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This issue: ***Mental Health and the English Classroom***

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New England Association of Teachers of English

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Who are we?

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From the Editor

Across New England's secondary schools, English language arts teachers are experiencing a major shift: student mental health has emerged as one of the most important educational concerns of our era. Even in communities recognized for strong public schools, increasing levels of anxiety, depression, social isolation, and emotional fatigue are shaping daily classroom experiences. Teachers feel this transformation acutely—not only in the visible struggles of students, but also in the more subtle signs that appear in writing, discussion, and the stories students share. ELA classrooms have long served as spaces where young people confront complex emotions, grapple with identity, and examine human experience. Today, that work is more vital than ever.

This issue of *The Leaflet* explores the intersection of literacy and student wellness, encouraging teachers to consider both the challenges and opportunities present at this critical moment. New England teachers face unique regional circumstances: shifting demographics in rural communities, increased academic demands in suburban districts, and growing inequities in urban schools. Yet across these varied settings, teachers consistently identify similar student needs: a desire for connection, meaningful expression, and environments that support vulnerability.

English teachers are uniquely positioned to respond. Through literature, students engage with characters who experience insecurity, grief, resilience, and hope. Through writing, they develop voice, agency, and self-reflection. Through discussion, they learn to listen, empathize, and articulate previously unspoken thoughts. These instructional moments are not ancillary to the curriculum; they are essential elements of humanizing education.

As you read this issue, we hope you discover both practical strategies and renewed affirmation of your vital role. Through fostering students' emotional and intellectual development, ELA teachers help create the conditions in which learning—and healing—can flourish.

Thank you for supporting NEATE.

Mark A. Fabrizi
The Leaflet Editor

Strength in Partnership

How an ELA Teacher and School Counselor Co-Led a Mental Health Literacy Unit

Brooke Eisenbach, Brianna Taylor, and Juliana Jones

Research from the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2020) shows that in the United States, one in six adolescents between the ages of twelve and seventeen has experienced a major depressive episode. Additionally, nearly half of all adolescents have faced a mental health disorder at some point in their lives (National Institute of Mental Health, 2024), underscoring what has become a national crisis. A recent U.S. Surgeon General's report recognized the severity of adolescents' mental health needs and outlined systemic strategies for addressing them (Office of the Surgeon General, 2021). The effect of mental health on educational achievement is substantial for a number of children and adolescents, with estimates revealing that over 21 percent of adolescents between the ages of 13 and 18 experience a serious mental health disorder during their youth (Frauenholtz, et al., 2017; Merikangas et al., 2010).

As individuals invested in the education and health of young adolescents, we (a teacher educator, middle school teacher, and middle school counselor) wanted to work together to bring a greater awareness and understanding of mental illness and mental health into the classroom. In partnering to teach mental health literacy (MHL) through an exploration of A.S. King's *The Year We Fell from Space* (2019), we endeavored to weave the central pillars of MHL into ELA standards–based instruction. In this article, we share a firsthand collaborative experience and call upon fellow educators and social support staff to identify ways in which they might effectively engage with one another to enhance learners' MHL through ELA classroom instruction and activity.

MENTAL HEALTH LITERACY IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

The World Health Organization [WHO] (2022) defines mental health as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (para. 1). Mental health literacy (MHL) speaks to the knowledge and understanding of mental health and mental health supports through four essential pillars of knowledge and action: 1) understanding how one can obtain and maintain positive mental health; 2) understanding assorted mental health disorders and their treatments; 3) decreasing the stigma associated with mental disorders; and, 4) enhancing knowledge of help-seeking behaviors and supports (Kutcher et al., 2016).

Research reveals the ways in which MHL holds potential to decrease stigma, promote early identification of and intervention for mental illness, and encourage individuals to obtain necessary mental health support (Anwar & Jain, 2025; Beukema et al., 2022; Dias et al., 2018; Furnham & Swami, 2018; Miller et al., 2019). We know that the stigma associated with mental illness can be changed through education that challenges harmful stereotypes (Mumbauer & Kelchner, 2018). Young adult literature (YAL) can be an effective tool for leveraging psychoeducation and combating this stigma.

Many middle schools utilize a teaming structure that incorporates interdisciplinary collaboration among educators

Literature can serve as a safe gateway for exploring and discussing mental health topics (Golden et al., 2021; Kohm et al., 2016; Peters, 2015; Stratford et al., 2020). Rather than ask that students make themselves vulnerable in self-disclosing their own experiences with mental illness or challenges with their mental health, readers can engage with stories to normalize the conversation (de Graaf et al., 2012; Corrigan et al., 2012).

A CASE FOR INTERPROFESSIONAL COLLABORATIONS

Professional collaborations within the middle school setting is not uncommon. In fact, many middle schools utilize a teaming structure that incorporates interdisciplinary collaboration amongst educators (McEwin et al., 2003; Thompson & Homestead, 2004). For the purpose of our collaboration, we refer to the intentional practice of educational stakeholders (teacher and counselor) working together through communication, action, and decision-making to achieve the shared purpose of enriching students' MHL through the study of literature (Croker et al. 2009). The roles are mutual and share in their arrangement and intention, as opposed to unilateral (Croker et al. 2012). Both parties engaged in this collaboration from a team perspective, leveraging one another's professional background to effectively weave the pillars of MHL within the study of symbolism, textual analysis and support, and characterization (Owens-King, 2024). Such interprofessional collaborations have been shown to positively contribute to and strengthen a focus on students' psychological health and well-being (Bates et al., 2019; Bryan et al., 2020; Testa, 2025).

