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Suicide in Literature: How Opening the Conversation in Classrooms Could Save Lives

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Suicide is the second leading cause of death from ages 10-24. In the United States, an average of 3,470 young adults in grades 9-12 attempt suicide every day. So why is Romeo and Juliet the only literature taught in high school classrooms that involves suicide? The current English curriculum is severely lacking in content pertaining to modern day issues, suicide being one of them. The following is a proposed unit on suicide in literature, to be taught at the 9th grade level. Studies show that 4 out of 5 students who attempt suicide display clear warning signs, so this unit is designed to educate students on warning signs, mental health, to open the conversation about suicide, and provide students with resources that could save lives.

**Objective**

Provide students with a more comprehensive understanding of suicide, prevention, and awareness, and create an opportunity for students to discuss suicide in a safe and supportive environment.

**Mini-Lessons & Safety Precautions**

Mini-lessons will be 10-15 minutes in length and serve the purpose of educating students on different aspects of suicide awareness and prevention. The first mini-lesson is the most crucial, as it will acknowledge the seriousness of the content that will be covered in this unit. The first mini-lesson will provide students with available resources if they are struggling with the content, suicidal thoughts, or mental health in general. It will be taught with the help of a school counselor; so, there will be an additional ally during the unit from the start, and know who to talk to if they need to. Mini-lessons will begin with statistics, general information and vocabulary that will be relevant in the unit and will progress in nature to match the pace of the students’ readings.

**Standards Alignment**

The following are National Common Core Standards as set forth by the Common Core State Standards Initiative that this unit fulfills:

**English Language Arts Standards: Reading**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Standard</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Language Arts Standard</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Language Arts Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>LITERACY.W.9.1</td>
<td>J Was Here</td>
<td>By: Gayle Forman</td>
<td>POV: Loss to Suicide</td>
<td>Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>LITERACY.W.9.2</td>
<td>My Heart and Other Black Holes</td>
<td>By: Jasmine Warga</td>
<td>POV: Suicidal Ideation/Suicide Attempt</td>
<td>Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>LITERACY.W.9.3</td>
<td>Girl, Interrupted</td>
<td>By: Susanna Kaysen</td>
<td>POV: Suicide Attempt</td>
<td>Survivor Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>LITERACY.W.9.4</td>
<td>The Memory of Light</td>
<td>By: Francesca Zappulli</td>
<td>POV: Suicide Attempt</td>
<td>Survivor Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>LITERACY.W.9.10</td>
<td>Thirteen Reasons Why</td>
<td>By: Jay Asher</td>
<td>POV: Suicide Victim</td>
<td>Recommendation: Not Suitable for Classroom Use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9-10</td>
<td>LITERACY.W.9.11</td>
<td>Suicide Notes</td>
<td>By: Michael Thomas Ford</td>
<td>POV: Suicide Attempt Survivor Recommendation: Suitable for Classroom Use</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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**Unit Outline**

- Choice Book One
  - Students will select a book from the list given.
  - They will work in book groups with other students who have selected the same book.
  - Each book group will create a reading schedule, assigning which pages or chapters they will read for which days, to which they agree to adhere in order to complete the reading in a timely manner.
  - Students will each receive a journal and will create a journal entry for each chapter or section that they read (W.9-10.10). Their journal entry should include:
    - their overall reaction to the chapters or pages that they read, and a question for their book group pertaining to the reading they completed.
  - Class each day will start with a different mini-lesson on suicide and mental health. Mini-lessons may include, identifying warning signs, healthy coping mechanisms, available support systems, and other relevant topics. Students will draw upon their knowledge from these mini-lessons to write a paper at the end of the unit.
  - After the daily mini-lesson, students break off into their book groups and discuss their assigned reading. Each student will ask the group their proposed question, and jot down answers group members offer in their journals.
  - Students will then spend time discussing the mini-lesson, and how it relates to their book, and record their thoughts in their journals. Journals will be collected at the end of class for participation.
  - Steps 4-7 will be repeated each class until all groups have finished reading their books.

- Choice Book Two
  - Students will select a second choice book.
  - Students will repeat the steps above for their second choice book, but will read the second book at a slightly more accelerated pace.
  - Students will use their existing knowledge from the mini-lessons to come up with discussion questions more relevant to suicide, and be able to analyze the books through a more informed lens.
  - Students will dedicate more focus to literary aspects such as character development, plot advancement, and theme recognition/analysis.

**Final Paper**

The teacher will return the student’s journals. Each student will use their journal entries to individually compose a paper comparing the two books that they read. The specific assignment will be as follows:

**Books**

(see handout for in-depth summary, review, and recommendations)

**My Book**

Three Eighty One

By: Paige McKinley

POV: Suicidal Ideation/Suicide Attempt Survivor

Three Eighty One chronicles Alyson Summer’s journey as a high school freshman, as she grapples with the beginnings of depression, self-harm and suicide. The book is told in split perspectives between Alyson and her best friend Jay. It offers a unique dual-perspective of what it looks like from the outside for someone to struggle with mental health in a cruel and unforgiving high school environment, and what it is like to experience it first-hand.

I began writing Three Eighty One as a freshman in high school in 2010 as I struggled with my own depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation. I wrote a chapter a week for two and a half years, but didn’t submit work on it until Fall of 2017. My hope for Three Eighty One is to create a story in which the reader can relate to either one of the characters if they are experiencing mental health issues, or if they are watching a loved one go through it, and learn from both characters’ successes and failures.

**Project Semicolon**

“Your Story Isn’t Over Yet”

What is a Semicolon?

In writing, a semicolon is used where a sentence could have ended, but did not, and continues instead. In Project Semicolon, the semicolon represents where a life could have ended, but continued instead.

What is Project Semicolon?

Project Semicolon is a non-profit organization dedicated to suicide prevention. The mission of project semicolon is to “help reduce suicide in the world through connected mission and greater access to information and resources.”

**How Does it Relate to the Unit?**

Project Semicolon is a tool that “suicide is preventable and everyone has a role to play in preventing suicide. My personal role in preventing suicide is creating this unit to bring student’s attention to suicide, open the conversation around suicide, and provide students with resources to combat suicide before they need them.”

**References**


**Acknowledgements**

On January 24, 2016 one of my best friends, Megan Lynn Durand, committed suicide. It was the single most horrific event of my young adult life, as I mourned her loss among families, friends, and entire community. In the year that followed, four more students in the Acton-Boxborough community committed suicide. The youngest was only ten years old. My grief-stricken hometown was suffering a suicide epidemic, and I couldn’t help but wonder, what could have been done to prevent this? Using my background in English, and Education, this is how I hope to combat teen suicide.

I would like to dedicate this project to my sunshine, Meg Durand, and to every teenager struggling with mental health, and suicide.

You are not alone.