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Susan L. Gabel

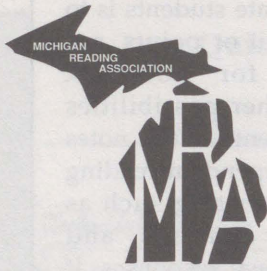
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Themes of Disability in Literature

by Susan L. Gabel

As teachers continue to explore the use of literature for whole literacy, thematic units may appeal to many as a positive alternative to current fragmented instruction. One common group of themes in literature for children and adolescents focuses upon disability. More broadly defined, these theme groups focus upon the differences we experience as part of being human. Using literature with themes of disability can meet a twofold purpose. The literature help teachers meet language arts and reading goals and objectives and can encourage natural discussions about issues surrounding disability and individual differences. By making this exploration, students are able to interpret pieces of history and culture from a new perspective.

Themes of Disability

Themes of disability can be found in many common literature selections used by teachers. Most selections can be classified into more than one theme group. Common theme groups are as follows.

1. **ISOLATION/REJECTION:** This theme group looks at self-imposed isolation and rejection, or the isolation/rejection imposed by past or present societies.

2. **DIFFERENCES/SIMILARITIES:** This theme group looks at the differences we experience as humans,

and the similarities we all share.

3. **STRENGTHS/WEAKNESSES:** This theme group focuses upon the balance between an individual's strengths and weaknesses.

4. **REDEFINING DISABILITY:** This theme expands the definition of disability to include attitudinal disability (the perspective with which we judge others) and behavioral disability (how we treat others).

5. **COPING WITH DISABILITY:** This theme group looks at the positive and negative ways in which people cope with disability.

Using Themes of Disability

Whole literacy activities flow naturally from selections with themes of disability. One aspect of whole literacy is the use of oral discussion. Small or large group discussions can be meaningful for teachers and students. Teacher initiated questions can focus upon the following:

1. How the students can relate to the events surrounding the character with disability

2. How the students feel about the character with disability and then disability in general

3. How the students think the character with disability is like them and different from them

4. How the character with disability must feel (both positive and negative feelings)

5. How society treats people who are different and who or what in a society determines/defines disability

6. Factors that help a person overcome differences or disability

7. How the use of tone and/or symbolism affected their attitudes about the character with a disability

8. What the students believe true disability really is

Elements of Style

Selections with themes of disability should be examined for their use and balance of character, tone and symbolism. These three elements can leave the reader feeling comfortable or uncomfortable with a character's disability (and perhaps with disability in general). Or, the elements can lead the reader to accept disability and difference as a natural part of life.

Characterization is best accomplished when developed to show both strengths and weaknesses. Characters with disability should not be portrayed stereotypically: over-gullible, completely evil, over-sexed, grossly physically deformed. Today we know that these narrow views are as inaccurate as are racial/ethnic stereotypes.

Some authors use tone in a manner that reveals their own discomfort with disability. An author who is uncomfortable with a character's disability often uses tones of discomfort, darkness, and isolation. Sometimes an author, in an attempt to be positive, loses balance in the other direction, using tones of utter happiness and complete innocence. Neither use of tone is appropriate. Rather, tone should reflect the same balance one would expect with any other theme. Many of today's authors use a balance in tone which grows naturally from the plot

(Betty Byar's **Summer of the Swans and The Pinballs**).

Good literature often uses disability as a symbol for evil, witchery, fear, or some other negative images (Virginia Hamilton's **M.C. Higgins, The Great**). Conversely, the loss of a disability is often a symbol of good, freedom, love, and other positive images (**Beauty and the Beast**). When used without balance, teacher's can be sensitive to the power of symbolism over the reader and can choose carefully and discuss thoroughly.

Positive Disability Language

A final consideration in selecting and using literature with disability themes is to look for positive disability language. This is most useful when selecting nonfiction: magazine and newspaper articles, essays, informational books. Fiction writers, too, can employ positive disability language without compromising their artistic freedom. Guidelines for the use of positive disability language are as follows.

1. Look for an emphasis on words and descriptions of personhood rather than words of disability.

2. Avoid selections which use words of disability when it's unnecessary.

3. Avoid selections which use the verb "to be" about characters with disability ("she **is** mentally retarded", "They **are** handicapped").

4. Look for selections that show that individual differences are an acceptable part of being human.

Summary

Teachers without extensive knowledge of disability need not be concerned about using themes of disability to meet general education

goals. With this information, the use of colleagues in special education, and an open mind, themes of disability can enrich the reading lives of students and teachers.

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

Early Grades

- Ollie Forgot** by Tedd Arnold. New York, Dial Books, 1988.
- Impossible Possum** by Ellen Conford. Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1971.
- Wilfried Gordon McDonald Partridge** by Mem Fox. New York, Macmillan, 1985.
- Buffy's Orange Leash** by Stephen Golder and Lise Memling. Washington, D.C., Kendall Green Publications, 1988.
- I Wish I Were a Butterfly** by James Howe. Orlando, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.
- The Lion and the Rat** by La Fontaine. Oxford, England, Oxford Univ. Press, 1984.
- Where's Chimpy?** by Berniece Rabe. Niles, IL, Albert Whitman, 1988.
- Why Am I Different?** by Norma Simon. Niles, IL, Albert Whitman, 1976.
- Crow Boy** by Taro Yashima. New York, Viking, 1955.

Middle Grades

- Sounder** by William H. Armstrong. New York, Harper and Row, 1969.
- Blubber** by Judy Blume. New York, Dell, 1974.
- The Pinballs** by Betsy Byars. New York, Harper and Row, 1977.
- The Summer of the Swans** by Betsy Byars. New York, Puffin Books, 1981.
- The Whipping Boy** by Sid Fleischman. Mahwah, NJ, Troll Assoc., 1986.
- The Stone-Faced Boy** by Paula Fox. New York, Macmillan, 1968.
- Fish Face** by Patricia Reilly Giff. New

York, Dell, 1984.

- M.C. Higgins, The Great** by Virginia Hamilton. New York, Macmillan, 1974.
- The Babysitter's Club: Jessi's Secret Language** by Ann M. Martin. New York, Scholastic, 1988.
- Beauty and the Beast** by Marianna Mayer. New York, Macmillan, 1978.
- The Ugly Duckling** by Marianna Mayer. New York, Macmillan, 1987.
- Sing Down the Moon** by Scott O'Dell. New York, Dell, 1970.
- Words by Heart** by Ouida Sebestyen. Boston, Little, Brown & Co., 1979.
- Mufaro's Beautiful Daughters** by John Steptoe. New York, Lothrop, Lee & Shephard, 1987.

Older Grades

- The Outsiders** by S.E. Hinton. New York, Dell, 1967.
- Flowers for Algernon** by Daniel Keyes. New York, Bantam, 1988.
- The Elephant Man** by Bernard Pomerance (play). New York, Grove Press, 1979.
- The Pearl** by John Steinbeck. New York, Viking, 1953.
- Of Mice and Men** by John Steinbeck. New York, Viking, 1953.
- Helen Keller** by Dennis Wepman. New York, Chelsea House, 1987.

SUSAN L. GABEL is a Learning Disabilities Consultant for the Walled Lake Consolidated Schools, Walled Lake, Michigan.