Students strengthened their literary analysis skills while nurturing their understanding of mental health

Collaboration is critical to ensuring the relevance, sustainability, and feasibility of strategies to address MHL in the classroom. The school's social support staff play an integral part of fostering positive youth development. For this reason, it is essential that these educational stakeholders are actively engaged in incorporating MHL into schools (Marinucci et al., 2022). Research reveals the ways in which MHL can be incorporated into the curriculum by social support staff to support adolescents' knowledge of mental health and increase help-seeking behaviors (Jorm, 2012; Marinucci,et al., 2023; Weare, 2017). In an effort to encourage exploration of narrative alongside an emphasis on MHL, we engaged in a year-long collaborative endeavor to bring this knowledge into the middle grades ELA classroom.

SHARING OUR COLLABORATION

Our collaboration on an MHL unit within the 7th-grade ELA curriculum grew out of our (Brianna and Juliana) ongoing commitment to creating a supportive, student-centered learning environment and a shared interest in supporting students through SEL work. Working on this unit together felt like a natural extension of the way we were already approaching teaching and supporting students. It was meaningful work, and its success depended on both of us being invested in the planning, the rollout, and the unit's overall goals.

We started planning over the summer by looking at several possible texts and creating a realistic timeline that matched what each of us could commit to within the reality of our roles and work within the school. In the end, we chose *The Year We Fell from Space* (King, 2019) as the pilot text for our introductory MHL unit. Its themes, characters, and portrayal of mental health experiences felt relevant for many of our 7th graders, offering a strong foundation for both academic learning and conversations about mental health.

In February, we felt the students and the cultivated class community were ideal for us to begin implementing the unit. As we engaged in the unit, we identified a balance that worked for pairing literacy instruction with intentional social–emotional and mental health learning. For the purpose of our collaboration, we decided to allocate more direct instructional time to literacy instruction to ensure clear alignment with our district's English Language Arts (ELA) competencies.

By focusing on the development of literary themes in the novel, students strengthened their literary analysis skills while nurturing their understanding of mental health in a thoughtful, age-appropriate way. After facilitating class discussions about the protagonist's evolving character, the shifting narrative structure, and the metaphorical weight of stars and space, our students discovered how authors used craft to reflect relatable emotional experiences. Further, our students began to understand that readers can trace universal messages, or themes, in the narratives they read. This made their citation of text evidence richer

and more thoughtful because they were able to connect the words King wrote to the message she was attempting to convey.

For the MHL component of this work, we emphasized the following four pillars of MHL: understanding how to achieve and maintain good mental health, understanding mental disorders and their treatments, reducing the stigma associated with mental disorders, and increasing the effectiveness of help-seeking.

In our co-taught introduction to the MHL unit, we thought it was important to include the following information for our young scholars: literacy standards, inclusive language, definitions of diagnoses, understanding mental health stigma, and access to support. This introduction offered students a glimpse of the objectives of our unit and the nature of our collaboration. They were able to see how we would work together to guide them through the novel and the unit's ELA and MHL focus.

Students had dedicated time for ELA academic lessons that encouraged them to closely engage with the text (with time allotted for reading), while weekly counselor-led lessons focused on the assigned reading through a mental health lens. These sessions included discussion, reflection, and hands-on activities that helped students connect more deeply with the material and better understand the unit's themes. For example, students analyzed and discussed mental health themes present in the first 73 pages of the book. They would then have a large-group discussion led by Brie, with questions like: How does Liberty deal with her parents' separation? What emotions does she express? What signs of stress or anxiety do you notice in the characters so far? And, how does Liberty communicate her feelings?

After the discussion, students were given a brain break (body movement of some kind, word puzzle, classroom basketball knockout, logic puzzle, go noodle, or rock-paper-scissors tournament). Lastly, students were asked to participate in an activity to create "Emotion Constellations" that represent characters' feelings in the story. This activity built on the novel's focus on constellations and symbolism.

Students designed their own, original constellation and identified a quote from the story to support their idea. The activity not only incorporated students' understanding of mental health and emotions but also aligned with their knowledge of characters and their skills in citing textual evidence to support claims. Overall, we remained mindful and sensitive of student needs and experiences when discussing the array of mental health topics and their connections to the story.

Throughout the unit collaboration, we engaged in regular check-ins on the unit's pacing, reading time, and final project expectations and goals. We would re-vamp and pivot lessons and discussions based on our observations of class dynamics, student groupings, students' demonstration of learning, and their progression with the text. For instance, we became aware that several students were struggling with the reading expectations, leaving them unprepared for class or small-group discussions. So, we created engaging choice boards for learners who had completed the reading, while offering other students additional class time to finish their reading assignments. Another example of a pivot occurred when students needed more instruction on citing textual evidence and connecting it to their theme analysis. Brie was very accommodating, as her schedule was a bit more flexible than Juliana's.

In many ways, Juliana supported the mental health and SEL pieces more organically than Brie could support the ELA work. For instance, Juliana used the mirrors/windows/sliding glass doors framework developed by literacy scholar Ruth Sims Bishop (1990) to gently and respectfully have students engage in personal reflection. This framework invites students to think of the novel as a mirror into their own lives, a window into the lives of others, or a sliding glass door to transport them in the world of the story. Students reacted with both laughter and empathy when Liberty, out of anger, pain, and confusion, threw a toaster through the window. Juliana asked students to write a journal entry about their own experience with these emotions. By exploring the connections between the novel and their own lives,

students reported both offering and receiving more empathy than during past novel units.

