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Books to Open Their Eyes: Using Literature to Teach Acceptance and Understanding of Disabilities

Maryann Ramseyer

“What are those special-ed kids doing coming into our room? They’re too stupid to be in here with us—none of them better try to sit by me.” I was taken aback when one of my fifth-grade students harshly uttered these words as my team teacher, who is the special education teacher, came into my room with her nine mainstreamed students to join us for a Thanksgiving art activity. All nine of the students were also fifth graders, and four of them were members of my own class who benefited from the special education resources for math and language arts. I had two immediate reactions: one was a desire to scold the young student for the insensitive, unkind comments, and the other was to instantly wonder why this attitude was present. My students have attended six years of school in a setting that uses a mainstream approach for the education of students with various disabilities, yet many of my students exhibit attitudes of superiority, hostility, and/or negativity toward the students in our class and school who have learning, emotional, behavioral, mental, and physical disabilities.

The Eyes-Shut Dilemma

As a teacher, I constantly wonder what I can do to teach my students how to accept, respect, and understand children and adults in general—with and without disabilities. Since the beginning of the school year, we have worked on using various life-long learning skills such as respect, honesty, responsibility, and trust, but it is obvious to me that many of my students are not applying these in their daily lives.

While searching for an answer to this dilemma, my mind turned to literature. The time I look forward to most is the twenty minutes I spend every day reading aloud to my fifth graders. Our conversations based on the books I read are always exciting and meaningful, and I secretly love their complaints when it is time for me to stop reading and move on to our next lesson. I wondered, “What books could I read to my students that would help them to accept and respect people with various disabilities?” I knew that if I could find some powerful books to read aloud to my students, that I might be able to help create the connections my students needed.

I began talking to other teachers and searching through booklists and Internet sites for fiction I could read to my students to expose them more fully to the typical feelings and normal lives of children their own age with disabilities. I had naively expected to type a few words into an Internet search engine, find some educational book lists, and come up with several good books. Instead, I found that most of the novels containing characters with disabilities were sadly out of date. Most were published in the 1970s and 1980s and make references to and/or use expressions that do not reflect the attitudes and understandings of today’s society. I was not looking for books that referred to people with disabilities as “crippled,” “deaf and dumb,” “retarded,” or “crazy.”

I simply wanted to find some novels that would show my students people with disabilities who were a lot like themselves. Searching Amazon.com under the keywords of physical handicaps, mental

handicaps, learning disabilities, and special needs published from 1997–2001 provided me with a list of books. Initially, I searched for books in which the main character had a disability, but this criterion led me to only a handful of books. To provide myself a larger selection to choose from, I decided to also locate books depicting a main character without a disability, but who had a personal relationship with a minor character who had a disability. I was convinced that these would serve my students as well, allowing another avenue for them to make personal connections.

I narrowed the field down to eleven novels by selecting books in which the main characters were between the ages of ten to thirteen, placing them in the same age-range as my fifth grade students. Of the eleven that met my desired criteria, I have chosen six to highlight in this article. I have decided to emphasize these six books because they are books that I have read and recommended to students. The complete list of eleven books is listed in the bibliography.

Some Eye-Opening Books

I have arranged the six novels into the following four categories to make them useful for fellow educators: Friendship/Acceptance, Family Relationships, Appreciation/Awareness, and School Interactions. The categories are based around general life-application themes that will allow students to make personal connections and provide them with meaningful examples about understanding and accepting people with disabilities.

