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Seeing Ability within Disability: Literature Edition

Though 20 percent of the United States population is disabled (CDC), discrimination against disabled¹ people is at an annual increase of 22 percent in schools and the workplace (EEOC). Only 3.4 percent of schools nationwide teach books about disabilities (physical, mental, and learning) by disabled authors and with disabled characters (CCBC). As a result, 20 percent of disabled students do not feel represented and heard in the classroom (Sayers Adomat). A lack of awareness of the disabled experience leads to an increase in stigmas and bullying. However, a plan can be implemented by teachers to prevent bullying and increase empathy and compassion in their students while also giving them a voice. That is through a diverse selection of books.

With persistent ableism² in the US, introducing young students³ to works of literature about the disabled experience in classrooms can act as a first-step combat plan to reverse misconceptions about disabled people in today's society by providing knowledge early on and introducing ideas of democratic values within students.

Books are such powerful tools in our lives. Reading books can transport people to magical, new worlds and “[help them] learn to understand human nature, weigh moral dilemmas,

¹ A physical, learning, or a mental disorder that limits an individual's mobility and can limit their participation in everyday life with an increase in ableism.

² Ableism is the discrimination against disabled people in favor of their non-disabled counterparts.

³ Students in elementary school to high school are considered young.

and use critical thinking skills,” English teacher and journalist Ann Hood wrote in her Ph.D. paper on the “Power of Literature: *A Practical and Philosophical Defense*.”

In addition to expanding understanding of human nature, books present a philosophical and psychological gift for children. The students feel heard and empowered when they see themselves as self-determined characters. They can lash out, feel silenced, and get aggressive if there is no representation in their classroom (Hood *Power of Literature: A Practical and Philosophical Defense*). The need for diverse books is critical because it gives students a voice and self-expression in a safe environment.

Though teachers should not remove “the classics” together, in a growing age of political and social polarization, it is important for classrooms to “reflect democracy and different identities in the United States,” according to Harvard Graduate School of Education English professor Jill Anderson (Anderson 4). With the rise of book bans and censorship, one might assume that it is “scary” for teachers to teach their students books about minority experiences.

However, a study conducted by Harvard University surveyed United States English teachers and found that though teachers were initially scared of teaching these books because they anticipated “parent and possible administration pushback,” teachers realized “it is not that scary anymore” once they got the ball rolling (Anderson 1). One teacher, Rachel Schubert, found that “her students were [more inclined] to share in class discussions and listen to their peers” (Anderson 3). Schubert also found an unexpected value in teaching her students diverse books; her students “displayed more interest in participating in democracy [and elections]” (Anderson 4), as well as being respectful. That is something, according to Schubert, “our Nation lacks” (Anderson 4).

Similarly, elementary and middle school students benefit from reading diverse books. Gus Alexiou, a disabled journalist, wrote an article entitled “Why disability representation in children’s books is key to an equitable future” Alexiou finds that in the “formative years⁴ of childhood, books for education and pleasure can shape young minds unlike anything else” (Alexiou 1). He continues by analyzing that when children are taught at a young age (elementary to middle school), they do not see disability as scary and realize “disabled kids are just like me.” Alexiou continues that when children in elementary school see disability as not threatening, bullying decreases, and there are fewer instances of “othering.”⁵ The critical part of teaching kids these books at a younger age is to combat bullying and ignorance.

A study by the US Government’s “Stop Bullying” Organization with the Education Development Center found that bullying behaviors can start as early as six (first-grade age). Bullying will likely increase throughout middle and high school if children are not introduced to books featuring different perspectives. In this way, literature is essential to not only reducing stigmas around the disabled experience, by making the school environment a safer place for all students (US Government’s “Stop Bullying” Organization 1).

An elementary school teacher, Donna Sayers Adomat, tested this theory by teaching her students books with disabled characters and led thoughtful discussions afterward. She found that in her elementary school classroom, friendships formed between disabled and non-disabled students, and her disabled students felt heard. Sayers Adomat concludes that teachers have a moral obligation to teach authentic books representing disabilities in the classroom to “examine diversity in society, [and] inevitably frame their students’ opinions regarding disability [positively]” (Sayers Adomat 2).

⁴ Formative years are preschool to middle school years.

⁵ The philosophy of treating people who are viewed as instinctively different from the rest of society differently and alienating the individuals as if they do not exist.

However, this can only occur successfully if the teacher knows what “authenticity” means. So what does it mean to teach diverse books about disabilities?