For the culminating project, students were asked to write a formal theme paragraph and create an infographic or mini-project linking their key takeaways about MHL, positive and actionable messages about reducing stigma, seeking support, or self-care, and their demonstration of mastery in paragraph structure, identification of theme, and use of textual supports. Students were asked to use apps such as Canva, Piktochart, or Google Slides to ensure their final projects were visually engaging for their audiences. We intentionally designed this activity to give students a hands-on MHL experience that directly connects to the text while reinforcing proper citation skills to address the ELA aspect of this work. The summative projects they produced were thoughtful, meaningful, and truly impressive, reminding us of the power of combining creativity, critical thinking, and collaboration.

Overall, this partnership created a supportive, responsive learning environment where students felt safe, seen, guided, and understood. Their learning extended far beyond the unit itself, as students could be heard using the language of MHL to express kindness, vulnerability, and self-advocacy. Further, the less engaging skills of theme development, text citation, and reading comprehension seemed a bit more appealing when coupled with a unique learning experience.

LESSONS LEARNED

As we reflect on this initial collaborative endeavor, several moments stand out as worth sharing with others eager to engage in similar efforts within their schools. With regard to preparation, it is beneficial for collaborators to engage in a mental health first aid course or similar psychoeducation prior to planning and implementing such a unit of instruction. Such preparatory training will allow everyone to enter into the collaboration with foundational or refreshed knowledge of mental health, MHL, and the identification of mental health supports available in one's community. There are a variety of free,

asynchronous options available to educators and school social support staff members that provide an essential base of knowledge without clinical licensure.

There is real value in teaching a collaborative MHL. However, in today's climate, it may be difficult for teachers to convince school administrators of the value and vitality of such a collaboration. Collaborative teams must work together to obtain administrative support and keep administration informed of the team's goals, instructional content, and anticipated instructional delivery methods. Obtaining buy-in can be crucial to ensuring that collaborators receive the time and resources they need to plan and implement the unit of study.

[Collaboration] provided each of us with unique insights and experiences

In addition to administrative support, we found that reaching out to caregivers before delivering the unit was critical to open, honest communication. Being clear about what MHL is, what is covered in the unit, and what isn't covered helps to build trust and leads to a successful rollout. It also provides families and students with an opportunity to review anticipated texts and topics to ensure the material is appropriate to the unique needs of the learner.

We also recommend beginning the collaborative planning process early. If possible, we suggest beginning over the summer break. This timeline helps create space for thoughtful preparation and regular check-ins, making it easier to stay aligned and work through challenges along the way. If possible, identify time during the school week to meet and collaborate. For instance, teams might strive to utilize professional learning community (PLC) time or opportunities during staff meetings to converse and plan together.

This endeavor not only impacted our work as a team, but it also provided each of us with unique insights and experiences we would not have encountered had we remained in our independent roles and worked within the school. For instance, as a school counselor, I (Brie) am always seeking meaningful, purposeful ways to engage in the classroom beyond standalone, isolated lessons. This collaboration

created an opportunity to support students' learning in a more authentic and integrated way. As an ELA teacher, I (Juliana) watched students make connections between a character's internal journey and their own questions or challenges. I was moved and encouraged by their insights, inferences, and intellectual curiosity.

CONCLUSION

As schools continue to face rising mental health needs among adolescents, it is imperative that teachers, counselors, and other support staff find opportunities to collaborate in ways that are proactive rather than reactive. This unit - rooted in literature, relationships, and responsive teaching - shows what is possible when adults work together to normalize conversations about mental health and equip adolescents with the tools to recognize, articulate, and seek support for their emotional well-being. Ultimately, by collaborating on ways to bring MHL into the ELA classroom, we not only teach students the foundational skills and content set within the traditional ELA framework, but we help them understand themselves, develop greater empathy for those around them, and work together to disrupt the stigma that all too often surrounds mental illness. Our work has helped us to recognize that effective MHL instruction does not require abandoning academic rigor or adding another curriculum to our current school objectives. Rather, working together to meaningfully embed MHL into our existing coursework, honoring one another's expertise, and identifying the time and resources to plan and implement an interdisciplinary unit allows us to address our students' academic needs alongside their growing awareness of mental health.

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Looking Under the Hood

The (Mental) Health of the English Classroom

David Sterling Brown

As a teacher—as someone who was once a middle school student and a high school student—I favor a pedagogical approach aligned with "brave space" methodology as outlined by Victoria D. Stubbs in "The 6 Pillars of a Brave Space" (Stubbs). That concise resource builds on the foundational work of Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens who authored "From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces: A New Way to Frame Dialogue Around Diversity and Social Justice." I favor the brave space approach because, retrospectively, I recognize how it benefited me in instances where some of my past secondary teachers were *forced* to utilize aspects of that teaching philosophy, notably before it was fully conceptualized.

In a brave space classroom, the environment fosters vulnerability; perspective taking; leaning into fear; critical thinking; the examination of intentions; and mindfulness, for example (Stubbs). In other words, conscientious brave space teaching sets up educators to embrace the difficult but not impossible task of managing and engaging the shifting realities of our real world, all while *teaching* students the important literacy skills they need to read, write and speak effectively. Having exposure to what we now consider brave space classroom principles was all to my benefit, for the early exposure informed the kind of pedagogue I would become.

