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Exploring Children's Literature With Authentic Representations of Disability

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Exploring Authentic Children's Literature That Includes Disability for Nurturing Social

Acceptance

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Abstract

Given the power of children's literature to communicate authentic representations of disability and the potential of humor for nurturing social acceptance, teachers should know how to discuss this literature in the inclusive classroom. The authors analyze authentic children's literature with elements of humor and provide strategies in support of such critical conversations.

Key words: higher education, inclusive education, children's literature; disability

Are We Prepared for Inclusion?

> The single most identifiable characteristic of inclusive education is membership. Students who happen to have disabilities are seen first as kids who are a natural part of the school and age appropriate general education classroom they attend. (Halvorsen and Neary 2009: 3)

Causton-Theoharis (2009) argued, "Inclusion is a way of thinking—a deeply held belief that all children, regardless of ability or disability, are valued members of the school and classroom community" (37). Twenty-first century Federal mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB] (2001) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEIA] (2004) not only provided the legal base for creating inclusive classrooms but also called for having high expectations for students with disabilities and supporting their academic growth in both general education curriculum and general education classrooms (Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez 2009). Are we prepared for such inclusion?

The answer is "NO". Mastin (2010) found both teachers and administrators not prepared to deal with issues related to inclusion. She reported a lack of sufficient training and support for teachers and administrators that would facilitate dealing with issues related to inclusion; she concluded, "The limited training and support for educators can adversely affect the way in which the special needs student is educated and perceived in the general population at the local school" (Mastin 2010, 5). Litvack, Ritchie, and Shore (2011) corroborated this conclusion as they observed students in general education classrooms experiencing discomfort around peers with disabilities. The researchers noted too that interactions in the inclusive classrooms between students with disabilities and their average- achieving as well as their high-achieving peers

without disabilities were minimal or non-existent; this resulted in an *Us-Them* divide— an unhealthy environment. One of these students testified, "We don't usually do much with them. They're usually with another teacher at the far end of the room" (482).

Reading Literature with Authentic Representations of Disability Can Help

We believe that reading literature with authentic representations of disability in the classroom may aid in increasing students' awareness and understanding of disabilities (Leininger, Dyches, Prater, and Heath 2010; Whittaker 2012). It may also help to nurture social development and peer- acceptance of students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Matthews 2009). Researchers who have examined disparaging attitudes towards students with disabilities note a lack of familiarity with those who have disabilities and reported that such lack of familiarity causes these negative attitudes (Altieri 2008). Also, children with disabilities who cannot find themselves represented in books and other children's media are equally invisible to their peers without disabilities in the classroom (Matthew and Clow 2007). The use of inclusive literature with authentic representations of disability may foster positive attitudes and behaviors toward individuals who have disabilities (Maich and Belcher 2012), as the able-bodied develop a better understanding of their own feelings and reactions towards peers who appear to be different from themselves (Prater and Dyches 2008).

Defining Literature with Authentic Representations of Disability

Literature with authentic representations of disability is a high quality literature which conveys realistic images of children with disabilities (Prater and Dyches 2008; Blaska 2003). Such literature shows what characters with disability can do rather than what they cannot do. Authors of such literature present disability as a part of who the characters are, rather than *all* that they are. Characters with disabilities display a range of emotions and their temperaments are

not dramatically different from characters without disabilities (Landrum 2001). In addition, authentic literature depicts characters with disabilities as well- rounded and multi-dimensional persons who belong to various communities and have friends (Smith- D'Arezzo 2003), rather than as flat, stereotyped outsiders or victims to be rescued (Myers and Bersani 2009). In general, depiction of characters with disabilities within this literature reflects exemplar practices of social behavior within the classroom or school community and even society. Thus, characters are introduced to readers as contributors in inclusive settings, as individuals who are accepted, rather than rejected, and who are more similar than different from others. If siblings are part of the story line, the sibling relationships are presented realistically. Authentic literature dealing with disabilities also promotes appropriate emotional reactions (e.g., respect rather than pity, acceptance rather than ridicule) and includes accurate illustrations of the disability or assistive devices being used (Prater and Dyches 2008).

In our college classrooms, we use Blaska's (2003) *The Images & Encounters Profile: A Checklist to Review Books for Inclusion and Depiction of Persons with Disabilities or Chronic Illness* to identify the high quality books with authentic representations of disability. [This checklist is consistent with current understandings and definitions of authentic literature (Myers and Bersani 2009; Smith - D'Arezzo 2003).] More specifically, we ask our teachers to evaluate the books they select for their classroom libraries using the following criteria from Blaska's checklist: promotes empathy not pity, depicts acceptance not ridicule, emphasizes success rather than, or in addition to, failure, promotes positive images of persons with disabilities or illness, assists children in gaining accurate understanding of the disability or illness, demonstrates respect for persons with disabilities or illness, promotes an attitude of "one of us" not "one of them," uses language which stresses person first and disability second philosophy, describes the

disability or person with disabilities or illness as realistic (i.e., not subhuman or superhuman), and illustrates characters in a realistic manner (See Table 1 for the listing of literature with authentic representations of disability). Additionally, we invite our teachers to examine the ways in which humor is used in this literature. This is because children with disabilities, like anyone else, laugh, and can laugh at themselves (Franzini 2002). Representations of disability that portray children as capable of both humor appreciation and humor production are thus authentic for this reason too.