Heather Mufford, a researcher at The College at Brockport, finds that to reverse stigmas presented by mainstream media on disabilities being “a scary thing,” authentic representation in the classroom is vital to “enlighten[ing] the next generation of what is happening with their peers”(Mufford 4). Accurate representation presents itself in two parts.

The first is making sure the character is not existing for entirely inspirational purposes (inspirational porn⁶) and is not viewed as helpless or evil simply for being themselves (Mufford 5). Mufford found that bullying and stigmas within the classroom increase when teachers teach these harmful tropes. Educators can quickly challenge these stigmas with the proper lesson plan and safe class environment.

A meaningful way to provide a safe environment for students is by showing authentic characters: but what does this mean?

The authenticity of disabled characters, Mufford discovers, is when the characters have depth and life goals outside of existing. Alexiou adds to Mufford’s assertion that books “featuring disabled characters with the same dreams, ambitions, passions, and humor” can reduce stigma and increase the class’s empathy. Teachers have a unique opportunity to shape their student’s minds and allow them to be critical thinkers; an influential part of that is having in-class discussions after reading assignments. In-class discussions are essential to teaching representation (Alexiou 3, Mufford 20).

In-class discussions can give students a voice and feel represented, and disabled students feel safe to speak about their experiences. The goal is to humanize the people behind the

⁶ The reduction of the disabled population exists only as the inspiration for their non-disabled counterparts; disabled activist Stella Young created this phrase.

diagnosis and to show that disability is a vital part of one's identity but not the whole picture. Disability joy should take center stage, and authentic voices should be heard. Being listened to is the very core of democracy.

While it might seem straightforward to implement, unfortunately, books about the disabled experience are threatened by censorship and discrimination around the country. As of 2019, "out of 419 children's books published, only 11 had disability representation" due to discrimination disabled authors face (Alexiou 1). Sadly, it does not stop there. Not only do disabled authors face discrimination in publishing books about their individual experiences in recent years, but book bans on the state level have also threatened disabled voices.

According to Authors Mary Ellen Flannery and Malinda Lo, in conjunction with the *National Education Association* found, "52% of book bans in the US center around diverse populations, including disability." According to Lo, "minorities are being silenced" (Lo in conjunction with the *National Education Association* 3). Lo argues that schools should encourage students to read diverse books, so they can connect with themselves, recognize their identity, and share it with others. She concludes that the impact of self-development is essential for improving democracy because people's perspectives and voices are heard. An easy way to do this is through reading books that represent the identities of the United States. Now, more than ever, teachers have a moral obligation to fight censorship because though some parents might think they are "protecting" their children from feeling "guilty," they are doing their children a disservice.

According to Flannery, "censorship is deplorable" (Flannery 3). It can rip democracy by its seams because when public schools only have books with a white, heterosexual, Christian, male, and non-disabled point of view, they create an imbalance of ideas for their students,

ignoring the experience of marginalized communities. Though book banners want to “protect their children from “scary experiences,” they create ignorance within students. The “scary experience” usually happens to be around a minority’s experience, which is scary to the parents and not the children (Flannery in conjunction with the *National Education Association* 3). Book bans will not “protect children;” they will harm them moving forward. They will become close-minded and unable to see others’ points of view, which hinders our Nation’s democratic values. Flannery concludes that “legislation meant to “protect” teachers and students from “harsh topics” actually harm their student’s emotional well-being because they think “I do not matter.” As teachers in public schools might face more obstacles than their private school counterparts, both have a responsibility to their students. That is why the works of literature teachers choose are vital to their student’s well-being. Teachers can help give their students a voice to explore their identities. Then, hopefully, students saying “I do not matter” change their minds and say, “I do matter.”

Representation is positive for non-disabled students because books can “expose [the realities] of life with a disability and increase students’ understanding and the development of meaningful relationships” (Mufford 6). Why should this matter to non-disabled students if it does not personally affect them? According to the Centers for Disease Control, one in four adults, or 26%, will develop a chronic condition or become disabled in their lifetime (Centers for Disease Control 2). A person could become disabled at any point in their life, which is why authentic representation and knowledge early can increase respect in the classroom early on and help the students in life move forward if they or a family member was diagnosed with a disability later on in life.

Teachers in the United States are increasingly seeing positive responses from students, both disabled and non-disabled. As earlier mentioned, one English teacher Donna Sayers Adomat tested the theory of more diversity in her class book list. She found that her students liked learning more about the disabled experience if they had not previously heard about it. In response, children with disabilities in her classroom, particularly learning disabilities, felt inclined to share their experiences in a safe environment. Sayers-Adomat said her learning-disabled students felt “smart” when their classmates heard their voices. The books read in class included characters with learning disorders that broke down the stigmas surrounding them (Sayers-Adomat 5).