As I note in my introductory paragraph, my secondary teachers were forced to embrace aspects of what was not yet defined as the brave space pedagogical philosophy. I recall two critical life-changing historical events that prompted my teachers to improvise pedagogically along the lines of mental health and community care:

On April 20, 1999, two white male teenagers carried out what became known as the infamous Columbine High School massacre after the young gunmen killed thirteen students and one teacher, and injured nearly two dozen other people before committing suicide. It was a Tuesday. I was in the ninth grade. The news about the Columbine shooting rattled my entire school, from students to teachers, as anxiety set in for me and my adolescent peers about where else such a shooting might occur. Many of us wondered, "Could a similar event happen at our quaint Connecticut school?" Without preparation or training for such an unprecedented violent event, our teachers had to help us cope. Some of them did that by creating space for vulnerability that allowed us students to be mindful of our feelings—fear, frustration, anger—and even write about those emotions through our critical perspectives. Poetry became an outlet for me.

Fast forward past the Columbine aftermath, to the beautiful blue-sky morning of September 11, 2001, and another tragedy with mass human casualties rocked the nation, and the entire world, when hijackers flew commercial planes into the two World Trade Center Towers and the Pentagon, crashing a fourth plane in a Pennsylvania field. It was a Tuesday. I was a senior in high school. And the tragic 9/11 news, which brought the school day to a halt, reminded me of a truth I had already internalized, if not from the school bullying I experienced as an adolescent, then certainly from the Columbine massacre: that there are no safe spaces, not even school. Later school-shooting tragedies would reaffirm that troubling reality: Virginia Tech (2007); Sandy Hook Elementary (2012); Umpqua Community College (2015); Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (2018); Santa Fe High School (2018); and Robb Elementary School (2022), for example.

"There is physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual violence woven into the structure of schools and manifested through everything from instruction to curriculum."

The Columbine massacre, and even 9/11, prompted swift and dramatic shifts in my, and many people's, understanding of school as a haven or safe space. It is ironic that I first *learned* about the mass school shooting, and the plane crashes, while I was at school. Yet in hindsight, perhaps school was the best place for me to be on April 20,1999 and on September 11, 2001 because that formative educational setting required my teachers—whom I imagine also felt unsafe—to suspend the "illusion of safety" and teach within a new harsh reality (Arao and Clemens, 141: 2013). In essence, the unexpected events of those tragic days in history required my teachers to be(come) brave space pedagogues who had to confront the discomfort of a violent world that is always uncomfortable, always producing harm for someone somewhere at any given moment.

Within our violent world, as education scholar Christopher Emdin suggests, there are socio-political systems and institutions that "convince us to accept and almost welcome suffering" (Emdin, 230: 2021). It is no surprise, then, that "there is physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual violence woven into the structure of schools and manifested through everything from instruction to curriculum" (Emdin, 230: 2021). Given this, I have determined I must eschew "safe space" rhetoric in my English literature classroom because I know, because I have learned, it is impossible to guarantee everyone's safety all the time. As Arao and Clemens rightly ask, "To what extent can we promise the kind of safety our students might expect from us," especially when students "conflat[e] safety with comfort?" (Arao and Clemens, 135: 2013). We can't.

On April 20, 1999, and the days thereafter—and on September 11, 2001, and the days since—the school/classroom environment ceased to feel wholly safe for me, if it ever did. Truth be told, it does not even feel safe for me now as a college teacher who sits on the other side of the desk, so to speak, and continues to see our sacred educational spaces marred by gun violence and other pervasive forms of violence. The uncomfortable memories that formed in my adolescent brain remain, and they remind the more mature me of today that I cannot lie

to myself about safety. Moreover, I certainly do not want to deceive my students regarding what I can guarantee about the classroom environment and their safety.

Interestingly, I am reminded that while serving as a visiting scholar at Trinity College in 2013, a student insisted on being excused from a class session on Shakespeare's first tragedy *Titus Andronicus*. The reason being: this student experienced sexual violence before, and *Titus* is an over-the-top play that involves rape, mutilation and other forms of violence. For my former student, *Titus* was a text that would challenge their sense of the classroom as a safe space. Having taught the play before, and having never experienced such an ask from a student, I was understanding but baffled. I began asking myself questions: Where is the line when it comes to excusing students from engaging with educational material they *feel* will produce discomfort or trigger them in some way? Should I, someone who experienced sexual violence as a child and young adult, not be teaching *Titus Andronicus*, am I harming *myself*? Is it realistic to define my classroom as a safe space (Brown, 2024)?

As my career progressed, I formed answers to those questions. For I believe it is through conscientious personal-experiential vulnerability that teachers can educate in ways that benefit the growth of our individual selves *and* the people we encounter through our vocations, especially students. Emdin reminds us in his book *Ratchetdemic: Reimagining Academic Success* that "the ratchetdemic educator understands that true knowledge is not given; it is discovered. By designing learning environments and curricula to awaken curiosity, hard work, and determination, the ratchetdemic educator creates conditions that allow young people to make their own discoveries" (Emdin, 2: 2021). The educational conditions in a classroom are what condition the extent to which one engages the personal and experiential in relationship to the critical. And so, I eschew safe space rhetoric. We all should.

Although there are fundamental differences between secondary classrooms and college classrooms, such as the difference in

pedagogical or curricular autonomy that we can exercise, we educators are undoubtedly aligned as it pertains to what we cannot promise any of our students: safety. This reality affords us room to think collectively and collaboratively about what we *can* do along the lines of championing brave space discourse so our students can survive and flourish. Brave space discourse ultimately helps students embrace the challenges of our ever-changing world, challenges we need them equipped to handle, especially since they will be shapers of our future world (Arao and Clemens, 136: 2013).