Friendship/Acceptance

Friends are important to everyone, but friendships among children are vitally important. In addition to making friends, students need to be taught how to be a friend. They need to learn how to apply the “do to others as you would have them do to you” rule to their lives and learn to be aware of how their words and actions can deeply affect those around them. *Bluish*, a poignant and thought-provoking novel written by Virginia Hamilton, offers

messages of friendship, acceptance, and kindness. Natalie, a young, frail girl who comes to school in a wheelchair, fascinates and scares the protagonist Dreenie. Natalie’s blue-tinted skin both attracts and scares Dreenie, who begins to refer to the young girl as “Bluish.” Through a series of events and situations typical of fifth graders, Dreenie, Bluish, and Tuli, another young girl searching for her place in the world, form a strong bond of friendship. Bluish’s disability is a temporary physical disability due to cancer treatments for leukemia, and the reactions of her classmates and people around her realistically portray those reactions reflected in our society. This novel shows how hateful comments and actions resulting from people’s ignorance of each other can cut down deep at the heart of people with and without disabilities. It shows students how children their own age with disabilities desire friends and acceptance from their peers just as much as they themselves do.

The novel *Petey*, by Ben Mikaelson, is another effective book that represents friendship and acceptance. Mikaelson weaves a story around the life of a man named Petey who has cerebral palsy. When little Petey is born to a poor family in 1922, it is obvious that Petey has some disabilities, but his disabilities are misunderstood and incorrectly identified. When his parents cannot care for him anymore, he is placed in a mental institution. Thus begins the journey of Petey’s life, from institution to institution, and the reader becomes aware of how Petey’s mind struggles to express his true understanding and desire for human interaction, touch, and love. While many cruel and unkind people enter and leave Petey’s life, readers also meet people who treat him with kindness and love, and who can acknowledge his true potential in life.

The second half of the book reveals how the lives of a young teenage boy, Trevor, and a now much older Petey become intertwined. Trevor assists Petey when some boys are taunting Petey by throwing snowballs at him. Because of this experience and the resulting relationship which forms between Trevor and Petey, Trevor learns valuable lessons in acceptance, tolerance,

determination, and love, and Petey receives what he has always wanted: someone to stay in his life and love him.

Reading the book *Petey* aloud to a class would allow a teacher to share lessons of friendship and acceptance in a positive and stirring way. *Petey* is a moving novel that shows two generations with various abilities and disabilities coming together and finding a place in each other's hearts. While at times the text is somewhat overly sentimental, and the plot often puts the young boy, Trevor, in situations where he has to "rescue" Petey, the novel shows good examples of caring and acceptance. This book also does an effective job of portraying a man whose mental abilities are not fully understood or expressed because he lacks clear, verbal speech. This shows the reader the struggles and misunderstandings that can often arise in situations similar to Petey's and gives readers applicable situations to relate back to in their own experiences.

Family Relationships

Sometimes students have the misunderstanding that because people have disabilities, they are not "normal." Students need to understand that while we all have unique situations, life is life—with or without disabilities. Giving students a look into the lives of characters who themselves do not have disabilities, but have family members who do, allows students to see how the characters, with and without disabilities, are similar to themselves using the applicable context of the family circle. Students can relate their personal family experiences with those of the characters' families. This provides students cause to relate the stories to their own background, thus giving them opportunity to see the normalcy of the lives of people who have disabilities.

The novel *Tru Confessions* is a novel that successfully depicts a family's relationship by portraying a sibling's reactions and feelings toward having a family member with a disability. *Tru Confessions*, by Janet Tashjian, takes a look into the life and dreams of Trudy (Tru). This first-person

narrative is shared in the style of an electronic diary that Tru keeps on her mother's computer. In her diary, Tru shares her dreams, wishes, and hopes. Her two biggest dreams are to have her own television show and to find a cure for her twelve year-old twin brother, Eddie, who has various mental and physical disabilities caused by a lack of oxygen at birth. When a cable television station runs a contest looking for a show created by and for teens, Tru puts her two biggest dreams together and creates a television show depicting the daily life of her brother, Eddie, which consequently educates the viewers about people with special needs. Tru's success is somewhat bittersweet when she realizes that she cannot cure her brother, but at the same time she finds contentment and satisfaction in the life and relationship she and Eddie share.

