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## Understanding Grief as a Healing Tool

### **Rationale:**

Unfortunately, adolescence is usually the time someone experiences the loss of a loved one, whether that be an immediate family member, extended family member, or even a beloved pet. This comes with a large package of very new emotions and feelings that they must deal with, and being teenagers, it seems to be 100 times harder. Typically, what we see from teens is a tendency to hold their emotions down which becomes extremely difficult and unhealthy over time, especially when it comes to grief. Grief and its process is also rarely discussed in schools between adults, teens, and peers. Thankfully, in the more recent years, there has been an increase in media that is catered to this age group which covers heavier themes such as death, grief, and mental health. Using some of these specific pieces of literature and visual media, I hope to encourage the topic of grief early on and how it can be used as a beneficial tool rather than something that can hinder an adolescent.

Through this unit of study, I chose to pick a handful of pieces of either literature or visual aids that focus on losing a loved one or mental health while also being easy to understand in order to start the hard conversation of grief and death. The main piece I would choose for this process would be the YA novel *All the Bright Places* by Jennifer Niven, as its main themes are mental health and grief. I would then start to introduce other pieces of work that also relate to these topics, which would be “When Great Trees Fall” by Maya Angelou, *The Giving Tree* by

Shel Silverstein, and the movie adaptation of *All the Bright Places* on Netflix. By incorporating certain activities and discussions throughout the unit of study, I hope to not only help the students better engage with literature and other pieces of work, but also encourage them to think about loss and grief in a way they didn't before.

### **Into the Text:**

Before getting into *All the Bright Places* as a class, I would first use this opportunity to start a class discussion about what the students know about grief and the process of grief already. By using the method of “accessing prior knowledge”, I would ask certain questions to allow students to think about what they already know or ideas they’ve heard from the world around them to start to understand the main topic of study. I would begin by asking questions such as:

- 1) Have any of you experienced any kind of grief?**
- 2) Do you think it is better to push the grief aside or use it as a tool to heal?**
- 3) What are some ways people keep memories alive?**
- 4) Have you ever heard of the “stages of grief” before? What do you think they are?**

After leading this discussion, I would then show them a short video clip from a cartoon that explains the basic 5 stages of grief. By doing this, I expect the students to get a little less uncomfortable about the topic and understand that grief does not always have to do with death, but can also be there for a small loss like in the cartoon.

<https://youtu.be/8tGCjGKstEw?feature=shared>

By using this cartoon as a simple explanation, it allows students to think about times in their lives when they might have experienced grief in a way but never noticed it, and also how they dealt with it in an easier way.

There is also another activity that is more hands-on that I would introduce to the students to allow them to get into the mindset of “leaving a legacy” by using Maya Angelou’s poem, “When Great Trees Fall”. This poem is a perfect example of showing how one is able to live on through the legacy that they left behind and how their living relatives can use that to hold their memories close to them and cope in a healthy way. This message from the poem is the perfect segway into the main focus of the study.

This assignment would involve splitting the class into small groups and having them choose a well-known person who has passed on. They would then discuss as a group what kind of legacy that person left on society today even though they’re physically gone. After this discussion is over, they would create an image of a tree and select different pieces of media (pictures, lyrics, quotes, etc.) that represent this legacy and add them onto the branches of the tree. The groups would then present their trees to the class and talk about the items they chose and why they’re significant to the person’s legacy.

### **Through the text:**

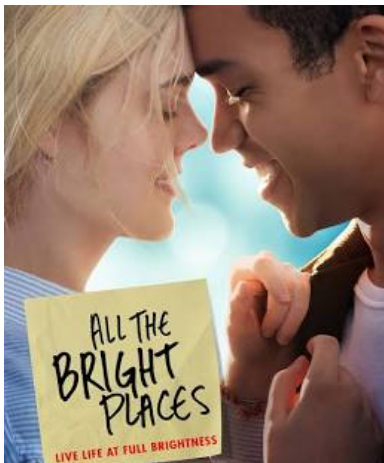
When starting the main focus, *All the Bright Places*, I would choose to have the students read silently to themselves in the classrooms due to some of the graphic language. I feel having them read in the classrooms holds them accountable for their responsibility to read the novel. After reading each section, I would have the students participate in the **Brown Bag Activity** by having them choose either an item or a quote from the section they read that they feel represents an important part of the novel. I would want the students to keep their picks and also some other notes and parts they found interesting in their notebooks so at the end of the week, I can have them do a short assignment that lets me know that they are actively engaging with the text.

This would be an example set of questions that I would give in a worksheet for participation credit.

- 1) Out of the Brown Bag items you have heard throughout the week, which do you feel is the most significant to the novel?
- 2) Were there any moments you think might be important to the rest of the novel?
- 3) Have you seen any changes in Violet's sense of grief throughout the novel so far?
- 4) In what ways do you think Finch has helped Violet heal?

By asking these questions, I would hope that it allows my students to keep the novel and our work with it still relevant in their heads rather than only thinking about it for a small moment. Choosing these questions specifically would not only allow them to think about the main topic we are focusing on but also get involved with the text as well.

Once we have completed the novel, I would then begin to introduce the movie adaptation in the class. Before we start though, I would have them write down a specific scene they feel should be included in the film and why (which is inspired by our SSW about *Speak*). This encourages them to think about the small details in the novel that they might have not thought about before and realize how these small changes have a large impact on the film's adaptation of the novel and story.



### Ending the Unit:

To end off the unit, I would present them with the **Book-to-Film** assignment (inspired by 122B) which would be a short essay that would go more in-depth about the differences between the novel and film adaptation, and how these changes might have affected the overall story either positively or negatively. Along with this, we would end off with an in-class discussion involving the famous children's book "The Giving Tree" by Shel Silverstein.



This book clearly shows what it means to leave an impact on the people around you, even if it is in a way that is not physically possible. For example, the last couple of pages show the tree still being able to give the old man a place to sit even though it expressed its concerns with its inability to give anymore. The smallest things in life can leave an impact on the people around us, so I feel that connecting this book back to *All the Bright Places* would further emphasize the main focus.

### Beyond the Text:

#### *If he had been with me*

- Loss of Friendship
- Death of a loved one

- Overcoming hardships
- Finding oneself

***The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger**

- Themes: Loss, depression, and the struggle to find meaning.
- A coming-of-age story about Holden Caulfield, who grapples with the death of his younger brother and his own mental health.

- ***The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold**

- Themes: Loss, recovery, and perspective.
- A deceased teenage girl narrates her family's struggle to move on after her murder.

- ***Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson**

- Themes: Friendship, loss, and resilience.
- A story of a young boy coming to terms with the sudden death of his best friend.

Works Cited

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