No matter what we teach or, to some extent, what level we teach at, I am convinced the personal and experiential are there, informing the critical thoughts and generating synergy that helps us prepare students to embrace challenges and seek effective solutions. How my secondary teachers responded to the crisis moments that were the Columbine massacre and 9/11 is proof of that, for instance. I am also convinced that if we took time to look under the hood, metaphorically speaking, we could identify the essential components within ourselves that keep us going—the engines enabling it all to work. Examining what is under the hood is vital, then, because it allows deeper appreciation for what drives our intellectual interests, our passions, our desires to be educators. It can foster deeper understanding of other people that then facilitates the implementation of a pedagogy of compassion and care that defined many of my post-Columbine massacre classroom experiences. I am not suggesting such a teaching approach is everyone's goal. Like Emdin, I do think it should be.

Through reflection on specific Freirean concepts, I discovered and embraced my desire to present students with a collaborative, participatory, "liberating education"

A key pedagogical influencer who had an impact on me as a nascent pedagogue was Paulo Freire, whose seminal theoretical text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* I found quite generative as I thought about the kind of teacher, and life-long learner, I wanted to be. For Freire taught me to reflect on how *I* was taught as a student. Moreover, Freire

prompted me to question how I wanted to teach my own students. Through reflection on specific Freirean concepts, I discovered and embraced my desire to present students with a collaborative, participatory, "liberating education" (Freire, 2003: 54) that "consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (Freire, 2003: 79). I want my students to think, to *be* thinkers who "develop their own power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as static reality, but as reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 2003: 83). Through their intellectual power, students can build resilience that is useful, especially when it comes to emotional, intellectual and mental health.

Like bell hooks, who writes about Freire's influence in *Teaching to Transgress*, I believe "the classroom remains the most radical place of possibility…" (hooks, 1994: 12). hooks adds, "For years it has been a place where education has been undermined by teachers and students alike who seek to use it as a platform for opportunistic concerns rather than as a place to learn" (hooks, 1994: 12). hooks' words remain true. I share in her concerns about what has become of the education system, broadly speaking, and about what *is* happening today to the education system in the United States.

That is why I am committed to transgressive teaching, to the kind of teaching that "urg[es] all of us to open our minds and hearts so we can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that we can think and rethink, so that we can create new visions" (hooks, 1994: 12). When we open our hearts, and minds, we—students and teachers—give ourselves "permission to feel" (Brackett, 2019). We give ourselves permission to "celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and across boundaries" (hooks, 1994: 12). In my pedagogical practice, I want to move against and across boundaries, especially the boundary between what is within and outside of the self. This is why I often ask my students some version of "What's under the hood?" I need a sense of how they are doing as human beings.

While not all teachers, and not all students, care to engage with what's under the hood, I argue they should. That is an integral part of liberatory, "self-actualiz[ing]" education that shapes what transpires within the self (hooks, 1994: 16). hooks suggests as much when she asserts that teachers "who are not concerned with inner well-being are the most threatened by the demand on the part of students for liberatory education, for pedagogical processes that aid them in their own struggle for self-actualization" (hooks, 1994: 17). We must be concerned with inner well-being, our own inner well-being first and foremost and that of our students. In fact, I appreciate the rare occasions when students make it clear they are concerned with *my* inner well-being. That doesn't happen often but when it does happen I am appreciative because I feel seen. I feel validated as a human being who is a professor but who is not *solely* a professor, for my job is not my identity. In fact, it would be incredibly unhealthy on the mental health front for anyone's job to define their whole identity.

Considering what's under the hood will inherently generate tension, especially when one is in a classroom setting where there are many different personalities, learner types, etc. As such, it can be incredibly useful to approach the learning process with what Catherine J. Denial calls a "pedagogy of kindness" that is "about attending to justice, believing people and believing *in* people. It's a discipline" (Denial, 2024: 2). I appreciate Denial's personal-experiential details about how her "pedagogy of kindness" philosophy came to be, for my path to foregrounding "what's under the hood" was comparable in some ways. With attention to her inner well-being and mental health, Denial writes:

> Things got complicated when I became a professor. I had PTSD, formally diagnosed in 2006, but in reality a companion for many years before that. I received lackluster treatment from my primary care physician and so I found myself trying to steer a course through the pressures of a new position while also battling flashbacks, dissociation, and physical pain. It never occurred to me to be kind to myself, and academia never modeled such an approach; it therefore did not occur to me to be kind to others. I put my head down and

> muscled my way through, and that showed up in every decision I made about teaching. (Denial, 2024: 4).

Denial was, in fact, *teaching* through her own personal and experiential discomfort in a way that, later, turned out to be productive for her given the evolution of her teaching philosophy and the publication of her book. That said, when I first read Denial's personal-experiential disclosure, it made me sad for her. It made me disappointed in the capitalist workaday world, the healthcare system and academia. I gave myself permission to feel for Denial's past circumstances that are the present circumstances for many folks, teachers and students alike. I felt for Denial as I imagined her past self suffering, striving to make it through the schoolyear in survival mode, which should never be the default modus operandi. I imagined that suffering person asking in relation to the self, "Does anyone care about what's under the hood?"

On mental health and self-care, Denial further argues, "We need a self-care that shouts when [professions] run *too fast*, demanding fealty to accelerating timetables of achievement […] We need a self-care that allows us to sustainably make demands of our institutions, demands that place our well-being at the center of everyday operations, strategic planning, and crisis management. We need a self-care that is not complicit in circumstances that create suffering for others" (Denial, 2024: 17-18). We need all of that because the health of classrooms, and the sustainability of our educational institutions, depends on the health of us pedagogues.