In this article, we review activities that focus on the engagement of children with literature with authentic representations of disability. Such literature includes the element of humor as part of the realistic representation of individuals with disability. We discuss how teachers may use literature with authentic representations of disability in the classroom for nourishing social acceptance. We also demonstrate how teachers can use literature to "referee" negative social behavior and humor that disparages.

Discover Similarities Rather than Differences

As more and more children with disabilities are included in inclusive classrooms, there are more opportunities for social interactions among students with and without disabilities. Unfortunately, the increased frequency of peer interactions in inclusive settings does not always translate into an increased quality of these peer interactions (McCay and Keyes 2001/2002). Many students feel uneasy or awkward around peers with disabilities in an inclusive classroom (Litvack, Ritchie, and Shore 2011). Differences are tolerated or at best welcomed in the general education classrooms while deeply-rooted perceptions segregating students based on their abilities still continue. What causes this situation is that children without disabilities concentrate on the surface differences between themselves and those with a disability, rather than

appreciating the commonalities. Reading in class *Susan Laughs* (1999) by Willis may help change these attitudes and feelings.

Young readers should have a good laugh as they can easily relate to a young girl, Susan, who is the main character in the book, written for children ages 4-8. The character Susan is portrayed as a child who does things "through and through - just like me, just like you" (31), despite being in a wheelchair, a fact that is revealed to the reader only on the very last page of the book.

Beyond having a good laugh, this book may help children understand that they do not have to feel awkward (Altieri 2008) around peers who are like the character Susan. This may be accomplished by helping children understand how much they have in common with Susan. More specifically, the teacher may ask children to identify daily activities that Susan has fun with, which the class may also enjoy engaging in during their daily activities at school and at home. A simple table or chart may be helpful in recording, organizing, and visually representing these commonalities. Because children are introduced to Susan's daily activities prior to being introduced to her disability, they are given the opportunity to notice that disability is only part - if any part at all - of her identity. Most importantly, they are also given an opportunity to rethink their conceptualizations of characters with a disability to acknowledge that they have things in common with them that they can laugh about, and hence with their peers in the inclusive classroom who have a disability.

Address Negative Social Behaviors

Negative teasing through name-calling can be a serious problem for victims and a barrier to promoting positive and inclusive attitudes in *the teaser* towards individuals with disabilities (Mills and Carwile 2009). Teasing through name-calling is sometimes compared to bullying and the pain it causes to that of physical hurt (Kowalski 2003). Generally, these teasers are students without disabilities who engage in these hurtful activities toward their peers with disabilities. However, children in middle grades begin to show an interest in social justice and social issues (Smith-D'Arezzo 2003) and are therefore amenable to change from within. *Eddie Enough* (Zimmett 2001) is written for this age group, and we believe the topic of teasing through name-calling that the book deals with qualifies as a social justice issue for children with or without disability, and as such, it deserves attention in the classroom.

In the book, the character Eddie Minetti cannot help being "too much," because he moves and speaks too fast. On one of his not-so-good days at school, he arrives late, misses portions of the spelling test, accidentally knocks things over, and loses the classroom's pet rat. His teacher declares, "I've had enough, Eddie, enough" (10). That is all it takes, and soon the entire class teases him with his new nickname – "Eddie Enough." Later, Eddie is diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Teachers may use role playing from this simple book scene to help students experience vicariously the effects of negative teasing on the emotional well-being of the main character in *Eddie Enough*.

> Lunch is usually my favorite subject, but not that day! As soon as I got to the
> lunch room, Neil started singing, 'Eddie Enough thinks he's tough!' It didn't take
> long before the entire table joined in. Even Vladimir, who doesn't speak English,

was trying to say the words. I felt like I got punched in the stomach. (Zimmett 2001, 16)

The steps for running the role play are summarized in Table 2 Role Play. Insert here Table 2

Teachers may use either the convergent or divergent approach (Christopher and Smith 1990) to script development in the role play. In the convergent approach, role players adopt the lines and exchanges for the role play almost verbatim from the original text while in the divergent approach the role players invent the lines and exchanges in their entirety. Both approaches allow for creativity and decision-making (although less so in the convergent than in the divergent approach) and call for an in-depth knowledge of the context and of the issues the characters face. To help students grow in character from this literary experience, teachers should encourage students to develop personal action plans for eliminating name calling in their own behavior or the behavior of others. Providing students with prompts - "*Define what nicknaming is*"; "*Is nicknaming good or bad?*"; "*Explain your ways for dealing with derogatory nickname calling*"; and "*List whom you will contact for help*" - may facilitate creating relevant action plans.

