



Educator Barnes – 12/17/17

In 2007, a black woman named Tarana Burke started the [original Me Too movement](#). The Me Too Movement empowers victims of sexual assault and harassment to speak out in solidarity. In 2017, the movement gained steam when prominent white women began tweeting #MeToo and speaking out about their own stories of survival. *Time Magazine* even named [The Silence Breakers](#) as their “Person of the Year.” Although this has been a watershed moment and we are seeing famous and powerful people’s careers ended because they have sexually assaulted and harassed others, there are still some areas in the #MeToo movement that has yet to come to light and have the same level of importance.

Many times when you hear about sexual misconduct in a school setting, it involves a school employee having inappropriate contact or making comments of a sexual nature to students. What we don't talk about are the students who sexually harass teachers. This is my twelfth year as an educator. I have taught high school students during student teaching and ninth graders in a 6-9 building, but this year is my first year working at a designated high school as a certified teacher. Many of my relatives did not support my transition to my current high school role; I teach English part time and coach teachers in literacy during the rest of my day. Although I am in my mid-thirties, I frequently get mistaken for a student despite the fact that I wear a pants suit almost every day. My youthful appearance and the incidents that happened to me in the past at two different middle schools where I previously worked made some of my friends and family members wonder if I was asking for more harassment stepping into a high school role.

My first year in the classroom was tough. I taught Honors American Studies (a blend between history and English), regular English, and inclusion English. I did my best to teach well and manage my classroom. One day, one of my male students decided to cross the line. He started repeatedly asking me questions about my nipples. Not quietly, but loud enough where everyone in my class could hear. No amount of ignoring him worked. "Come on Mrs. Barnes. I want to know if your nipples are really hard right now? It's a yes or no question." Then, I changed up my strategy. I stopped ignoring him and replied, "Right now we have an assignment to finish. That should be your focus. Do I need to call the office?" After that, he shrugged and finally did his work. I felt uncomfortable and mortified. I was wearing a boring suit and I didn't understand what led him to act in this manner. Later, I wrote him up and the school suspended him for five days.

I was the only black teacher working in this suburban school. This five day suspension sent shock waves through the school. The gossip aftermath was the worst. I overheard one student say to another student, "My parents said she probably was asking for it because kids don't say things like that to teachers unless teachers have invited it." At the end of the school year, I decided to leave this school in the suburbs and I have been an urban educator ever since. Unfortunately, another incident was to come in an urban middle school setting.

A few school years later, another incident occurred. There was a student who many girls had a crush on. Although he was constantly in trouble, many of our middle school girls would swarm around him. In my class on several occasions, I would overhear him saying how fine I was or how good I look to other boys. When I would circulate around the classroom to help students and I passed him, he would lick his lips and wink at me. I had a few conversations with him in the hall where the video cameras were to explain how inappropriate his behavior was and I also called his home. After calling home, the behaviors went away or so I thought; he was working up to a big finale.

Later, when I was reviewing grammar, he started licking his lips at me during the lesson. I told him to stop or I was going to send him to another room to get himself

together. Instead of stopping, he decided to put his hand inside of his pants and began stroking his penis and making inappropriate comments. "Mrs. Barnes forget Mr. Barnes. You know you want this." During the previous incident I described students chuckled, but during this incident students were in shock and looked as uncomfortable as I felt. At that point, I sat down my grammar book, picked up the phone and called the office. He was removed from my room and subsequently suspended. This incident ended up being the last straw because he was constantly in trouble. He didn't return after his suspension because he was expelled.

For both incidents, writing the referral was the worst. Even writing this article isn't pleasant. When you have to sit down and describe how someone (especially a student) has violated you, it is uncomfortable. You wonder if there was something you could have done differently and it changes how you interact with future students. My current high school students know I don't like to be hugged. They don't totally get it, but they respect it. We fist bump, high five and do this weird elbow bump thing, but I choose not to hug my high school students because of how easy it is for someone to suggest you provoked or asked for certain behavior from students.

When I think about the #MeToo movement, I wonder where we have gone wrong in society where men and women feel this behavior is appropriate, where students feel this behavior is okay. My twins boys are six and my husband and I have discussed the need for having open conversations with them about sexual conduct when they are older, so it is clear what actions are wrong and the consequences if they take certain actions. No educator should have to put up with sexual harassment from anyone especially a student. We have to have open dialogues with our youth to stop this behavior while they are young. I believe the adults who are involved in sexual misconduct now probably began back in childhood, possibly in some teacher's classroom.