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Advocating for Trauma Victims Through Young Adult Literature

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Of Courage and
A Warrior's Boldness.

I won't let
Prejudice,
Hate,
Bullying,
Racism,
Or
Fear
Turn me around.
Today
Is a good day
To let those that
Try to erase us
Know that they
Will never ever win.

Synthia Shelby loves to share her trials and triumphs through her writing. She tells her journey through her words and actions. Cynthia motivates, inspires, and empowers others so they can press towards their dreams. She serves her community as an educational leader, author, spoken word artist, and workshop facilitator.



Advocating for Trauma Victims Through Young Adult Literature ***Zoe Mihalicz, Breea Hornback, Bethany Womack, Klaire Compton***

*The summer before my junior year of high school, I was sexually assaulted. This experience changed my life forever. I lost friends. I went from making good grades to barely passing. And I slipped into severe depression. But one day, in my junior year advanced English class, my teacher took us to the library to pick out a novel. I never cared for reading until I found *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. The novel's protagonist, Melinda Sordina, was sexually assaulted at a party—a situation almost identical to mine. Reading about an adolescent going through a similar experience helped me to understand that I was not alone as a sexual assault victim in high school. *Speak* taught me how to heal and how to advocate for myself and for my peers, who may be dealing with similar experiences.*

Discussing traumatic incidents may feel uncomfortable for teachers and students. It may feel safer to keep these topics silenced and internalized in order to avoid difficult conversations. Yet, each day, students walk into classrooms carrying the physical and emotional burdens from these life-changing experiences, necessitating these conversations within and outside of the classroom. In a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey conducted in 2019, 23.9% of Kentucky high school students experienced in-school bullying, and 8.6% reported sexual violence (“Adolescent and School Health”). Resources like media blogs and platforms, as well as school counselors and school

psychologists, are increasingly available for students (Mullen et al. 3). In order to put a greater focus towards the well-being of students, certain principals believe school counselors must have resources that shift their focus from administrative duties to proactively focusing on the “social-emotional, mental, and behavioral health services” students need (“School Counselors and Principals”). Despite the gains in access to these resources, students often remain reticent to seek out and access these modes of support. The English classroom is one place where difficult but necessary topics are already discussed through reading and writing. Young Adult (YA) texts, such as *Speak*, can be vehicles for normalizing conversations about traumatic experiences, validating students’ personal experiences and feelings (Hinton and Berry 285).

In addition to YA literature’s ability to address sexual assault, its inclusion of characters from multiple races, classes, geographic regions, genders, and sexual identities, reaches out to historically marginalized students facing prejudice and discrimination. In “Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors,” Rudine Sims Bishop argues that literature “transforms human experience and reflects it back to us Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books” (1). YA texts that draw upon multicultural experiences give adolescent readers the opportunity to see familiar experiences reflected through characters in literature, while diverse characters provide perspectives on relationships between these experiences across cultures, regions, and identities (Hinton and Berry 287; Durand). When we focus on “not only inviting a range of stories into our classrooms, but also being open to being changed by these stories,” we acknowledge that, while there are instances that students can relate to others and their hardships, there are also times they do not. In these instances, students are learning about hardships from the perspective of their peers (Frederickson 63). Selecting texts pertaining to students’ lives and interests exposes them to perspectives on traumatic events that they might not have

considered previously and validates these experiences (Frederickson 60).

Validation is important because it promotes empathy from teachers and peers, which in turn, advocates for groups of students who may not receive support when dealing with traumatic incidents at home or in other aspects of their daily lives. A student must know they are not alone before ever sharing their personal experiences. In “Teaching Empathy and Promoting Global Citizenship,” Eir-Anne Edgar dives deeper into this, explaining how she has started choosing literature that helps her “proselytize the ‘good word’ of literacy” (67). Edgar assists students’ readings of various viewpoints portrayed in assigned texts. Facilitating these connections helps students feel comfortable and supported by their peers and teachers in order to perform well, stay engaged, and put forth effort in the classroom (Ayer 14). By selecting texts that not only represent the contemporary concerns of adolescent readers but that also speak up for and advocate for students dealing with trauma, teachers cultivate a safe space to facilitate discussions that promote healing and understanding.

