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Valuing Student and Teacher Voices: Using Literacy Quadrants to Disrupt Notions of Stigma in Young Adult Literature Focused on Mental Illness.

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Exploring Emotion, Mental Illness, and Grief in English Education

**Valuing Student and Teacher Voices: Using Literacy Quadrants
to Disrupt Notions of Stigma
in Young Adult Literature Focused on Mental Illness**

National Council of Teachers of English Conference, Houston 2018

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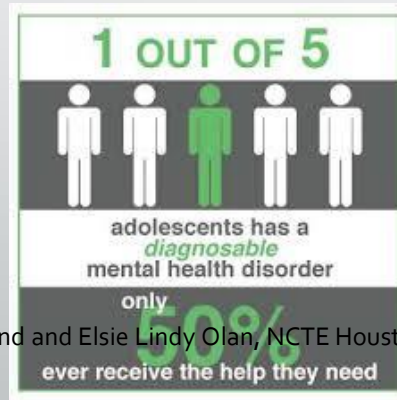
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Mental Illness

- Students' literacy quadrant drawings (from two different universities) demonstrate their clear understanding of the stigma associated with mental illness (e.g., negative words & behaviors).

- According to research from the National Institute of Mental Health - which estimates that 1 in 5 teens and 1 in 25 adults has a serious mental disorder, teachers **will** have students in their classes for whom mental illness is a reality.

1 OUT OF 5
adolescents has a
diagnosable
mental health disorder
only 50%
ever receive the help they need

Approximately
1 in 25
adults in the U.S. experiences a serious mental illness in a given year.

Mentall Illness

- Teacher candidates can address this issue through literature included in their curriculum, especially with young adult texts that feature mental illness as a theme (e.g., *Turtles All the Way Down* - OCD; *Challenger Deep* - Schizophrenia; *Highly Illogical Behavior* - anxiety; *Girl in Pieces* - self-injury/suicide; *When Reason Breaks* - depression/suicide).

- Literacy quadrants can be a key practice in confronting the stigma associated with mental illness.

- Definition of *"literacy quadrants"* - adapted from the Frayer model (1969), literacy quadrants include prompts for each quadrant about students' thinking, writing, identity, and cultural awareness. Literacy quadrants are used as a metacognitive tool that helped students to explore their cultures, learning, and literate lives.

Literacy Quadrants Data Analysis

Semiotics - Morris (1964)
**Symbols - Langer (1948)**

- Images - What images say about students' perceptions of mental illness (key terms, emotions)
- Language - What words say about students' perceptions of mental illness (themes)

Literacy Quadrants convey students' perceptions of mental illness and other social issues, their knowledge of literature (including YA texts), and their cultural beliefs/backgrounds.

