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Dis/Ability, Acceptance, Tolerance, and Inclusion in Children's and Young Adult Literature

For years, teachers have both strived and struggled to include literature in their classrooms that creates a positive space in which all students feel welcome. To be certain, this idealized goal of an all-inclusive classrooms extremely lofty, and most teachers can spend their entire career working to achieve this end having never actually achieved it. That being said, teachers can certainly look to use meaningful texts that open up a dialogue between them and their students with the ultimate goal of fostering a sense of inclusion. Books such as *Am I Blue?* and *Out of My Mind* are good places to start.

Marion Dane Bauer's collection of short stories *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence* is a moving and captivating amalgam of various accounts of dealing with salient issues affecting gay and lesbian adolescents. As a reader, I was drawn to this book over the other selections because, after reading the description, I wondered how a collection of short stories would be able to portray such a complex issue. I was also drawn to it because of the time period in which it was written. The mid-1990's were a drastically different era of tolerance and acceptance in the LGBTQ community, and I was curious to see how the book would capture the challenges of that era of emerging gay rights issues.

To answer my first question, while reading the book I found the stories themselves to be thoughtfully poignant, tender, and moving, and I thought each afterword written by the author themselves provided an essential complement to the story in terms of providing

a sense of purpose and message that may or may not have been implied by the events of the story itself. For example, some of the more personally memorable stories to me seemed most memorable because the author's explanation at the end left the reader with an indelible message or strong personal connection. Stories such as James Cross Giblin's "Three Mondays in July" or Lois Lowry's "Holding" all developed a greater sense of purpose based on the author's brief comments following the story. Giblin's story follows an adolescent boy living in rural America whose confusion regarding his sexual identity is heightened when he stumbles upon a voyeuristic situation at the beach one day. The story's conclusion finds the boy nervously discussing his confusion with the older man and feeling a sense of affirmation at the conclusion. To firmly assert the purpose of the story, Giblin himself states that he went through a similar (but not the same) experience and felt a great deal of confusion while growing up. To me, this made the message of the story that more resonant and the characters all the more believable. Lowry's "Holding," in contrast, contains a surprise ending of sorts when the main character reveals to his friend that the funeral he attended was for his father's boyfriend of many years, not his girlfriend. This leaves the reader with a greater sense of perspective regarding the gay and lesbian community, and Lowry herself states that she has had firsthand experience with diversity, having lived in many places around the world and interacting with many people.

As for my second question, while reading these stories I got a collective image in my mind of the struggles facing adolescents questioning their sexual identity not just in the early 90's like I had assumed, but for decades leading up to that point. It would be a difficult (or impossible) task to find one common thread that connects ALL the stories together but, ultimately, many of them dealt with the issue of having the courage to confront one's

identity and speak up about it. In addition, many stories focused on the potential problems that those in the gay community face from family, friends, or society. As such, the book promotes the idea of finding people that one feels comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings with and finding an outlet to express oneself in a positive, safe environment.

As a teacher, I considered the myriad ways a book like this could broaden the perspective of my students, and not simply the ones who may be struggling with these questions themselves. A book such as this has the power to develop a shift in thinking for many which, when rightly viewed, can be tremendously influential. To me, the book was particularly powerful because the central characters in the stories were people “just like them,” meaning that the bulk of the protagonists in the stories were readily identifiable.

Stories like “Winnie and Tommy,” “Slipping Away,” and “Parents’ Night” are particularly beneficial for students, as they contain an important message about being tolerant among friends or family. They also clearly show that a person’s reaction to someone else’s identity can have a profound impact on them, either positively or negatively. “Winnie and Tommy” builds to a conclusion in which Tommy explains to Winnie, his girlfriend of over a year, that he is gay and, for students, this story shows the complex emotions associated with an event such as this and the impact it can have on others. Simply exposing them to a story like this gives them a brief glimpse into an issue they may have never even considered. “Slipping Away” brings up similar ideas, but with the emphasis on how revealing one’s sexual identity can bring about negative consequences. The hurt feelings experienced by Maggie at the end of the story demonstrate the crucial issue of tolerance and acceptance, and the often devastating consequences that can accompany a person’s choice to come out to one of their friends. Finally, “Parents’ Night” is an interesting story,

simply because it combines the idea of revealing one's identity to his or her parents and the effects that can have, but also discusses the basic principles of creating a safe school environment that fosters a sense of inclusion. This story in particular brings up multiple issues affecting LGBTQ youth and, once again, has the potential to significantly shift the perspectives of many young students. As such, the sheer quantity of stories in this book can give students a broader sense of perspective regarding the various differences and challenges facing the LGBTQ community.