Develop Humor Appreciation As a Universal Capacity

Teachers should provide all students, both with and without disabilities, with opportunities to develop appreciation for humor generally, but also for humor in the context of disability and persons with disability, by exposing them to humor in literature. In selecting such literature, teachers should consider children's age and maturity, since humor comprehension is related to the child's cognitive and social development (Southam 2005). Southam's (2005) framework (see Figure 1) that draws from Piaget's stages of cognitive development may assist teachers in this process. The framework provides an overview of the relationship of humor to

child cognitive development.   Insert here Figure 1

It is important, therefore, that teachers become sensitive to the cognitive and developmental needs of children with disabilities. Research has shown that, for example, "children with autism would create less humor than children with Down syndrome," because "autism produces deficits in the social-cognitive and affective domains" (Southam 2005, 115). Children with disabilities are capable of enjoying "socially shared experiences of humor" (McGhee 1979, 614). In addition, humor facilitates the growth of social skills among children with such disabilities as dyslexia, intellectual disability, and autism (Semrud-Clickeman and Glass 2010).

Using a mix of group and independent readings of children's literature with humor may help teachers support their students' differing needs for comprehending and appreciating appropriate humor in children's literature. Teachers should also consider using a variety of ways and forms to introduce humor to students, such as through narratives, oral readings, traditional print media (e.g., books and magazines), graphic media [e.g., comic books, manga (Japanese style comics), and anime (animated mini films)], and even audio and film media (e.g., podcasts and age-appropriate films). Different forms of presentation may aid students with differing language and cognitive processing needs or personal preferences in acquiring and developing humor appreciation (Degabriele and Walsh 2010).

We chose the book *Sparks* (2002), by McNamee, to model humor appreciation exploration, because it includes a child with a disability who is able to laugh in the face of challenges he encounters at school. The book *Sparks*, and its protagonist Todd, grapple, from a first-person viewpoint, with what it is like to have a disability, to be aware of it, and yet to be possessed of a sharp wit.

In *Sparks*, a ten-year-old, Todd, a character with intellectual disability, has just moved from a special education fourth-grade class to the general education fifth-grade class. While he was the smartest student in the special education class, in the fifth-grade class he is faced with higher expectations and with many challenges; he worries about making good grades, being teased by his sister and peers, and missing his best friend Eva from the special education class. However, he is able to meet positively these higher expectations and to overcome these challenges due to his determination to be included in the general education classroom and his liberal use of humor. The following example illustrates how Todd creates humor to deal with challenges he faces in a science class:

> I followed all the instructions in the science workbook. But when I finished, my project looked nothing like the picture in the book. I still have no idea where I went wrong. The little red light bulb that was supposed to light up stayed dark. It didn't even blink for a second. Not a spark. It's like I killed electricity. It took a million years to invent and now it was dead because I touched it. (McNamee 2002, 5-6)

Todd's laughing at himself in this excerpt indicates not only his ability to use humor as a coping strategy (McGhee 1989), but more importantly, to use it to accept himself and the disability that makes him, as he describes himself, a "slow learner." We agree with Beerman's and Ruch's (2011) explanation that "laughing at oneself" in situations such as the one described in this excerpt "didn't mean put-down humor, but rather a confident acceptance of problems or weaknesses that one cannot change" (492). Such humor has at least one more benefit. It may help create opportunities for bonding with others. Mary, Dupey, Edil Torres-Rivera, Loan, and et. al. (2001) explain how this works: "People who are not open to teasing or cannot handle laughing at themselves probably cannot handle being 'part of the group,' especially if the lack of

humor indicates that they are too wrapped up in themselves and their problems" (Mary, Dupey, Edil Torres-Rivera, Loan, and al, (2001, 55). On the contrary, individuals who can and are willing to laugh at themselves and at their shortcomings make themselves approachable and likeable by those around them.

To help students process this humorous incident, teachers may consider using the following prompts: *What happened at the end of Todd's experiment? What did he want to happen? How does Todd react to that situation? Why does Todd use humor in the way he does? What would have been your response to this or a similar situation? Would your response serve you as well?* Conversations around questions such as the ones presented here position humor as both a coping strategy and a bonding experience for all involved, no matter their dis/ability level.

Final Thoughts

Exploration of the literature with authentic representations of disability, such as that reviewed in this article, may help students both understand disability and appreciate disability humor as a normalizing and validating resource among those with and without disabilities (Smith and Sapon-Shevin 2008-2009). Most importantly, these conversations may open the doors to embracing attitudes and social skills that include, empower, celebrate, and connect children and adolescents with and without disabilities. We believe that these goals are worth pursuing in any classroom and beyond.

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