



# Invisible Identities

Erin Smith

**What happens when we bring our whole selves into the classroom, instead of showing up as only the teacher?**

I.

As a child, I was bewildered whenever I saw my teachers outside of school. Happening upon my third-grade teacher at the grocery store or the playground monitor at the dentist's office somehow felt akin to trespassing or opening someone else's mail—like I was crossing some clearly defined boundary I had no business crossing. Perhaps I was a particularly shy and slightly neurotic child, but I don't think I was alone in the disorientation I felt in spotting a teacher outside of the classroom. I've often heard friends joke that they used to think teachers lived inside of the school building. By early elementary school, I'm sure I knew that teachers needed to eat and get their teeth cleaned like the rest of us, yet there always seemed to be some strange boundary between my life and theirs. In hindsight, it's amazing how long it took me to understand teachers were real people who not only participated in life's banalities, like running errands, but also had their own joys and sorrows, desires and regrets.

I think this detachment from seeing my teachers as people must have come in some part from the way teachers are portrayed in contemporary American culture. You just need to turn on the news to see this. There are countless feel-good, albeit problematic stories about teacher-martyrdom: professionals who give it all to their students and seem not to rest or have

any semblance of a life outside of the classroom. When you are a teacher, it often feels like you are expected to be a teacher with a capital T. That is, teaching is your entire identity. Maybe this is the result of living in a capitalist society that tries to tell you your worth is a product of your labor. When we see teachers this way, we miss out on the multifaceted and flawed, but whole, person behind the career. I'm always struck by how often teachers are framed as teachers above all and anything else. People who are teachers are not amorphous and interchangeable vessels to be filled with an identity that our jobs assign. Teachers' identities overlap, correspond, and messily inform who we are and how we show up to the classroom.

I am fortunate enough to be a part of a community of math and science teachers through the Knowles Teaching Fellows Program—a five-year program that positions practitioner inquiry as a key leadership development thread. Within the Teaching Fellowship, we often reflect on our identities and how the intersection of those identities show up in our teaching. I tend to focus on my visible identity markers, notably my whiteness and being a young woman, and the implications of these markers in my interactions with both students and colleagues. It is less often that I interrogate my non-visible identity markers. Probably because if I don't bring it up, they go unsaid. What identities do we share and what identities do we keep hidden, and why?

II.

People cannot tell by looking at me that I have struggled with mental health throughout my adolescence and

young adulthood. I have tried to keep it this way for most of my life. Beyond a few close friends, my partner, and immediate family, it's not something I really bring up. It is hard to talk about mental health for many reasons. Mental health and wellness are simultaneously stigmatized and minimized, and because of this, I've often felt a sense of trepidation about outing myself as someone who struggles. Professionally, there's the looming risk of not being taken seriously, or even scaring people. And as for minimization, there is a well-documented history of people with mental health issues being thought of as hysterical, doing it for attention, or not being capable of taking care of themselves or others. While I'm fortunate that my social circle understands the complexities of the mental health arena, it's hard to shake such deep-rooted stereotypes—in fact, I'm sure I've internalized many of them.

While I've struggled with mental health most of my life, I had what I now consider a full blown mental health crisis during the last year and a half of college. I felt simultaneously like every neuron in my brain was on fire and at the same time like I was moving extremely slowly through excruciatingly cold water. I felt extremely aware of myself and the space I took up in the world, and at the same time had moments of utter depersonalization, not knowing how I got from point A to B. I was diagnosed, finally, with generalized anxiety disorder and obsessive compulsive disorder.

All that, and I can list on one hand the people in my life at the time who were actually aware of any of this—not only because I tried to hide it, but also because I was “high functioning.” I did not, on the surface, fit the profile of someone having a mental breakdown. My own experience showed me that mental health challenges are often invisible in school systems if you don't have glaring academic warning signs, like poor grades. This is clearly a problem. When I was a student in college, my mental health challenges were hidden beneath the veneer of high achievement. I always got good grades, and even while I was in the depths of crisis, I was still extremely involved in campus life, excelling in a senior research thesis in microbiology and working four jobs. When people saw this, they often stopped looking. Just because I understood the system and how to make it work for me, does not mean I was being cared for by that system.

