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ENGL 112B

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Unit of Study: Mental Health

**Rationale:**

Mental health is a significant issue that often does not get the attention it needs to get because of the stigma that still surrounds it. There is an unspoken belief in American society that essentially establishes that something will simply go away and cease to exist if you don’t talk about it. The silence and stigma surrounding mental health do not mean it goes away; it simply means that those who struggle with their mental health have to struggle in silence. Mental health is one of the issues that I feel strongly about because I have personally struggled with depression since I was very young. I believe it’s essential for kids to understand that if they are struggling they don’t have to do it in silence. When I was in high school, I found comfort in literature that showed that not everything is happiness and rainbows, which is why I have developed a strong connection with *The Perks of Being a Wallflower,* among other books. Exposure to books that deal with real-life issues helps students understand that they are not alone, that other people have felt the way they feel and that it is okay for them to reach out for help.

**Focus Text**

The text that will be the main focus of this unit is *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* by Joanne Greenberg. This 1964 book is a fictional autobiography that focuses on a young girl who is diagnosed with schizophrenia and her struggles with it. Recently it has been discussed that the author and the main character should not have been diagnosed with schizophrenia but instead with severe depression. This is a portrayal of mental illness that will be interesting to analyze because of the misdiagnosis.

**Intro To the Unit**

In order to introduce my students to this unit, I would like to begin by sharing some spoken word poetry that talks about mental health. I believe poetry is a fundamental part of literature and I also think that sharing poems from a variety of authors can further establish that mental health is something that a lot of people struggle with. Some of the poems I would like to share as an introduction for this unit are “Explaining My Depression to My Mother” and “The Loneliest Sweet Potato” by Sabrina Benaim because they touch on themes relevant to those whose struggle with their mental health. These two poems talk about things such as feeling sad out of nowhere, feeling like the sadness takes over your life, and how difficult it is to discuss your mental health when you feel like no one around you truly understands you. After watching the videos as a class I would ask them to discuss with one another what they thought about the poems, this is to gauge their understanding of the subject matter if any of them feel uncomfortable with it. This also to gauge whether I can continue to use more spoken word poetry throughout the rest of the unit or if it’s something that didn’t work. After this, I would move on to introducing the text *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* by Joanne Greenberg written under the pen name Hannah Green. For this introduction to the text, I would focus less on the text itself and more on giving background information about this author. I think this is important because the book was a fictionalized autobiography so it is key to understand the context that inspired the literature.

**Through The Text**

Depending on whether or not the poetry activity was successful I would incorporate it to the rest of the unit. This means that I would start each class session by playing a poem that focuses on mental health. Some of the other poems I would like to incorporate are “You Can’t Be Depressed” and “I don’t need to have a better day I need to feel better about this one” by Neil Hilborn. Neil Hilborn is an incredible spoken word artist whose poems all deal with mental illness but focus not only on how awful it is but involves the importance of staying hopeful, and appreciating the good things in life which are often what keeps us going. Another poem I would like to share is “When the crazy came back” by Brenna Towry, this poem discusses a part of recovery that isn’t often mentioned which is that recovery isn’t a straight path, there will be a lot of time when you will relapse, recovery doesn’t mean you will never struggle with your mental health again, it means you will never lot those struggles beat you.

For the text itself, I would try to do the majority of the reading in-class. I want to do most of the reading of the book in class because I also want to add another reading component to the unit. I would like to do a book club activity in which I divide the class into four groups and each group focuses on reading a specific book that deals with mental illness and then coming to class to discuss it. I would like to incorporate other books into the unit because I think it’s important that these kids get exposure to different texts that portray mental illness because authors can portray them in very different ways. These complementary books will be more recent which will help in analyzing whether the portrayal of mental illness has shifted over the years. For both the focus text and the book club books I would like to have my student create patient logs for the main characters. This is an activity we did my senior year of high school when reading *The Catcher in the Rye*, this activity consists of taking something that happens in the book or that the main characters say and writing about it from the perspective of a psychologist listening to a patient. This activity would serve as a reading log in order to make sure the kids are keeping up with all the reading. At the end of the unit, I would have the students write an essay comparing the portrayal of mental illness in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* and their book club book and discuss which one they believed did a better job at portraying mental illness.

**Complementary Works:**

* *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chobosky

This novel is a coming of age story which deals with more than just the everyday trials and tribulations of being a teenager. The book follows Charlie and his journey learning how to cope with his past and not letting that past define him. This novel deals with issues such as anxiety, depression, sexual abuse and how important it is to not let the past define who you are.

* *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson

This story follows Melinda’s journey as she navigates becoming a social outcast at school after calling the police at a high school party. Melinda struggles with PTSD after being raped at the party and must fight her inner demons to get her voice back and begin her healing process. This novel is important to read because of it’s theme of not allowing other people to take your voice away and how important it is to reach out for help when you need it.

* *The Way I used to be* by Amber Smith

This is another novel that focuses on PTSD and depression. This novel follows Eden’s life changes thoroughly after her brother’s best friend rapes her. Eden fearing that no one will believe what happened to her turns to self-destructive behavior to ease her pain. This novel is important to read because it focuses on how much-unprocessed pain can affect a person and the lesson that it isn’t what happens to you that makes you who you are but how you react to it.

* *All The Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven

The novel focuses on Finch and Violet’s story, two teens who meet at the top of the school tower the day they both decide to end their life. The novel follows their journey focusing on overcoming their demons and coming out on top. This book is essential to read because it essentially shows that the people who try their hardest to help others are oftentimes the ones who are struggling the most and need the most help.

Works Cited

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Chbosky, Stephen. The Perks of Being a Wallflower. Pocket Books, 1999

Niven, Jennifer. *All the Bright Places*. Thorndike Press, a Part of Gale, a Cengage Company, 2020.

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