Sayers-Adomat (elementary and middle school) and Rachel Schubert (high school), both English teachers, found that positive interactions, meaningful conversations, connections, and friendships increased in their classrooms when everyone’s voices were heard, non-disabled students reached out in allyship and support. As a result, disabled students were not fearful of judgment by their circumstances.

Teachers have significant intellectual influence over their students. Whether they realize it or not, they are a mentor in their students’ lives.

As ableism continues to plague our world, teachers can guide students to be well-rounded members of society by introducing our Nation’s identities through their booklists. Teachers can provide a platform for students to discover, think critically, and gain empathy for all minorities’ experiences, especially the disabled community. Sayers-Adomat and Schubert are morally obligated to present authentic representation within their curriculum and follow the readings through Socratic-style discussions. They feel other teachers need to do the same as they see their students who are “hungry for knowledge” build meaningful connections. As Donna

Sayers-Adomat says, “Teachers who give children books about disabilities are striving to build bridges, not reinforce prejudices” (Sayers-Adomat 3), which we need more of in this country: empathy, connection, and critical thinking.

In this way, teachers can contribute to the Catholic social teaching of “solidarity” by teaching students books that they do not personally identify with and bringing a positive outlook to the discussion with their students. Teaching books at a young age helps build awareness within students so they can become critical thinkers and allies.

Teaching books with authentic disabled characters can also humanize the person behind the diagnosis, representing “life and dignity of the human person” (the first Catholic Social Teaching). Teachers can show their students that a person’s diagnosis is not the only part of their identity. They are also resilient, and the content of their character matters.

Books, reading, and having meaningful conversations are vital to democracy and understanding others. The current increase in ableism is un-democratic, and students should be taught at a young age to respect people with disabilities and other minority groups. In this way, books about disability can act as a first step in the prevention plan to combat ableism and protect democracy by protecting individual voices and the disabled community’s collective desire to be heard.

Democracy is based on the ideology of representation, and teachers can enlighten the minds of the next generation; in this way, perhaps the most crucial job in the world is to be a teacher, particularly an English teacher when teachers teach books that represent minorities’ experiences instead of ignoring them they allow their students to have a “free inquiry of democracy [and what being a good citizen means to them]” (Flannery 4).

Educators must continue fighting for their student's education; with the rise of censorship, teachers can take back that power of listening to one another within the classroom. When teachers teach books with various experiences, they show their students that someone's invisible or physical differences are not the whole person's identity and character. Teachers have the power to create a safe environment where students are unafraid to be judged or bullied for being themselves; teachers can increase awareness of the forgotten voices in society and help guide their students to be positive, critical thinkers who strive to make the world a more inclusive, accessible, and equitable place. That is one of the most democratic things anyone can do: allowing their students' voices to be heard.

A List of Books with Authentic Disability Representation

1. *Unbroken: 13 Stories Starring Disabled Teens*, edited by Marieke Nijkamp (Middle to High School level).
2. *Haben: The DeafBlind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law, A Memoir* by Haben Girma (High school level).
3. *Disability Visibility: First Person Stories From The Twenty-First Century*, edited by Alice Wong (Middle to High school level).
4. *A Time to Dance* by Padma Venkatraman (Middle to High school level).
5. *Being Heumann: An Unrepentant Memoir of a Disability Rights Activist* by Judy Heumann (High school level).
6. *Out of my Mind* by Sharon M Draper (Middle school level).
7. *El Deafo* by Cece Bell (Elementary to Middle school level).
8. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (High school level).
9. *Demystifying Disability: What to Know, What to Say, and How to Be an Ally* by Emily Ladau (Middle to High school level).
10. *All the Way to the Top: How One Girl's Fight for Americans with Disabilities Changed Everything* by Annette Bay Pimentel (Elementary to High school level).
11. *A Disability History of the United States* by Kim E. Nielsen (for history classes, High school level).
12. *The Running Dream* by Wendelin Van Draanen (Middle school level).

13. *Rolling Warrior: The Incredible, Sometimes Awkward, True Story of a Rebel Girl on Wheels Who Helped Spark a Revolution* by Judy Heumann and Kristen Joiner (High school level).
14. *The Beloved World of Sonia Sotomayor: From the Bronx to the Supreme Court* by Sonia Sotomayor (Middle to High school level).
15. *Fearlessly Different: An Autistic Actor's Journey to Broadway's Biggest Stage* by Mickey Rowe (High school level).

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Future." *Forbes*, Forbes, 27 Dec. 2022,

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