Although I stabilized from this particular point in my life, mental health is rarely, if ever, a linear journey. While I have found a tight-knit support network, therapists, and medication, there are still some days where it feels like my brain is a hummingbird, wings beating hundreds of times a minute, but appearing very still to everyone who is looking in from the outside.



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III.

When I first began teaching, I didn't divulge anything about my own mental health journey to students. For one, I thought that might delegitimize me as a teacher somehow, even if I was speaking in past tense. I also thought, frankly, that I would scare them. But as the years passed I found myself wondering, what happens when a student's present reality runs up against my own history of mental illness? Whenever I saw a student struggling with mental health and anxiety, I considered the extent to which I should reveal my own story.

Teachers are used to wearing many hats. Sometimes we become de facto mentors, librarians, guidance counselors, and even parental figures, in addition to being a chemistry or algebra teacher. Many teachers find that students will come to them first to share difficult emotions, and I find no different. The longer I teach, the more conversations I have with students about their mental health—from anxiety to depression to eating disorders to suicidal ideation. When students approach me with a mental health need, some are tentative, some curious, some desperate—but they all want to be listened to.

When I was going through the lowest points in my mental health journey, I felt like I had morphed into something freakish—that no one would even be able to speak the same language as me if I did open up about what I was feeling. I don't doubt that some of my students who voice their own struggles felt this way too. I think I realized that one part of listening is gently letting students know that I see them in a way that only someone who has lived what they are going through can see.

As I gain confidence as a teacher, I gain confidence in sharing parts of my story and parts of my identity that I used to hide. Early on in the school year, I hold a

community circle in my class, where my students and I talk about the identities that we share with others and the identities we keep hidden. I start by asking students to think about all the identities they share openly with others. Students share that they are siblings, artists, athletes; I share that I am a teacher, a runner, a writer. Then, I ask students to ponder identities they don't share openly with others. To model, I share about my own mental health struggles. I ask students to write their own unshared identities anonymously on slips of paper, then I hang the identities they write on a bulletin board for my students to read throughout the year. I find that students share deeply and truthfully when given a safe platform to make their stories known.

"I am depressed but hide it from my friends"  
"My father was deported"  
"I have an IEP"  
"I'm still struggling with my mother's death"

As my students share these identities and more, I realize that by sharing my own story, I am not scaring my students or delegitimizing myself, as I feared. Instead, their comfort level increases when I make the space for students to bring their own struggles with mental health and other possibly hidden identities into the classroom. By sharing the very stories I used to worry would bring judgment or fear, I give permission for students to bring their whole selves, wherever they are in their own journeys, to our class. I often notice students relax when I share my story, not tense up in fear or judgment.

IV.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, schools have been grappling with a seeming explosion of mental health issues amongst student populations. Some of these issues surfacing may be new, others unveiled through the realization that schools are the support providers in the community for so much more than just education, be it supplying food, counseling, or medicine.

I've noticed that the term "self-care" seems to be everywhere since the pandemic began. As someone who has struggled with mental health issues, I sometimes roll my eyes at emails preaching self-care but not offering the structural changes necessary for students and educators alike to feel cared for by the education system. I've encountered an increasing number of reminders to "take time for self-care this weekend" or "counter burnout with three self-care practices!" As well meaning as they might be, I take issue with these messages as they implicitly frame taking care of oneself as separate from schooling or work.

What would it take to create a system of schooling where taking care of oneself was not separate from existing within a school community? A system in which

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care and learning were intertwined?

I won't pretend to know the answers to these questions. But I do know that if we want to help the growing mental health crisis, we can't just apply bandages to individuals by selling them products, or hoping that self-care will fix problems created by a broken system.

I like to think I'm doing my part to chip away at that societal myth of capital-T teacher—the one who lives to teach and doesn't have a life outside school—whose appearance at the supermarket or laundromat would send the six-year-old me into an existential panic. Because at the end of the day, I am only the teacher I am because of my past, however painful. I want my students to know that I have lived and struggled not for them, but alongside them.

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