Cultivating Discussions for Healing and Understanding

YA literature’s characters can be vehicles for normalizing discussions about how to negotiate identity-based challenges. Stephen Chbosky’s *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (1999), for example, includes high school-aged characters and situations that portray how students deal with trauma, struggle with relationships, confront bullying, and face issues related to self-acceptance. In the novel, two high school seniors, Patrick and Sam, take freshman Charlie under their wings and show him the meaning of acceptance and friendship. However, Patrick and Sam need “to know that someone out there listens and understands” as much as Charlie (Chbosky 9). Through adventures and trials, they find themselves challenged by inner issues stemming from previously experienced traumatic events. It is during these explorations that

Chbosky represents a multitude of potentially familiar experiences, such as revealing sexual preference to family and friends, negotiating sexual preferences, and coping with sexual assault and depression. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* portrays how these different traumatic events are dealt with by vastly different groups of students to connect with readers.

The novel does not engage racial prejudice and discrimination nor does it examine intersectional identities between race and sexuality. However, it does focus on homophobia and the marginalization of students in the LGBTQ+ community, as portrayed through Patrick's character. Patrick's peers know he is gay, but his boyfriend, the quarterback of the football team, is closeted. They continue hiding their relationship throughout the novel because Patrick's boyfriend refuses to admit the truth due to the fear of his classmates' and father's homophobic opinions. In one scene, his boyfriend even goes as far as punching Patrick in the face to prove his masculinity. Patrick feels emotionally drained, and as Patrick and Charlie are hanging out one night, Patrick kisses Charlie out of sadness and desperation. As Charlie explains it, "We didn't do anything other than kiss. And we didn't even do that for very long. After a while, his eyes lost the glazy numb look... Then, he started crying. Then, he started talking about Brad" (Chbosky 91). It is possible that students belonging to the LGBTQ+ community may, like Patrick and his boyfriend, struggle against the prejudices they face living in a homophobic world, and in turn, might need a friend or some form of refuge to let them know they are not alone.

In "The Times They Keep A-Changin,'" Alex Sanchez examines the positive effect of reading YA literature that relates directly to personal struggle, such as "coming out" (20). Sanchez argues that students find their identities and self-value through reading texts that make them feel accepted and supported in the classroom, even though "the coming out experience is a universal story of self-discovery and being true to who you are," which, for some, may be more difficult and

sometimes traumatizing (22). Students who read about others grappling with the difficulty of finding and accepting identity, like Patrick in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, feel acknowledged when seeing their own experiences with marginalized or closeted sexual identities represented through YA characters. For students who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community or do not identify with similar traumas or discrimination, reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* and other texts that engage LGBTQ+ issues can help them understand other's experiences, challenge heteronormativity, and encourage empathy with experiences outside of their own (Clark & Blackburn 28).

In another example, Sandra Cisneros's critically acclaimed *The House on Mango Street* (1984), portrays protagonist Esperanza's experiences, a twelve-year-old Chicana growing up in a small, run-down home on Mango Street in racially segregated Chicago. Esperanza's journey involves emotional and sexual self-discovery. Readers witness the challenges a young girl faces, while growing up in a poverty-stricken, troubled environment. Esperanza is filled with a deep desire to leave her neighborhood because it will never reach the aspirations she dreamt of her home having. Her fears are not without reason. After befriending Sally, a girl who is described to be so beautiful it is troublesome by her own sexually abusive father, Esperanza finds herself in the midst of a sexual crisis (Cisneros 81). After joining Sally in an adventure to the Money Garden, Esperanza is sexually assaulted and left only with the knowledge that her friend is a liar. She begs her friend Sally to not leave, and repeats to herself through her sobbing "I don't remember" (Cisneros 100).

Esperanza's assault constitutes a pivotal moment in the novel, a turning point that reveals how other female characters undergo similar traumatic incidents. She writes through the pain, and though she concludes by the end that she will one day return to save those like her on Mango Street, she decides she will first have to leave her home. Without leaving Mango Street, she will

never be able to return and make the changes necessary to save the kids from the trauma she endured while growing up there. Adolescent readers may relate to Esperanza for multiple reasons—a Latina student feeling isolated in a room full of peers who do not look like her, a student who has encountered sexual assault or harassment, or a student raised in a geographical region they are ashamed of. But even when students are less familiar with the cultural obstacles that Esperanza's character faces, the novel's incorporation of multiple points of view to tell its story invites readers to recognize the challenges within each community and to empathize with trauma survivors.