Tru Confessions is a wonderfully fast-paced novel that successfully and believably depicts a sister's deep love, confusing emotions, and fierce protectiveness of her twin brother. While the focus of the story is on Tru and is told through her eyes, Eddie is portrayed in a positive yet realistic light. Eddie and Tru are placed in situations that are sometimes humorous, sometimes frightening, sometimes sad, and sometimes frustrating, but the love between a brother and a sister is believably portrayed. Through Tru, the reader sees how someone might handle the real and natural emotional issues that are present when someone has a sibling or close acquaintance with disabilities. There are strong examples of acceptance and understanding toward people with disabilities, not only within family circles, but also among individuals in contact with Tru and her family.

Kimberly Willis Holt's debut novel, *My Louisiana Sky*, also successfully captures a family's experiences with disabilities and the emotions surrounding their situation. *My Louisiana Sky* tackles the sensitive story of Tiger Ann Parker and her family. Tiger is twelve years old, and when her grandmother dies, Tiger is forced to re-evaluate her life, her home situation, and her true feelings

about her parents' mental and learning disabilities. Her father is a hard worker, but isn't able to read or write, and her mother has the mental understanding and capabilities of a six-year-old. When Tiger's sophisticated Aunt Doreen invites her to come to Baton Rouge for a visit in order to tempt her to live there with her, Tiger is forced to decide whether to change herself to fit in the big city or to come to terms with her feelings and attitudes about her parents and her rural Louisiana hometown. This coming of age novel reveals Tiger's need to either accept the world she has been born into or make the decision to adapt to new circumstances and leave her parents behind.

Tiger Ann is a believable, honest protagonist that readers will identify with and be drawn to. Her emotions and thoughts are realistic, therefore allowing the readers to recognize and examine their own feelings and attitudes toward people with and without disabilities. Tiger has to realistically deal with the mental and learning disabilities of her parents and has to learn to cope with comments and judgments placed upon her because of her parents' abilities. As Tiger attempts to sort out her role in her parents' lives, their disabilities often are at the forefront of the novel. Still, her parents are portrayed as loving and caring, despite their lack of mental comprehension in many areas.

Everyone has gifts to share, and we need to help students learn to give people with and without disabilities a chance to show their abilities and gifts.

Appreciation/Awareness

Too often students seem to feel that because a person is disabled, he or she has nothing to offer society. Students need to see the truth that everyone has disabilities of one kind or another; some of us have to wear glasses—others have to write down everything so we don't forget. Having disabilities does not mean one does not have abilities. Students need to understand that

everyone has something to bestow upon the world; it might be the ability to play a musical instrument, to illustrate fantastic pictures, to make people laugh, or just to know when someone needs a smile. Everyone has gifts to share, and we need to help students learn to give people with and without disabilities a chance to show their abilities and gifts. Students often do not appreciate or accept people with disabilities for the simple reason that they do not understand what the disability is, what it means, or what it involves. Not understanding someone's disabilities often leads to intolerance and biased actions, whether intentional or unintentional.

Gathering Blue is a powerful novel by Lois Lowry which shows readers the importance of appreciation. The protagonist, Kira, is born with an under-developed leg. Kira is a strong, determined female character who has great courage, determination, and perseverance, but Kira's disability is seen as a defect, and she is deemed worthless in her community. However, as the novel unfolds, the reader sees the incredible talent Kira possesses and how this talent affects her community and its future. Kira faces various trials and judgments and intolerant people throughout the novel, but she overcomes these difficulties and strives to do her part for her community. This science-fiction novel depicts life in a futuristic society, but the lessons learned are readily applicable to the reader. *Gathering Blue* portrays a character having a disability, but also portrays a character who has something to share with the world.