Emdin [emphasizes] "reality pedagogy": "an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf"

As I conclude this article, I return to Christopher Emdin. Beyond being influenced by his *Ratchetdemic* text and philosophy, I was inspired by his book, *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood…and the Rest of Y'all Too*, as I considered my pedagogy in relationship to mental health. With a focus on education in urban schools, Emdin

invites his readers to consider how they engage with and teach a particular demographic of students in America. Even so, *For White Folks* has use value for pedagogues who teach all sorts of students given its emphasis on what Emdin calls "reality pedagogy": "an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own cultural and emotional turf" (Emdin, 2016: 27-30). It was that aspect of Emdin's book that got me thinking about mental health, English literature, pedagogy, learning processes and more. *For White Folks* provided many answers and it generated many questions for me, three of which I offer here. I hope you sit with these questions for a moment to reflect on mental health and the English classroom:

1) Was there ever a time when you became bothered by a lesson being taught to you in your educational past? Can you remember why, how it impacted you?

2) What were the specifics of the classroom cultures you have experienced as a student (or that you have created as a teacher)? Did you ever feel uncomfortable? If so, why? Was the discomfort useful pedagogically?

3) What teaching practices do you, or can you, employ to create a brave space classroom environment that helps set students up for success with managing the challenges they will inevitably face in life?

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***David Sterling Brown**, PhD—Associate Professor of English at Trinity College—is author of* Shakespeare's White Others *and the forthcoming* Shakespeare Under the Hood*, both with Cambridge University Press. Brown has published numerous peer-reviewed and public-facing articles and delivered myriad invited talks. Explore his contributions to the humanities at www.DavidSterlingBrown.com.*

Special Section: Book Annotations

We devote this month's Special Section to preservice teacher candidates who share several texts that align with the issue's theme of mental health and can be used in secondary classrooms. Thank you to Dr. Brooke Eisenbach, Associate Professor of Middle and Secondary Education at Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, and to her students.

They Called Us Enemy by George Takei

Olivia Imprescia, Lesley University

Growing up is confusing enough, but growing up behind barbed wire because of your race is something no child should ever face. In *They Called Us Enemy*, George Takei shares his true story of being a Japanese American boy during World War II, when his family was forced into a confinement camp after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

George doesn't fully understand why his family is being treated like enemies, but through his eyes, we witness the fear, confusion, and injustice they endure. Although his parents do their best to protect him and his siblings, the camps are harsh, crowded, cold, and deeply unfair. As he grows older, George begins to grasp the racism and betrayal that led to their imprisonment, but he also learns the importance of hope, education, and using one's voice.

This book reminds readers that history isn't just dates and facts - it's real people, real families, and real pain. Yet it also tells a story of resilience, courage, and forgiveness.

Essential Themes: Racism, Injustice, Family, Identity, Resilience, Trauma

George Takei, Justin Eisinger, and Steven Scott; illustrated by Harmony Becker (2019). *They Called Us Enemy*. Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions. Graphic novel. 208 pages.

Popcorn by Rob Harrell

Becca Hall and Rebecca Sack, Lesley University

All Andrew Yaeger wants is to have a successful picture day, but seventh grade isn't easy for anyone. On top of the regular middle school struggles, his mom is starting a new job, his grandmother's Alzheimer's is progressing rapidly, and his relationship with his best friend is changing. All he wants is for things to stay under control, to keep his shirt clean, and to bring home a nice school photo for his mom and grandma. But between his family, friends, and the school bully Gene, he cannot seem to catch a break. He tries to use the strategies he's learned to help him in times like these, such as breathing exercises and doodling, but will they be enough to face the halls of his middle school on picture day? As his anxiety bubbles up inside, Andrew must rely on the people he loves for support to calm himself down when he feels like his popcorn kernel of anxiety might POP.

Essential Themes: Friendship, Anxiety, OCD Tendencies, Panic Attacks, Family, Alzheimer's, Bullying, Empathy, Courage, Art

Rob Harrell (2024). *Popcorn*. New York: Dial Books for Young Readers. Fiction. 288 pages.

Ab(Solutely) Normal: Short Stories that Smash Mental Health Stereotypes by Nora Shalaway Carpenter and Rocky Callen, eds.

Emily Finnegan, Lesley University

The collection of short stories, edited by Nora Shalaway Carpenter and Rocky Callen, challenges common misconceptions about mental health by offering a refreshing, multifaceted portrayal of young people navigating these issues. Each story is crafted by diverse authors and sheds light on various mental health experiences, breaking down stigmas surrounding conditions such as anxiety, depression, OCD, and addiction.

Through the complex characters, *Ab(Solutely) Normal* explores the complexities of mental health with authenticity, humor, and empathy. Readers encounter protagonists who defy stereotypes and discover inner strength as they address topics such as self-esteem, family dynamics, friendship, and self-acceptance. Whether the characters face their fears, manage their conditions, or advocate for themselves, these stories emphasize resilience and the importance of compassion in understanding mental health.

Essential Themes: Identity and Self-Acceptance, Empathy and Connection, Friendships, Family, Mental Health, Mental Illness

Nora Shalaway Carpenter and Rocky Callen, eds. (2023). *Ab(Solutley) Normal: Short Stories That Smash Mental Health Stereotypes*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press. Anthology. 336 pages.

Guts by Raina Telgemeier

Braeden Marver, Ruth Anderson, and Osmin Castenada, Lesley University

Sometimes, the thought of something happening can be even worse than the actual event. Young Raina knows this all too well, as she experiences chronic feelings of sickness that are eventually attributed to IBS and the anxiety that comes with it. Food becomes a slippery slope for her; she begins to fear that even thinking about food will make her sick.