Advocating through Literary Representation

In the recently published *Everyday Advocacy: Teachers who Change the Literacy Narrative* (2020), Cathy Fleischer and Antero Garcia describe everyday advocacy as “the vehicle that can transport ideas to reality” (7). One way to begin transporting these ideas and facilitating change for and within students is to question what possibilities we give to students regularly, who may be negotiating sexual trauma or identity-based marginalization. We need to empower the voices of struggling students by giving them a chance to reflect and learn from their hardships. And we might select class texts that represent students' social struggles, promote healing, and demonstrate how to seek support for themselves, as well as how to advocate for peers facing similar obstacles. For instance, when selecting the books that her class will read during the upcoming school year, Carmen Lugo Llerena takes stock of the normalization of Eurocentric curriculum, recognizing that some teachers may be unsure of how to address the lack of inclusion of marginalized students. She asks herself, “Have I done enough to provide the counter narrative to decolonize a curriculum that privileges a select few and minoritizes most of my students?” (“Stories My Students Need to Hear”).

In order to “do enough,” we need to be intentional about selecting YA novels that

advocate for students to speak out about their traumatic experiences. One book that provides an approach for students to address their traumatic experiences is Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (2018). *Poet X* explores the high school experience of fifteen-year old Dominican American, Xiomara, who goes by “X” and works through her traumatic family experiences, sexuality, and her rejection of Catholicism. Xiomara struggles to be authentic in every aspect of her life because she feels like she has to conform to the stifling restrictions that her family, culture, men, and religion are imposing upon her. Her mother and father want her to be a well-mannered and chaste woman, but her community, especially the men in it, tell her that her worth relates to her body: “their gazes and words / are heavy with all of the things / they want you to be” (Acevedo 26). While negotiating these conflicting societal expectations, she discovers that she can find her voice and reclaim her power through poetry, reflecting, “I only know that learning to believe in the power of my own words has been the most freeing experience of my life. It has brought me the most light. And isn't that what a poem is? A lantern glowing in the dark” (Acevedo 297).

Addressing and allowing students to talk about trauma using YA literature does not negate standards-driven education. Instead, it bolsters it. Incorporating *Poet X* into a junior or senior English class, for instance, teaches students to “determine two or more themes . . . and analyze their development over the course of a text, including how they interact and build on one another”; “to view literacy experiences as transactional, interdisciplinary, and transformational”; and “to think deeply and critically about text” (*Kentucky Academic Standards* 352). *Poet X* provides ELA students with a model for a teacher's role in helping Xiomara address trauma through self-expression in slam poetry. Reading the novel critically engenders difficult questions about feeling and being marginalized in one's home, school, and community. Most significantly, when Xiomara becomes inspired by the powerful effects writing through her pain has

had on her since joining the slam poetry club, the novel portrays how literacy can be a transformational experience that uncovers truth and shares it with others. Readers experiencing similar negotiations between conflicting social expectations and familial trauma observe that the English classroom can be a site for working through these conflicts and learning to advocate for one's self through words.

Helping Children Deal with Stress during the 2019-nCoV Outbreak, an infographic created by the World Health Organization, provides tips, such as “listen to their concerns and give them extra love and attention” and “speak kindly and reassure them” so parents and educators can help kids cope with the pandemic. These tips can be applied to educators, helping students manage traumatic events, such as depression, anxiety, and sexual assault. When recognizing the needs of our students and using detailed resources related to coping with struggling students, teachers naturally become advocates. Once advocacy becomes a mindset, as Fleischer and Garcia point out, a cycle of change can then begin (8). To combat retraumatizing students, teachers should preview reading topics, prior to assignments and discussions. This way, students are aware of the content in advance, as well as available resources if they deem a topic too uncomfortable or triggering. This can be accomplished through privileging student reading choice, or allowing students to choose from a variety of options. Using thoughtful questioning techniques, such as facilitating higher level thinking, to allow your room to be a safe space for students allows for the discussion of difficult topics.

