

Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education

Volume 1

Number 8 *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*

Vol. 1, No. 8 (Summer/Fall 2004)

Article 3

Summer 2004

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Repository Citation

Hollander, S. A. (2004). Inclusion Literature: Ideas for Teachers and Teacher Educators, *Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education*, 1 (8).

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Inclusion Literature:
Ideas for Teachers and Teacher Educators

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Inclusion is certainly a wonderful idea. Sadly, it does not happen by itself. In reality, teachers are responsible for making inclusion work in the classroom. Every day, inclusive educators are faced with the significant challenge of creating a classroom environment where all children are accepted. Children's literature can play an important role in this effort

Children's books are powerful; they provide an avenue by which readers gain a more complex perception of themselves and others. Readers learn that all characters share universal experiences: dreams, challenges, embarrassments, and triumphs (Rohner & Rosberg, 2003). Children's literature serves innumerable purposes at home and in the classroom. Literature about disabilities, inclusion literature, has a specific and valuable purpose: it can help students become more accepting of individual differences, particularly in today's inclusive classrooms (Andrews, 1998).

Inclusion literature has many benefits for readers with and without disabilities. According to Winsor (1998), these books can help explain a disability in uncomplicated, jargon-free language. Providing a perspective different from textbooks, field trips, or observations, inclusion literature can ease fears fueled by ignorance and replaces negative stereotypes with accurate information (Andrews, 1998). In

sum, this type of literature can help students develop awareness and empathy by providing a genuine connection to the lives of individuals with disabilities.

These books also have the potential to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation among students with disabilities. Inclusion literature is an inexpensive, entertaining, and authentic way to communicate with these children and provide them with stories about themselves and how they cope in their daily lives (Ayala, 1999). According to Rohner and Rosberg (2003, p. 40), “children with disabilities who encounter protagonists with special needs may also for the first time discover characters with whom they can relate.” Of great importance to inclusive educators, research indicates that inclusion literature can be used to encourage positive peer relations among students of differing abilities (Andrews, 1998; Heim, 1994).

Role of the Classroom Teacher

Few would argue that classroom teachers are critical in the inclusion process. Their attitudes and instructional choices are at the heart of a successful classroom. Inclusion literature is just one of many tools available to inclusive educators, and there are a variety of tasks associated with effective use of these books. To derive the greatest benefit for students, teachers should consider the following responsibilities:

1. Evaluation of books;
2. Facilitation of discussion;
3. Implementation of related activities; and
4. Integration into the curriculum.

Evaluation of books.

Classroom educators must carefully examine each book to determine its suitability, accuracy, and literary quality. These books must have believable plots and engaging stories (Rohner & Rosberg, 2003). Characters must be portrayed realistically and positively. Of course, students' reading and maturity levels are always important considerations in the evaluation process (Kitterman, 2002).

Evaluation is very important because inclusion literature, like most pedagogical tools, is not perfect. There are numerous gaps and shortcomings in available books. Many of these books do not reflect modern, culturally and linguistically diverse classrooms and communities. In an investigation of 59 books for young children portraying characters with disabilities, Ayala (1999) found that "few books included ethnically diverse characters, few were in languages other than English, and all placed little or no emphasis on specific cultural practices."

Many disabilities are not well represented in current children's books. Carroll and Rosenblum (2000) lament the dearth of young adult literature with realistic portrayals of characters with visual impairments. Some disabilities are represented in the literature, but educators may be surprised and disappointed by the values communicated by the authors. Mills (2002) rightfully writes against books that subtly and not-so-subtly express and endorse demeaning attitudes toward individuals with mental disabilities. Prater (2003) documented the many strengths and weaknesses of portrayals of characters with learning disabilities in current children's and adolescent literature.

While censorship is never recommended, it's clear that inclusion literature is vulnerable to the same flaws as any other genre. Despite improvement over the past few years, some books are riddled with problems, such as shallow, stereotypical, or inaccurate portrayals of parents, educators, and individuals

with disabilities, outdated information, improbable events, and excessively preachy or didactic text. To help teachers select appropriate books, there are many excellent general and disability-specific annotated bibliographies of inclusion literature (Heim, 1994; Carroll & Rosenblum, 2000; Landrum, 2001; Stelle, 1999; Prater, 2000; Rohner & Rosberg, 2003; Turner & Traxler, 1997; Winsor, 1998) and lists of questions and criteria for purposes of evaluation (Heim, 1994; Carroll & Rosenblum, 2000; Landrum, 2001; Andrews, 1998).

Facilitation of discussion.

Books about characters with disabilities are generally not intended to be the subject of conventional classroom story time or bedtime story time at home (Winsor, 1998). They are best read at times and in contexts that foster reflection.

Teachers are advised to share these books and discuss issues in small groups or literature circles, so children can share their feelings, questions, and concerns, and relate the issues portrayed to their personal lives (Rohner & Rosberg, 2003; Prater, 2003).

Andrews (1998) reports that inclusion literature can yield many broad topics for discussion, such as labeling, friendships, parents, barriers, and school. If desired, teachers may lead students in more targeted discussions about ideas and information, e.g., what is universal language? or skills, e.g., waiting patiently when interacting with an individual with a communication impairment (Turner & Traxler, 1997).

Books about characters with disabilities can play a role in differentiated instruction and discussion. According to Andrews (1998):

The variety of reading levels and specific disabilities dealt with in inclusion literature makes it possible for every student to select and read a book, complete related activities, and engage in open-ended response discussions where students can share, compare, and contrast how the different books dealt with disabilities and related issues.