At school, Raina's anxiety intensifies whenever she's faced with the prospect of giving a presentation. She worries about standing in front of the class and what her classmates will think of her, and the fear becomes so overwhelming that she ends up fleeing the classroom sicker than she's ever been. Concerned for her daughter, Raina's mother decides to put her in therapy.

Therapy teaches Raina important self-care strategies for when she feels scared, and after a few sessions, she begins to see progress. She gradually overcomes her overwhelming fears about eating and learns

grounding techniques that help ease her anxiety. However, therapy doesn't cure Raina; instead, it introduces new worries about being perceived as "broken." Despite these fears, Raina uses what she's learned to help others, and when she shares her experiences, she discovers she isn't alone.

Essential Themes: Anxiety, Friendship, Coming of Age, Family, Self-Care, Mental Health and wellness

Raina Telgemeier (2019). *Guts*. New York: Scholastic. Graphic Novel. 224 pages.

The Boy in the Black Suit by Jason Reynolds

Isabella Ciampa and Andy Steburg, Lesley University

The world came crashing down on Matt's life when his mother died before his last year of high school. His home-life struggles began leading into school after his mother's cancer diagnosis, which led to his dad's relapse. So-called friends stopped talking to him, unsure of what to say to someone who had just lost his mom. But he still had his best friend, Chris, and that was what mattered.

Matt knew he needed a job, which led him into the funeral business with Mr. Ray. He lingered in the back row, watching strangers' families grieve their losses, trying to make sense of his own. He was confronted with other people's coping styles, whether it be laughing, singing, crying, or praising, which led him to Lovey, who completely changed his perspective on healing through grief. Through her, Matt begins to see that healing isn't about forgetting; it's about learning to live again, even in the shadow of loss.

Essential Themes: Grief, Friendship, Anxiety, Anger, Connection to Others, Depression, Sorrow, Growth, Addiction, Coming of Age.

Jason Reynolds (2015). *The Boy in the Black Suit*. New York: Atheneum Books for Young Readers. Fiction. 272 pages.

Living with Viola by Rosena Fung

Neil Adams, Lesley University

The story *Living with Viola* is a graphic novel that follows Livy, a Chinese-Canadian adolescent, as she navigates the complexities of family expectations, friendships, and her mental health. Livy is often weighed down by an alter ego, Viola, who embodies her anxiety and depression. Viola whispers doubts and intensifies Livy's fears, leaving her ashamed of who she is and of her cultural background.

At school, Livy faces teasing about her culture and struggles to fit in with wealthier peers. At home, her family pressures her to achieve perfect grades and pursue medicine, though she dreams of studying art. Despite her parents' hard work, Livy is embarrassed by their financial struggles.

Despite these challenges, Livy finds support from her teachers, friends, and family. When her grades plummet and her sadness deepens, she meets with a psychiatrist and learns she has anxiety and panic disorder. Through therapy and self-reflection, Livy slowly learns to quiet Viola's voice.

This story illustrates how mental health challenges intersect with cultural identity and family pressure, ultimately showing that with support, self-acceptance, and resilience, healing is possible.

Essential Themes: Culture, Tradition, Family, Anxiety, Mental Health, Resilience

Rosena Fung (2021). *Living with Viola*. Toronto, Canada: Annick Pub. Graphic novel. 272 pages.

We Are Big Time by Hena Khan

Cat Correia, Lesley University

When Aliya moves from sunny Florida to snowy Milwaukee, she's not just dealing with a weather shock; she's starting over. New city,

new school, no friends, and definitely no basketball team like the one she left behind. At her new Islamic school, she joins a hijab-wearing girls' basketball team that she quickly realizes is nowhere near as good as her old one. No one takes them seriously - not even themselves.

But with a new coach who believes in them, things start to shift. Aliya struggles to find her place on the team, especially with her co-captain, Noura, who's resistant to sharing the spotlight, while balancing homework and prayer and dealing with reporters who make the hijab more about headlines than faith. Slowly, game by game, practice by practice, they start to feel like a real team. Not perfect, but stronger than before.

Aliya learns that being "big time" isn't just about scoreboards. It's about confidence, identity, friendship, and taking control of your own story. By the end, even when the team loses some big games, they win in other ways: through togetherness, respect, and the pride of showing what they can really do. *We Are Big Time* isn't just about basketball. It's about believing in yourself, standing up for who you are, and owning your story, even when the world tries to write it for you.

Essential Themes: Culture, Religion, Basketball, Empowering Women, Family, Anxiety

Hena Khan; illustrated by Safiya Zerrougui (2024). *We Are Big Time*. New York: Random House Children's Books. Graphic Novel. 240 pages.

Making the Bed

Michalene Hague

Making the bed — such a simple task,
clean sheets and aired blankets —
how does anyone do this anymore?
My palms smooth the mattress cover;
fingers balloon the fitted sheet to stretch
to corners, the lift and pull a foundation
for laying flat, firm and wrinkle-free —
to make a bed worthy of dreams.
Such a simple task!

My hands fly out the top sheet — header
edge designed to embrace in style —
to brush, gently, its lay and lines,
to tuck, balancing, the bottom hem
below the mattress foot's heft,
to make a marriage —
a caress of consummation,
a sweetness, a memory, a vow
in each simple task.