As an educator, I think a book like this is an excellent starting point for developing a dialogue between students and teachers and developing a positive classroom environment that fosters inclusion and safety. I do not think, however, that this book should be the only resource for discussing such matters. Although the stories themselves are broad and varied, they present only a small fraction of issues affecting the gay community. In addition, as mentioned previously, the book is also slightly dated at this point, and recent developments regarding issues facing the community are also extremely important to discuss with students as well.

Including a book such as *Am I Blue?* into an English classroom has the potential to open doors for many students, but how a book such as this is presented is important to understand as well. Caroline Clark and Mollie Blackburn, in their article "Reading LGBT-Themed Literature with Young People: What's Possible?" explore the possibilities and caveats associated with bringing in reading that deals with sexual orientation into a classroom. They explain that, generally speaking, in high school classrooms, there is an "emphatic positioning of young people as straight and homophobic in schools and the socially sanctioned demand that students position themselves as such" (Clark and

Blackburn 27). Given this, they advocate that teachers should try to purposefully incorporate this literature in the classroom. According to them, if teachers do not use LGBT-themed literature in class with the end goal of combating homophobia or heterosexism and do not challenge their homophobic, heterosexist students, then they are “tacitly-if not willfully- affirming and even promoting heterosexism and homophobia in schools” (Clark and Blackburn 28). To be clear, teachers should not shy away from including such literature in the classroom, but they must be assertive of their end goals regarding said literature, otherwise they run the risk of developing a potentially less inclusive classroom than they had originally envisioned.

In addition, the authors explain that certain texts are used to promote empathy among straight people which “may lead, at best, to sympathetic responses in straight students who now feel sorry for gay people, a response that leaves LGTBQ students in the classroom positioned as pitiable” and that that teaching a LGTBQ-themed text as an isolated unit has the potential to reinforce that being a person of a LGTBQ orientation is nonnormative (Clark and Blackburn 28).

This brings up the important question of how best to incorporate a book like *Am I Blue?* into the curriculum while keeping these many parameters in mind. Teachers should consider using a book like this throughout the school year, not just as an isolated unit, and they should also be mindful of the discussions they are fostering in the classroom so as to not portray LGTBQ people as “nonnormative.”

This goal can be achieved by creating spaces in which students are able to share ideas freely without fear of negative repercussions both from their peers and the teacher. Jill Hermann-Wilmarth, in her study, “More than Book Talks: Preservice Teacher Dialogue

after Reading Gay and Lesbian Children's Literature," says, "I hope and believe that change in thinking is possible for my students and for myself, but when students are told that their thinking is wrong from the beginning, resistance will inhibit any possible change" (Hermann-Wilmarth 189). As such, she places a special emphasis on building a strong dialogue with students and is mindful of the fact that "bringing student experience into the classroom by acknowledging and validating that experience is the key component to dialogic learning" (Hermann-Wilmarth 189). Developing a classroom environment in which students feel their opinions are valued and all students feel safe enough to share their ideas is crucial for making a book like *Am I Blue?* have value for students. Without this kind of environment, the book becomes a simple curiosity, at best.

Shifting focus, the notion of disability and what is considered to be "normal" has been, for years, a subject that society has struggled to respond to appropriately. Given this sad truth, a book such as Sharon Draper's *Out of My Mind* becomes a crucial text for helping others understand the plight of the disabled or mentally challenged.

I chose this book simply because it had an excellent "hook" that drew me in. Just reading the first chapter piqued my curiosity enough to want to know more about the story's central character, Melody Brooks. As a reader, I found the book difficult to put down and at times I was so completely absorbed in the story that I would let hours slip by. My immersion in this book came from the simplicity of the character study that Draper builds throughout the first hundred pages or so. As a reader who is mostly unfamiliar with the challenges facing someone with cerebral palsy, I was (I hesitate to say it) fascinated by Melody's narration of the daily struggles she faces and how her parents work tirelessly to ensure she has the care she needs and deserved. Very little of the first third of the book is

plot-driven, but, nevertheless, I found myself curious to know more. Reflecting on this early section of the book, it serves as an excellent vehicle for the reader to make an emotional connection with Melody to heighten the devastation that occurs during the book's heartbreaking climax.

Although the climax of the book is gripping and emotional (I distinctly recall feeling a shortness of breath and my heart racing when I read both the sad moment at the airport and the chapter in which Melody's mom runs over her little sister), the book is filled with multiple moments in which the reader feels a thoughtful or gentle sadness on account of Melody's plight. At one point, Melody explains that she believes in herself and her family believes in her and so does Mrs. V. She says "it's the rest of the world I'm not so sure of." Several moments like this are peppered throughout the narration. Sad moments like Melody getting embarrassed at having to be fed at a restaurant, or having one of her convulsive spells (the "tornado spastic dance" as she calls it) while the rest of her mainstream class looks on helps the reader see what a struggle Melody faces just to exist. And this is all accompanied, of course, with Melody's own narration which is exuberant, emotional, and humorous.

