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About This Issue: What Mental Illness Means

LISA SCHADE ECKERT AND ROBERT ROZEMA, LAJM CO-EDITORS

We don't usually write introductions to themed issues, instead letting our contributors speak for themselves. However, we were impressed with the breadth of interpretations of the term *mental illness* and, at the same time, at the element of risk that seemed to surround submission to a journal themed on mental illness. We, therefore, are moved to address several issues here as well as introduce the authors who raised them.

Linda Sirois, whose son was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder at a young age, compounded by a traumatic brain injury when he was eleven, provides insights from the perspective of a knowledgeable and experienced parent. She shares details about the journey through middle and high school, including some of the research that helped her advocate for her son. In doing so, she provides crucial insights for teachers of all grade levels and offers a framework for these discussions from the parents' perspective.

Secrecy and shame make the stigma more painful—or as Linda puts it, “the lack of safety to disclose has been more painful for him and our family than the mental illness itself. The silence can be terrifying.” Sirois notes that parents may try to avoid stigmatizing their mentally ill children by resisting IEP and special education labels. But she credits a teacher who understood what her son was up against, a teacher who correctly advised her to get him under the protection of a proper IEP to guard his rights; teachers and administrators who did not understand her son's special needs “could say anything and do anything to him.” Sirois's son was fortunate to have parents who were strong advocates—what about kids who don't have advocates? Too often, the resulting options become corrections, even prison, punishing the irregular behavior rather than addressing the underlying medical reasons for it.

At the same time, teachers must be ready to handle issues surrounding mental illness, including lack of funding for support services, the responsibility for identifying individual

triggers for affected students, dealing with IEPs, school safety, and many more. A teacher who is trained in teaching English can suddenly find herself having to interpret symptoms and behaviors of trauma, and this task seems more likely for English teachers, who deal with community, communication, and the reading and writing of language. As Katie Sluiter and Rachel Kooiker point out, the very nature of teaching English taps into human pain, to make it a safe place to facilitate good discussions. Mitra Dunbar and W. Douglas Baker suggest that new teachers would do well to think about their own emotional lives as inextricable parts of their personas and pedagogies.

Yet a teacher is not *required* to disclose personal experiences and such discussion may feel perilous, especially to a novice teacher who is still developing a sense of identity in the classroom. Does dealing with mental illness always require personal disclosure? How does a teacher who is unwilling, unable, or simply without personal experience open discussion? The answer for several of our contributors is young adult literature because the genre often addresses difficult social and personal issues. In this issue, several educators offer teaching ideas, pedagogical evidence, and expert advice for teaching understanding of the manifestations and underlying issues of mental illness.

This issue provides many suggestions for including young adult literature that addresses mental illness in the ELA classroom. Robert Rozema, for example, argues that one developmental disability, autism, is consistently misrepresented in adolescent fiction. Beth Murray and Spencer Salas demonstrate how to dramatize the young adult novel *Crazy*, and Sierra Holmes reviews four young adult novels dealing with mental illness.

Of course, the subject of mental illness is also present in classic works of literature. Jeremy Fielder describes how he begins a literature circle unit on Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* by sharing his personal story as a springboard to encourage “real-world literacy” and authentic discussion of issues

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like Lennie's mental impairment in his ninth-grade English classroom. Gregory Shafter argues that canonical texts such as *Hamlet*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and *The Bluest Eye* can help students recongize how madness and sanity are highly politicized terms.

Bullying and microaggression compound the effects of mental illness, disability and difference for adolescents, as Kia Jane Richmond illustrate in her piece, eloquently connecting cultural responsivity to include students with mental illness and disabilities. Amy Masko makes a similar case for cultural responsiveness and literature as a vehicle for learning empathy and addressing issues of racially motivated microagressions—literary experience can mitigate by enabling a vicarious experience.

We thank all of the authors contributing to this issue and hope their insights provide support and inspiration to teachers at all grade levels.

—The Editors