Blankets, layered by season, by colors,
follow, each an echo, a recollection —
thumbs coax their threads together,
and at the foot, hands fold ends in tight,
anchoring hospital corners.
Such wraps snuggle the sleeping
child comforted close between us,
the nightmare soothed away
by covers of hugs and kisses.
No simple task. …

Hague

Tucking in the tiered sides,
fingertips sense the secrecy of tears,
those water-stains, those streaks
and smears trickling hues of pain,
heartbreak, and pleading prayers
onto the linens of safe space.
Lovers gone, mother gone, youth gone —
shades wash away, or linger still
in bedding comforts made fresh
on any changing day. — So do rivers
story canyons from their beds —
such an ordinary task.

And you — propped against plump pillows
in cool, crisp cases, bedcovers drawn up
to confront temperature, tissues, tea, and toast —
rumple the bedspread around you,
arranging my reminiscence
like us drizzling icing atop cakes,
Layers: a light quilt for summers,
a down duvet for winter's dreams,
the décor for sheets of time.
Does anyone do this anymore?
Making my bed — each moment,
I ask for a simple task.

Michalene Hague *is a career English teacher and Department Head at Peabody Veterans Memorial High School. Published often in* West Coast Maine Magazine *and* The Leaflet*, she was NEATE's 2015 Poet-of-the-Year and is a member of the Mountain Poets Society in Maine.*

Call for Manuscripts

The Leaflet is the oldest journal in the United States dedicated to the teaching of English. We wish to provide English teachers across New England with articles that have a current pedagogical focus. Manuscripts will be accepted for each issue that describe innovative teaching strategies, recent classroom research, lesson plans, and reading recommendations to assist us in our vocation. Individual issues of *The Leaflet* centered on themes are intended to provide a focus for submissions, not to limit contributors to specific content. Consider themes as writing prompts rather than publication constraints.

In addition, we will continue to publish book reviews (fiction and nonfiction), creative applications of technology, and original fiction, poetry, and even cartoons written by the very talented teachers amongst us.

Upcoming themes

Spring 2026: Reclaiming joy and creativity!

Data-driven instruction, standardized testing, post-pandemic fatigue—many English teachers are searching for ways to rekindle the spark that drew them to the profession. This issue invites educators to reflect on how they are claiming joy and creativity in their classrooms. How do you foster wonder, play, and imagination in your teaching? What practices, texts, or projects have reignited student engagement and teacher passion? Help us celebrate the transformative power of literature, writing, and human connection.

Submission deadline: May 1, 2026

Autumn 2026: Confronting the New Wave of Censorship

Across the U.S.—including traditionally progressive New England states—teachers are facing increasing scrutiny over curricular choices, classroom libraries, and discussions of race, gender, and identity. Even districts that do not pass formal bans are experiencing "soft censorship," in which teachers self-censor out of fear of complaints or administrative pressure. This issue strikes at the heart of English teaching: promoting critical thinking, exposing students to diverse perspectives, and protecting students' rights to read. We encourage you to share your story.

Submission deadline: July 31, 2026

See our website for more details.

Manuscript Guidelines

The Leaflet is the professional, peer-reviewed journal of the New England Association of Teachers of English (NEATE). The journal is published semiannually, and its target audience includes elementary teachers, secondary-level English teachers, and higher education faculty. The goal of the journal is to provide teachers at all levels with an opportunity to share ideas, research, and classroom experiences with other professionals.

Manuscripts should be double-spaced throughout with standard margins and numbered pages. MS Word 2000 or later is preferred. Documentation should follow the most recent APA guidelines, and manuscripts must conform to the NCTE *Guidelines for Gender-Fair Use of Language* (see http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/genderfairuseoflang).

While high-quality writing and rigorous research are among the most important criteria for publication, manuscripts should generally adhere to the following lengths:

- Articles: 5-12 pages (1,500 to 3,500 words)
- Fiction: up to 15 pages (4,500 words or fewer)
- Poetry: up to fifty lines
- Book reviews: 3-5 pages (900 to 1,500 words)
- Other submissions (*e.g.*, web page descriptions, technology applications, etc.) will also be considered

Submit your work as a Word attachment. The subject line should read **Leaflet submission**. Include your name and institution within the body of the email, along with a brief (50-75 words) **author biography** and **mailing address**. Manuscripts submitted to *The Leaflet* will be reviewed by one or more members of the editorial board in addition to the editor. Editorial decisions are not limited to acceptance or rejection: Promising manuscripts are often treated as drafts and returned with suggestions for revision.

Send all manuscripts and inquiries to Dr. Mark Fabrizi, *The Leaflet* Editor, at fabrizim@easternct.edu.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The New England Association of Teachers of English
124th Annual Conference
October 2026

Location: TBA

NEATE's annual conference is always a great way to network with other professional educators, expand your teaching repertoire, and relax among like-minded teachers. The 2026 NEATE Conference will be held in October and, as always, promises to be fun and enriching.

Look for the call for proposals for the 2026 conference soon and submit your best idea to share with your colleagues at NEATE.

Want to become a published author?

Conference presenters are encouraged to turn their presentations into articles to submit to *The Leaflet*. All articles are peer-reviewed by members of our editorial board. We will work with new authors to help strengthen their articles for publication.

If you have any questions about the publication process, or you'd like some advice on manuscript preparation, please contact Dr. Mark Fabrizi (fabrizim@easternct.edu), Editor of *The Leaflet*. Manuscript submissions are accepted year-round.

Let us help you see your work in print!

Manuscript Guidelines

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The deadline for submissions is approximately four months prior to publication. Receipt of manuscripts will be acknowledged by email, and all contributors will receive two print copies after publication.

Send all manuscripts and inquiries to Dr. Mark Fabrizi, *Leaflet* Editor, at fabrizim@easternct.edu.

The Leaflet

NEATE Officers

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