After completing the novel, I certainly felt a greater sense of perspective, but I also felt the urge to recommend the book to others. The simplistic nature and straightforward story make this an easily accessible book with a powerful message. The fact that I felt the desire to hand this book to others only further serves to highlight how important this book is to explore the central ideas of "inclusion" and "normalcy."

To be certain, my desire to share this book with others connects well with my feelings about this novel as an educator. To say that I feel as if "everyone should read this

book” might be too broad a generalization, but I firmly feel that the central concepts that this book explores are important to understand and also readily accessible. To place this book in the hands of a student (at almost any grade level), would give them a greater sense of perspective regarding the ideas of normalcy, inclusion, and disability.

The book contains countless quotations and moments in which Melody just wants to fit in but feels left out because of her physical limitations. Again, her thoughtful narration reinforces her desire for normalcy. She also has several interactions with students, teachers, and other adults (especially her peers Molly and Claire) in which she challenges their preconceived ideas of normalcy. Her interactions and thoughts serve as a great starting point for discussing with students what is considered “normal” and how those ideas are challenged.

To continue, the idea of normalcy is paired well with the similar idea of inclusion. Melody’s desire to fit in and to be understood by her peers, her family, and the other influential adults in her life are both fostered and, at the same time, hindered by her use of her Medi-Talker device and the school’s decision to develop inclusion classrooms. Both elements of the story please Melody greatly at first; however, she also faces challenges from her peers and teachers regarding her transition.

Lastly, the idea of disability is ubiquitous throughout the entire novel, but Draper is cautious not to oversaturate the reader with plot elements detailing Melody’s limitations. Instead, the reader is left to get a sense of these challenges through the eyes of Melody as she lives her daily life. Through this, the reader sees small examples: her falling out of her chair while watching a movie, her inability to tell her mom that her fish jumped out of its

bowl, her needing to be carried up a flight of stairs. Thus, the idea of disability in the book remains subtle and omnipresent.

In the same way that *Am I Blue?* has the potential to open doors for students in terms of broadening perspectives, *Out of My Mind* can accomplish similar goals in the classroom. Recent studies have shown that, while books featuring characters with disabilities are being published more frequently in recent years than ever before, the quality of such books remains in question. Eve Tal's "Swimming the Mainstream: A Discussion of Criteria for Evaluating Children's Literature About Disabilities" explores the often problematic nature of this genre. Tal states both that "Despite the increasing inclusion of characters with disabilities in children's books, their quality falls below the quality of multicultural literature" and "Children's literature about people with disabilities too often falls into stereotypes or didacticism, as the impulse to inform the reader wins out over the desire to tell a good story" (Tal 32). To be sure, many authors start off with good intentions when crafting a story with a focus on disability, but their discussion often gets mired in explanatory text that only informs the reader and does not provide a good story.

Furthermore, Joan Blaska outlines criteria for evaluating literature about characters with disabilities. Some of her criteria explains that the book should emphasize success rather than, or in addition, to failure; promote positive images of persons with disabilities or illness; promote attitudes of "one of us" not "one of them"; and illustrates characters in a realistic manner (Blaska).

Given these criteria, this is what makes *Out of My Mind* such a unique and special book. The aforementioned criteria all connect well with the text. The idea of success mixed with failure is certainly demonstrated through Melody's recurring triumphs and failures.

Secondly, it would be difficult to argue that Melody Brooks as a character is not a positive portrayal of a person with a disability, as Draper's strong use of voice and tone of narration give the reader a sense that Melody is not a character to take pity on. To continue, the aforementioned idea of inclusion is seen in Blaska's third criteria, and the plot of the book certainly revolves around Melody's desire to become "one of us." Finally, the simple explanations that Draper provides the reader of Melody's struggle to exist in a "normal" society and the inclusion of Melody's daily challenges that seem menial to a person without disability give the reader a very real image of what it feels like to deal with cerebral palsy. Given these criteria, *Out of My Mind* is elevated to a higher level of books dealing with disability, as it seeks to both tell a good story while subtly informing the reader of the struggles of a person with disability. Draper's novel is clearly an important text in the canon of books dealing with disability and, when rightly viewed and discussed in the classroom, it can have the power to positively impact the perspectives of many.

Together, both *Am I Blue? Coming out from the Silence* and *Out of My Mind* are highly influential books for students that have the ability to open their eyes and expand their worldview to see the issues of acceptance and inclusion in a new and positive way. As teachers, we should always be mindful of including books such as these while also being absolutely certain to utilize these texts purposefully in a way that fosters a positive classroom environment.

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