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“We’re All Mad Here;” Ending the Stigma Around Mental Illness

Rational:

High school education stresses the importance of physical and sexual health. Students are taught sex education and drug and alcohol education; physical education is required from seventh grade until twelfth grade. Now, this is understandable as the percentages of students being affected by these topics are substantial. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, “33% [of students] drank some alcohol” within thirty days prior to the survey. ReCAPP states that, again, in 2015 41% of high school students claimed to have had sexual intercourse. As for drugs, an average of 16% of students can be calculated from the 2015 Monitoring the Future Survey for those that have taken any illicit drug within the last thirty days. Now, these percentages show what students have experienced at least once in the last thirty days, but there is one huge issue that a high percentage of students face, every single day that has no place in the current curriculum. A whopping “20% of [students] live with a mental condition, 11% have a mood disorder, 10% have a behavior or conduct disorder, 8% have an anxiety disorder,” (National Institute of Mental Health). These are conditions that surface any time, anywhere, regardless of the student’s choices. Students must choose to drink, must choose to partake in drug use, choose to have sexual intercourse; there is no choice in mental illness.

By educating students on the topics of mental health and mental illness, teachers create an enlightened environment where students can speak freely about their thoughts and feelings. Bringing these topics into the classroom challenges the stigma around the subject and the fact that no one talks about it. We are seeing more and more students with depression and anxiety; yet nothing is being done to help these students cope.

If teachers spoke about mental illness in the classroom and created a space for students to express their thoughts and experiences with mental illness, what would happen? If teachers informed students about just how common depression is, how many of those students would go on to commit suicide? If we discussed the mentally ill outside of blockading doors to keep them out and perpetuating the fear after a school shooting, how many would feel the need to bring a gun to campus, or think to hurt other students? How many would hurt themselves? How many students could be truly helped by this curriculum?

Chris Crutcher says it best in his Alan Review article, “Good teachers save lives,” (8). Crutcher argues that it is a teacher’s duty to make sure students are being checked in on and challenges teachers to have the courage to start those difficult conversations with students. Teachers have the prime opportunity to introduce these ideas to young adults; students spend approximately seven hours a day, five days a week, thirty-six weeks of the year at school. There is no way in all that time, teachers are unable to notice some of the signs. But how many teachers are trained? How many feel comfortable discussing these topics with their students? Crutcher answers, the “good” ones.

Launching the Unit:

1. What Does MenTal Illness Look Like?

I will put up several headshots of famous individuals on the projector and ask students to write about them. The prompt will state:

“Take a look at all of the people up on the board, what do they all have in common? Who is the your favorite or who do you think is the most successful and why?”

After the students complete their short pre-write, I will have them discuss their answers in a pair-and-share. I will ask students if anyone wants to share what the student wrote or what their pair talked about. Once all of the students who want to share have spoken, I will change the screen to the next slide, revealing the same headshots but with all of them labeled with mental illnesses the famous individual lives with. I will then ask the students if their opinions of the individuals have changed or if anyone finds their favorite person less successful.

1. Respecting Each Other’s Beliefs and Experiences

Before any further conversation even begins, expectations for the students must be set in order to keep everything open and inclusive. It is important to facilitate discussion rather than lead a lecture. As a class, we will discuss what rules must be set and will write these expectations on a large poster sheet that will stay on the wall throughout the unit. I will set a few standard rules that I have previously determined such as no name calling, no foul language or slurs, ‘One Diva, One Mic’ Rule (one speaker at a time/no speaking over others), and everything said by classmates stays confidential. All other rules will be discussed and determined by the students in a whole classroom discussion. Consequences for breaking the rules will be discussed by the students as well but will most likely result in a grade deduction for the unit. I will also discuss my role as a facilitator or referee in the discussions held in class, as well as my legal obligations as a faculty member to report any information on students being a danger to themselves or others.

1. Pre-Writes / Journals

Students will be required to write in their journals throughout the unit. Both in-class pre- writes and take home writing assignments will be assigned. Students will be responsible for having their notebooks in every class and keeping all of their work organized. Journals will be stamped daily end of class for participation credit. They will be collected on the final day of the unit along with the final paper and be worth 25% of the unit grade.

Pre-Writes: 20% (5% each)

1. **What Does Mental Illness Really Look Like:** The first writing prompt explained above.

2. **What Do You Know?:** Students will be asked to make three columns on their page. One will be for Things You Know; the second will be What You Think You Know; and the third will be for Things You Want to Learn.

3. **Personal Reflection:** Students will be prompted to think about a time when they felt like no one was listening to them or believing them and how it made them feel. How does this tie to the short from class?

4. **General Notes:** Students will be encouraged to take notes durning the class discussions about the novel and make a point of noticing certain reoccurring themes or topics.

