As if Middle School Didn't Already Suck:
Perceptions of Disability from an Inclusive Classroom
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I used my sister's disability to help me get accepted into Ohio State. I used her disability to get several thousands of dollars in scholarships. My dozens of application essays center around the idea that my younger sister's dyslexia contributed to my worthiness to earn an award. In fact, one of the 2015 Common Application essay prompts was "Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family." I said my "accomplishment" was helping my sister learn to like reading, which contributed to my growth from childhood to adulthood.

My narrative essay applied a disability narrative trope all too well: that people with disabilities are merely plot devices to help develop the characters of people without disabilities; that disabled people serve as a sort of muse and bring a realization to nondisabled people.[1] Or, as I wrote in 2015, they give nondisabled people new "eagerness to help, understanding, and patience."

Regardless of whether or not using my sister's disability as essay content was right, the fact is that disability affects nondisabled people. The effects my sister's learning disability has on me compels me to look more closely into the relationship between students with disability and those without. Specifically, I ask, how does the socialization of students without disability and students with learning disabilities within a mainstream, public, middle-school class setting influence nondisabled students' perceptions of disability?[2]

Based on my personal experience with disability—encountering it at a young age via my younger sister—my general hypothesis for this question is that inclusive education settings encourage empathy-building among nondisabled students and improve social intelligence or lessen isolation within disabled students.[3] This prediction is reasonable because, as studies indicate, by interacting with disabled peers, nondisabled students learn tolerance and appreciation for people with disabilities (Evins, 2015). The more we interact with an "other" group, the more we come to understand and empathize with them. The increasingly common practice in public schools is to integrate students with and without disabilities. Research describes such inclusion as an effective way to promote nondiscriminatory and open education for all students. Furthermore, interaction between disabled and nondisabled peers increases overall social functioning for each group (Martinez, 2006). Inclusive classrooms have the potential to improve social and emotional welfare throughout both disabled and nondisabled groups.

Despite the aforementioned praises toward inclusive classrooms, other studies show that putting students with learning disabilities into a mainstream classroom brings additional difficulties to these students. Pavri and Luftig (2001) cite studies that found nondisabled students and teachers in inclusive classrooms do not accept disabled students, oftentimes ignoring or actively rejecting them—thus supporting the idea that people with disabilities are less desirable than those without. This shows a lack of increased empathy in nondisabled students toward their disabled peers.

The most common group studied in research regarding classroom inclusion is the middle school age group—a population of students that has relatively distinct social norms. Unlike elementary-aged students, young adolescents have relatively accurate social competence. Also, these students typically depend highly upon their peers for support. As it is widely—and oftentimes humorously—addressed, middle school is rough. In general,

students face the pressures of trying to "fit in" and find close friend groups. Martinez (2006), however, suggests that students with multiple learning disabilities may perceive greater distancing during these middle school years, even in an inclusive setting.

With the increased social competence of nondisabled students, "passing," as Cox (2013) says, in this setting becomes increasingly difficult for students with disabilities. For "passing as sane" depends on others' interpretations of a person's embodiment; when those interpretations change, a person must adapt to avoid the high social costs of not passing. Moreover, as nondisabled students increase their social competence, the visibility of invisible disabilities, such as learning disabilities, increases. An increase in visibility does not, however, mean that the nondisabled population's understanding of the disability—or knowledge that a person's unorthodox behavior is due to a disability—increases.

None of the cited studies state whether or not nondisabled students were actually aware that their disabled classmates had disabilities. Research only indicated that nondisabled students perceived disabled students as aggressive, disruptive or of low social status. Interestingly, no studies showed that nondisabled students felt pity toward disabled students, which could be due to the students with disabilities being relatively high-functioning. Knowing to what extent nondisabled students have knowledge of their peers' disabilities could give greater insight into how inclusive classrooms impact nondisabled students' perception of disability. As inclusive classes are more beneficial to the developmental growth of higher-functioning disabled students than they are for lower-functioning disabled students, it is realistic to assume that most students without disabilities may not consider their disabled classmates as being disabled (Evins, 2015). Instead, nondisabled students would label students with disabilities as simply disruptive or weird and therefore prompt social separation between disabled and nondisabled students despite being together in a classroom. The assumption that middle school students are not aware of their classmates with learning disabilities reflects Kleege's (2015) point that "People with invisible impairments often are excluded from the general public's collective image of disability" (p. 184). The ambiguity of to what extent students without disability have knowledge of disabled students and their disabilities means that we are limited in accurately understanding how interacting with disabled students affects nondisabled students' perception of disability.

What is indisputable is that inclusive classrooms ensure that students without disabilities do have some sort of relation with students with disabilities. Cox (2013) addresses how performativity theorists argue that our sense of self is created by repeated and ritualized actions and that these actions occur through our relations. Because inclusive classrooms put nondisabled students into acting in relation to their disabled peers, nondisabled students' performativity—thus, their sense of self—is partly defined by their actions with disabled students. In an environment that promotes equity and understanding for each student, nondisabled students may gain increased empathy through their relations with disabled students. But in an environment that does not reassess expectations of students and stigmatizes invisible disabilities, nondisabled students may view disability as negative and a burden to both individuals and groups.

Understanding classroom dynamics between students with and without disabilities, while considering the academic and social implications of learning environments, will improve educators' approaches to student groups with different abilities. Furthermore, applying this knowledge will help guide disabled students transitioning from one learning or social environment to another: elementary school to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to college. For instance, after years of practicing, my sister now enjoys reading; but as she went from grade to grade, other learning and social barriers became more prevalent. She no longer holds close relationships with her peers, instead opting to socialize with adults or young children for whom it's easier for her to "pass." Reassessing norms in educational environments, which are decided by the nondisabled, will relieve social pressure on disabled students, thus improving their academic and social welfare. Finally, evolving mainstream education norms will ultimately affect realms outside of the classroom: employers, coaches, instructors for higher education, and other people working with diverse stakeholders will better understand group dynamics to make more opportunities accessible to all.

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