Literacy Quadrants Instructional Sequence

- **Upper Left Quadrant**
  - **Draw a picture that depicts mental illness**
- **Upper Right Quadrant**
  - **Draw a picture about how the characters with mental illness are portrayed in literature (canon and YA lit)**
- **Bottom Left Quadrant**
  - **Draw a picture showing your favorite text featuring a character with mental illness**
- **Bottom Right Quadrant**
  - **Draw images that reflect your concerns/difficulties with teaching texts about characters with mental illness**
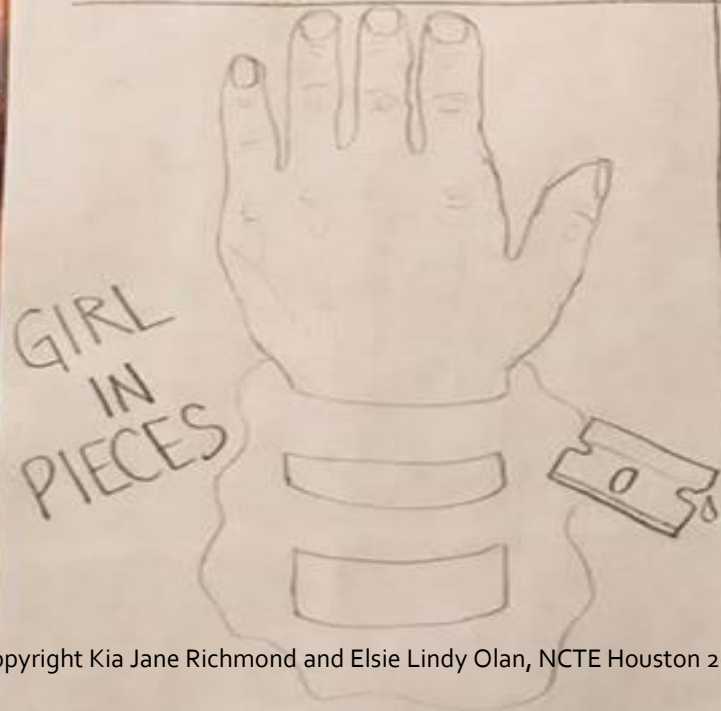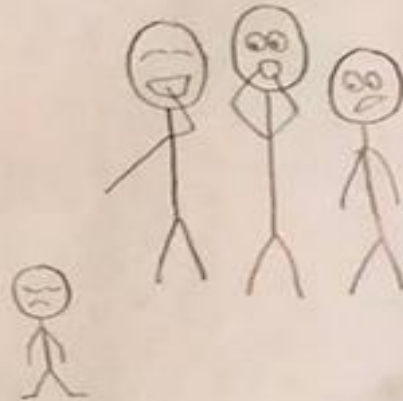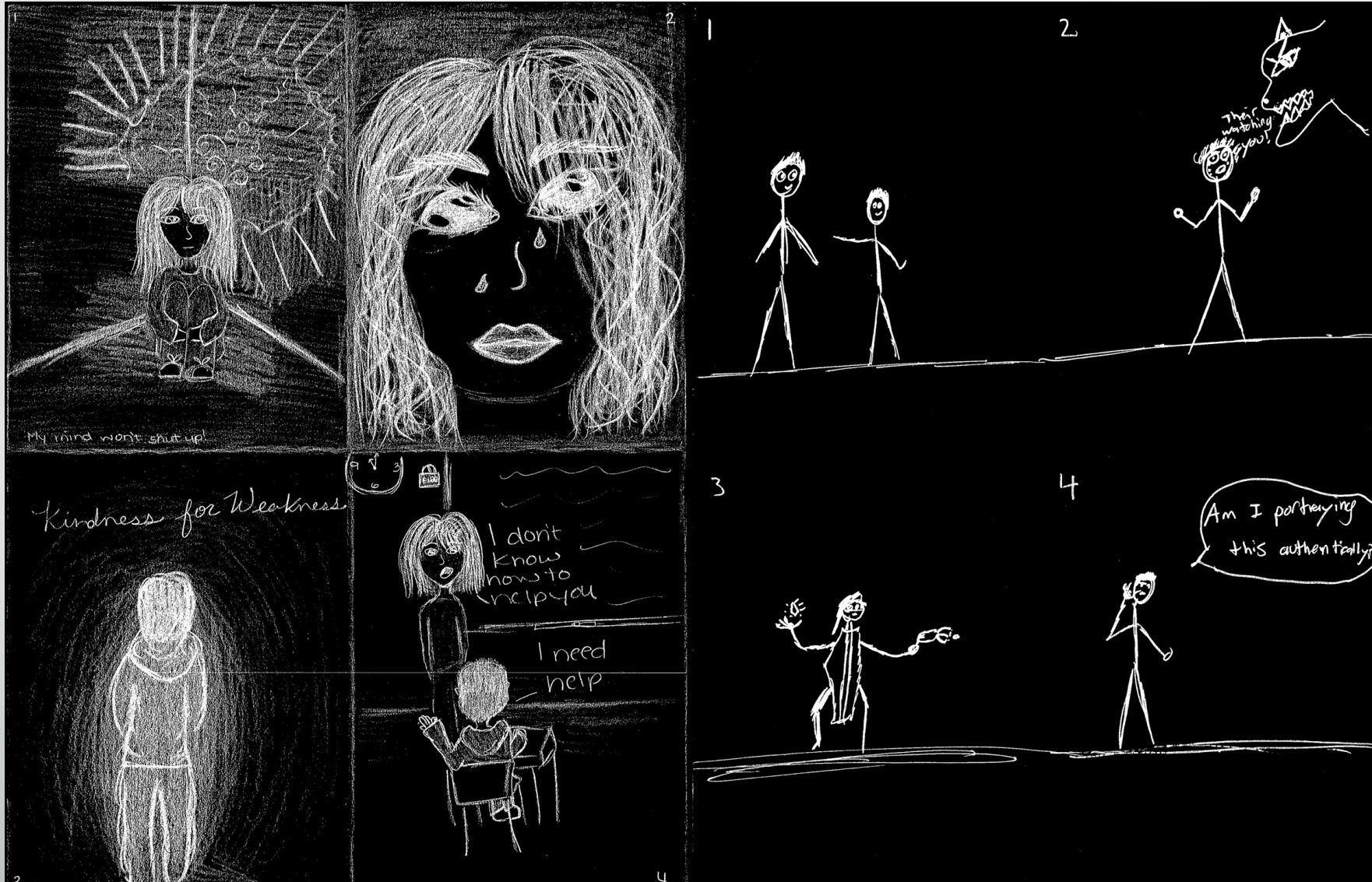
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Common Themes Identified

