexual abuse.

Rape: penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.

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