At Home Writings: 5%

Students will be required to read a second work from a pre-approved YA list at home over the course of the unit. Each novel will have aspects of mental illness in them. Students will keep a journal log as they read, tracking the mental illness throughout the novel. Students will be encouraged to look at how the mental illness is represented and if it complies with or goes against the stigma. Other points to consider are how the illness affects the plotline, where and how often the illness pops up within the novel (timing), and whether the illness is represented clinically or emotionally in the novel. Checks will be done in class with pages in the journal getting stamped for completion. Grading will be participation only as these will be used as notes for the final project the students will complete at the end of the novel.

The Unit

1. “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

I have chosen this short story as the canonical work as it deals directly with one of the main ideas I hope to get across (i.e. ignoring mental illnesses only fuels the fire) and it is a short piece that can be read entirely in class. I will read aloud to the students as they follow along in their own texts, stopping periodically to check for comprehension and ask for clarification from random students. The reading will be spread out through the week to allow for student led discussions in class. Discussions will reflect the students’ reactions and feelings towards the specific section read in class that day and topics will be chosen by them. I will facilitate and regulate discussions by interjecting questions involving the text to refocus if need be and step in when any expectations are broken by students.

1. Individual Novels

Because we will be reading the conical text solely in class, students will be required to choose a book off of the pre-approved list (attached) to read on their own time. No two students will be allowed to choose the same book so on the first day of the unit, a list will be posted on the front board and students’ names will be drawn from a hat to come up and select one of the novels. Students are to read something they have not yet read before; however, it is acceptable to have seen a film adaptation of the novel as many of the listed novels are popular movies. Students will be asked to keep a journal while they read, tracking the representation of mental illness throughout their novel. Students will be responsible for pacing themselves and setting up their own reading goals and timeline for the unit. I will check in individually during class time, roughly half-way through the unit, to make sure they are staying on track.

1. Final Paper

To wrap up the unit, students will be asked to write a final paper. There will be two provided prompts as well as a third option where students can propose an topic to me for the paper instead; this would require an outline of how the paper would be structured as well as enough supporting evidence for the proposed prompt to write a full paper. The first of the provided prompts would be to compare and contrast how mental illness is handled in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the individual YA novel and make an argument as to why these similarities and differences take place (possible topic of stigma of the time or author’s own experience - May require outside research). The second option will be to discuss the role of mental illness in the YA novel of choice and how it helps to develop the plot; consider writing about the illness as a character in itself in order to analyze its role in the novel. All papers regardless of the prompt must be between 1,300 to 1,500 words, typed, MLA format, with a Works Cited page in MLA format as well.

\*Students who receive less than 80% will be given the opportunity to present their arguments to the class in a three to five minute presentation to earn up to 5% extra credit for any other missed points\*

Reflection:

At the end of the unit, the class will have a a chance to reflect on what they have learned throughout the unit. They will be asked to go back through their journals and highlight anything that they had previously written that they no longer agree with or believe and underline anything that they learned from the unit that ended up in their writing. They will then have five minutes to write up to half a page about their experience in this lesson and what they feel they gained in learning about mental health and illness.

Pre-Approved Book List:

*Every Exquisite Thing* by Mathew Quick

*The First Time She Drowned* by Kerry Kletter

*When We Collided* by Emery Lord

*Every Last Word* by Tamara Ireland Stone

*Life Unaware* by Cole Gibsen

*Wintergirls* by Laurie Halse Anderson

*The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky

*It’s Kind of a Funny Story* by Ned Vizzini

*All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven

*Looking for Alaska* by John Green

*Made You Up* by Francesca Zappia

*Just Listen* by Sarah Dessen

*Crank* by Ellen Hopkins

*Cut* by Patricia McCormick

*Will Grayson, Will Grayson* by John Green

*Dr. Bird’s Advice for Sad Poets* by Evan Roskos

*Suicide Notes* by Michael Thomas Ford

*The Impossible Knife of Memory* by Laurie Halse Anderson

*Faking Normal* by Courtney C. Stevens

*This Song Will Save Your Life* by Leila Sales

*OCD Love Story* by Corey Ann Haydu

*Crazy* by Amy Reed

*Schizo* by Nic Sheff

*Get Well Soon* by Julie Halpern

*The Unlikely Hero of Room 13B* by Teresa Toten

*The Rest of Us Just Live Here* by Patrick Ness

*Freaks Like Us* by Susan Vaught

*Out of My Mind* by Sharon M. Draper

*The Boy Book* by E. Lockhart

*The Discarded Ones* by James Tipper

*Scars* by Cheryl Rainfield

*The Program* by Suzanne Young

*Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco X. Stork

*The Half Life of Molly Pierce* by Katrina Leno

*Chopsticks* by Jessica Anthony

*Holding Up the Universe* by Jennifer Niven

*Cracked* by K.M. Walton

*Jerkbait* by Mia Siegert

*Am I Normal Yet?* by Holly Bourne

*What Happened to Lani Garver* by Carol Plum-Ucci

*Everything, Everything* by Nicola Yoon

*Finding Audrey* by Sophie Kinsella

*I’ll Give You the Sun* by Jandy Nelson

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