1. Mental illness is having 2 sides:

   a. Internal/external

   b. Private/public

   c. Internal conflict/brave face

   d. Conceal truth/pretend

   (Related – doesn't want world to know about private side)

2. Feeling lonely, excluded, isolated, face in the crowd, misunderstood – related to bullying, constant questioning, struggling, trapped, lost, feeling helpless, falling apart, racing thoughts

3. Negative emotion or thoughts such as sadness, angry, mad, unhappy, upset, frustrated, confused, unfocused, conflicted, uncertainty, fears, attacked

4. Popular books mentioned – *13 Reasons Why, Girl in Pieces, Perks of Being a Wallflower, Looking for Alaska*

5. Difficult to talk about mental illness – suffer in silence; people are opposed to the topic

Sample Key Terms (emotions, mental illnesses)

Lonely/Loneliness/ALone in a Crowd

Struggling

Racing thoughts

Sadness

Darkness

Inside

Conceal unhappy

Negative emotions

Brave face

Pretend

Sensitive

Frustrated

Fears

Helpless

Confused

Mad

Violence

Trapped

Isolated

Crying

Mixed emotions

Upset

Exclusion

Difficult topic

Opposed

Bullying/Retaliating

Lost

Conflicted

Falling apart

Doesn't want world to know

Depression

Mood swings

Anxiety

Eating disorder

Bipolar disorder

Sample Key Terms (emotions, mental illnesses)

My mind won't shut up

Kindness for weakness

I need help

I don't know how to help you

On the inside

Misunderstood

Everyday people

Real problems

Anxiety

Why?

I'm not good enough

Mental illness

This is a sensitive topic

How can you talk about what you don't know?

Sad/misfortunate

Bad/or/crazy

It's poison

Do it!

They're watching! They want to hurt you!

Look here

_____'s acting funny! What's wrong with _____?

13 reasons why

Perks of being a wallflower

Looking for Alaska

Significant Statements from Data

1.   Having a mental illness is related to an internal/external conflict.

2.   Mental illnesses are associated with negative emotions and behaviors/actions.

3.   Mental illness is difficult to talk about; people are often opposed to the topic.

4.   There are popular young adult books that focus on mental illness.

Statements' relationships to dominant narrative

The statements perpetuate the dominant narrative about mental illness.

Stereotypes of individuals with mental disorders contribute to stigmatizing behaviors.

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (Canada) reports common misconceptions about individuals with mental illness include believing that they are

- "all potentially violent and dangerous"
- "responsible for their condition" and
- "have nothing positive to contribute." (2001)

Likewise, research on public stigma toward mental illness in the U.S. finds that stigmatizing beliefs about the dangerousness of individuals with mental illness have risen over time and that beliefs of "shame, blame, incompetency, punishment, and criminality of people with mental illness are common."

Results

How do literacy quadrants disrupt notions of stigma in young adult literature specifically focused on mental illness?

1. The creation of drawings helps students unpack their notions about mental illness (the images are pictures of their understandings).
2. Engaging students in dialogue about the drawings (the next step we would take in the classroom) helps students identify their values and identify stigma.
3. Using young adult literature can help students to revisit their biases and position them in relation to literature and to their world.

Statements' relationship to dominant narrative and research on mental illness

Since 2012, there has been a renaissance of interest in mental illness in young adult literature (e.g., publications in *Study and Scrutiny; Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy; Language Arts Journal of Michigan; School Library Journal; Journal of Popular Culture, International Journal of Literary Theory)*.

Our study is supported by Kia's research on the issue,

which is included in this fall's *ALAN Review*

(a special issue on "The Psychology of YA Literature),

and in her new book, due out next month from

ABC-CLIO (Libraries Unlimited Press).

Kia Jane Richmond

MENTAL ILLNESS in Young Adult Literature

Exploring Real
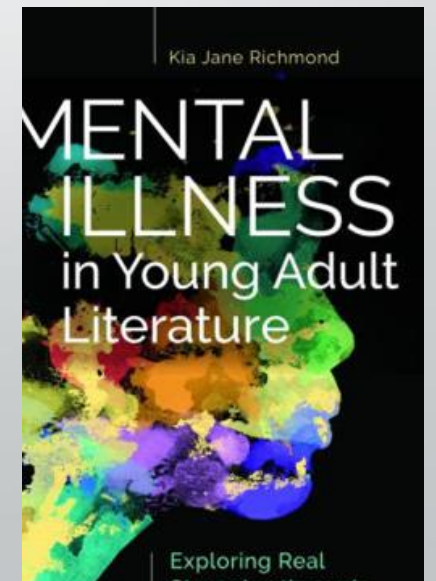
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Thank you!

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