Reading any of the books listed in the bibliography will introduce students to various disabilities and will help make them more aware of the disabilities around them. *Bluish* introduces students to temporary disabilities related to illnesses; *Petey* tells the story of a man with cerebral palsy, and *My Louisiana Sky* introduces the readers to characters who have mental and learning disabilities. I found that, typically, when the main character has a disability, the disability is often a physical disability—perhaps blindness, deafness, or

an underdeveloped body part or feature. In contrast, I found that when an author portrays a character with a mental, learning, or emotional disability, the character is a minor character. This is not true, however, with the book *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, which is discussed in the next section.

School Interactions

Adults can share stories of those times when they felt humiliated and embarrassed at school because of something cruel said or done by a student, or sadly enough, by a teacher. The excuse of “that is just the way kids are” isn’t acceptable. Our students need to constantly be reminded of how they should treat others. Life is a string of relationships—significant others, children, co-workers, friends—and interactions at school are often the starting point for students to begin developing life-long relationships. Students need to be explicitly taught empathy, understanding, and compassion for their classmates, their teachers, and their world.

In *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, the hyper, wired, constantly-moving character of Joey Pigza is brought to life. Jack Gantos has penned a moving story that gives insight into the daily struggles and emotional rollercoaster ride of a young boy who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Joey can’t seem to control his ever-changing emotions or his body, and his medication doesn’t seem to help one bit. All of this creates various difficulties for him, his teachers, his classmates, and his family. This book gives the reader an honest and realistic look into the life of one child with ADHD. Jack Gantos does not sugarcoat the disability of ADHD. He does an effective job of allowing the reader to realistically relate to Joey’s feelings, actions, and reactions to the various situations and events he encounters. The varying tempo of the plot, speech, and thought patterns used to depict Joey effectively reveals and depicts the emotional and mental spiral in which many people with ADHD often find themselves.

Reading this book to a group of students will open up many discussions about learning and

emotional disabilities, which are, from my own experience, sometimes the hardest to explain to children but often most prevalent in the classroom. Joey seems to reflect the life, mind, and actions of many children who have ADHD. This novel gives a reader insight into the feelings and reactions this disability entails. There are positive and negative portrayals of adults who deal with Joey day in and day out, much like the reality of the lives of many children with and without ADHD and/or other disabilities. This book also does an excellent job of portraying the use of medication and how it does help some children with ADHD.

In addition to *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key*, both *Bluish* and *Tru Confessions* are books that express various lessons in the classroom that students could apply to their daily lives. In *Bluish*, the students in Natalie’s classroom are at first scared by her disabilities and thus ignore her or tease her because of their lack of understanding. By the end of the novel, there is a sense of understanding and acceptance from Natalie’s classmates. The connection between the students and Natalie will be apparent and applicable to your students. While *Tru Confessions* focuses more on family relationships than school interactions, it also has several scenes in which Tru deals with teasing and unkind comments and actions at school. These actions are directed toward her brother and her because of Eddie’s disabilities. Tru’s emotions are very realistic throughout the novel and allow the reader to become connected to her honest, believable feelings. This novel will help students recognize intolerant, uncaring actions and comments they sometimes direct toward people with and without disabilities.

The Wide-Eyed Conclusion

I was pleased to find that authors are writing and publishers are publishing novels that depict characters with disabilities. In the six books I have discussed, and in each of the eleven books listed in the bibliography, the characters with and without disabilities are easy to relate to, convincingly realistic, and accurately portrayed. I

believe that students who read these books, or have the books read aloud to them, will gain insights about the realities of living with a disability. Hopefully students will be able to transfer the insights and understandings expressed through these books to their own lives.

In order for teachers to have access to more books such as these, book lists need to be updated, authors need to keep writing, and publishers need to keep publishing books that have genuine, non-stereotypical characters with disabilities. Because our students live in a diverse world, we need to help them feel comfortable with and be appreciative of the diversity around them. This includes teaching students ways of responding to people with disabilities. Well-written books that have characters with disabilities provide educators with additional resources for helping students develop attitudes of acceptance and understanding toward the diverse world around them.

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