Reading *Speak* helped one of the authors of this essay to feel as if she was “not alone,” to acknowledge the lingering trauma of sexual assault, and to access support and resources. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *The House on Mango Street*, and *Poet X* may be used canonically in other regions of Kentucky, although our pre-service classroom training did not include these texts. Beyond the featured YA books, there are texts that engage the social injustices addressed (and not addressed) in this essay, as well as texts that

focus on the intersectionality between characters' experiences. The list below includes additional reading recommendations.

Additional Reading Recommendations to Facilitate Conversations about Trauma and Marginalization in the High School English Classroom

Channel Miller, *Know My Name: A Memoir* (2019)

In this memoir, Channel Miller recounts her own personal story of sexual assault and her legal fight for justice.

Malla Nunn, *When the Ground is Hard* (2019)

This is a story about a 16 year old girl, attending a Christian boarding school in Swaziland. When Adele Joubert is demoted from her popular friend group and assigned to room with an ostracized, rebellious student at a Keziah Christian Academy, Adele begins to question socioeconomic hierarchies.

Dadib Khorram, *Darius the Great is Not Okay* (2018)

Told from the perspective of a young Iranian-American, this YA novel addresses the struggles of navigating cultural heritage while finding your identity as a teenager.

Amy Lynn Reed, *The Nowhere Girls* (2017)

Told through alternative perspectives, this novel offers a criticism of rape culture and explores sexuality and real life as a teenage girl with brutal honesty.

Nic Stone, *Dear Martin* (2017)

This novel, told from the perspective of an African American teenager, addresses police brutality, racism, and the struggles of young Black people in America.

Angie Thomas, *The Hate U Give* (2017)

Told from the perspective of a young Black woman, this novel tackles the tough but necessary topics of racism and police brutality and the power of speaking up.

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Zoe Mihalicz and Breea Hornback are pre-service teachers, completing their English Teaching degrees at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) in Fall 2021. Bethany Womack and Klaire Compton, recent EKU English Teaching graduates, are beginning their education careers at Hopebridge Autism Therapy Clinic and Madison Central High School, respectively. Their interests in using young adult literature to provide coping mechanisms and to advocate for students who are victims of trauma inform their teaching approaches in the classroom.



The Time Has Always Been Now: Realizations from a White Educator

Daria Ochenkowski

B.C.E. and A.D. are the terms used to describe the meaning before history was recorded and after history started to be recorded. In our lives, there are similar turning points categorized as “life before this event and life after this event.” A college trip to Selma, Alabama, was one of those experiences for me. Being a white female pre-service teacher, I understood that I would not look like a lot of the students I would teach, nor would I have the experiences of many of the students I would teach. Still, my trip became an unexpected catalyst for my journey with a never-ending destination of becoming an anti-racist educator. The two-day trip jump-started a lifetime of unlearning the white savior mentality, the unlearning of my bias, and the unlearning of color blindness. As most life experiences bring significant growth, it begins with great heartbreak; Selma proved to be just that.

Pulling into Selma, my heart sank. Not the “Oh poor you” feeling, but the feeling of an expectation not meeting a reality in an immense way. Selma was a place where history was made, where lives were changed, and chains were broken; on March 7, 1965, just months after the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was passed, John Lewis

and 600 others marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge and faced attacks from law enforcement. Known as “Bloody Sunday,” this galvanized millions across the nation as they watched what happened on their TV screens. In the weeks that would follow, further action would be taken. Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act of 1965. As we drove to our first destination, the National Voting Rights Museum and National Museum for Peace and Justice, my face pressed against the window, I saw buildings upon buildings that had not been given attention for years. The paint was chipping on the sides of houses, the signs of stores were hardly readable, the streets covered in pot holes. A city that holds so much history looked so despondent. The desolation was a greater reflection of our nation’s apparent decision to turn its head away from the racism that has been present for over four hundred years than the events in Selma. Our country always has honored and changed in spurts, like a new year’s resolution, but it has never created a lifestyle. Selma displayed this. The city was disparaged, a spurt of growth came and left.