Specific topic or methodology aside, discussion time is very valuable. It gives children the opportunity to share their views and express their uncertainties as they learn to live with siblings, friends, and classmates who are different.

Related activities and curricular connections

In addition to thoughtful discussion, there are many possibilities for related activities. Some educators arrange role-playing and simulation exercises for students. These are “hands-on activities where students can better understand their own feelings and experience what it is liked to be disabled” (Andrews, 1998). These activities may be carried out in or out of school. One example: Turner and Traxler (1997) suggest that students practice lip reading and then describe their experience. Also along the lines of active learning, Kitterman (2002) makes many fine recommendations including field trips to rehabilitation facilities or sheltered workshops, school or class wide service projects, and classroom visits from adults with disabilities or medical or therapeutic personnel.

Rohner and Rosberg (2003) propose writing projects that extend from the books, such as interviewing an individual with disabilities or researching a specific disability. Kitterman (2002) advises teachers to ask students to modify folktales to “include a wheelchair or to have some type of disability displayed in a character.” Students may also compose poems, write letters of inquiry or advice to characters, or use reader-response journals to document their thoughts and feelings.

Andrews (1998) suggests that teachers consider where inclusion literature and related activities naturally fit into already existing themes and topics in content areas. As part of Stelle's (1999) annotated bibliography, she links specific books to different curricular themes, many in the areas of science, nature, art, and character education. Similarly, Winsor (1998) reports that inclusion literature might be used as a resource in secondary health or Psychology curricula.

Teachers who do not have the time or inclination for dedicated activities or full-scale integration into the curriculum may find other uses for inclusion literature. These books might be placed in classroom libraries or recommended on an individual basis to students, parents, librarians, or other school-based professionals. In sum, carefully selected children's books, coupled with relevant discussion and activities, can serve as an effective introduction to the unique needs of every individual.

Role of the Teacher Educator

Winsor (1998) reports that inclusion literature is a worthy topic for workshop discussions among pre-service and in-service teachers. Prater (2003) also urges teacher educators to seek out fictional portrayals of individuals with disabilities, and she suggests several ways to utilize these books in different classes:

For example, in a characteristics course, university students could compare the characteristics portrayed in a juvenile fiction book with the characteristics learned in the course. In methods courses, students can write lesson plans involving the use of books to teach about learning disabilities. In addition, children's literature courses should incorporate books with characters with LD as required reading; and textbook authors preparing materials for future teachers could provide lists of appropriate books as part of their curriculum. (p. 61)

Book sharing.

As a teacher educator, I find it is worthwhile to integrate these books into my courses and I would like to add simple book sharing as a valuable activity. Books can be introduced, described, and passed around class in a compelling and time-effective manner. There is no research to indicate that teachers-in-training have significant knowledge of this genre, which is tailor-made for inclusion. On occasion, I will read brief passages from selected books. Pens quickly fly up to copy down titles, authors, and publishers as students easily grasp the general idea of inclusion literature and make note of specific recommendations. After my presentation, more experienced students sometimes bring in their own disability-related children's books to share with peers, and everyone's knowledge base is expanded.

Bookmaking.

After book sharing, I often engage my students in a brief bookmaking activity.

Bookmaking is effective because it involves two powerful modes of thought and expression: linguistic and visual (Brewster, 1997). As a teaching-learning activity, bookmaking is remarkably versatile. Most bookmaking projects require inexpensive, easily accessible materials and result in impressive finished products (Marzollo, 1991). These projects have proven to be successful with many types of students (Bellinger, 1994; Fielding, 1998).

My bookmaking activity is quite basic. Although it is possible, I do not provide art supplies, such as construction paper, scissors, and markers. In small groups of three or four, I ask students to fold an unlined piece of paper into quarters and develop a multi-page plan for a fresh, new book that would be appropriate and interesting for students in their (potential or actual) inclusive classroom. I usually allot 15 to 30 minutes for group work. This activity helps my students with some of the tasks associated with

inclusion literature. Bookmaking stimulates students' thinking about the evaluation of books, particularly gaps in the literature, and it serves a model of an activity for their own classes.

I believe that teacher educators will be delighted by students' response to this assignment. Many Education students are well versed in children's literature. Some are strong and imaginative writers and illustrators, and a few harbor dreams that they may be the next Karen Hesse or J. K. Rowling. Although I have not read every book of this kind, it seems that my students often pick up on gaps in current inclusion literature. They have created books about topics such as Early Intervention (services for children ages birth to two), low incidence disabilities, the "hidden curriculum," "twice exceptional" children, and the roles of co-teachers. They have also penned bilingual and culturally sensitive books. After students develop their books, I ask them to share their work with the other small groups. Group members are usually quite proud of their finished products and happy to share their thoughts on the process. Many students reported that they successfully used the recommended books and bookmaking activities in their own classrooms.

As mentioned earlier, bookmaking is versatile; this activity could be used as a homework project, an open-ended question on an exam, an extra credit assignment, or a full-scale activity for ongoing group work. Depending on the parameters of the assignment, finished products may be graded. Students can put the books in their teaching portfolios or use them in activities for their own students. Outside the classroom, bookmaking has proven popular as a topic for workshops at local conferences and as a creative component of Master's theses. Based on my experiences, I can say that bookmaking is a truly inclusive activity; students of all ages and skill levels can enjoy and learn from this type of project.

Conclusion

Books make the unknown known; they provide opportunities for readers to grow and develop in many ways. Inclusion literature is no exception. Books about characters with disabilities can play an important part in the successful inclusive classroom. There is no doubt that school-based professionals can benefit from increased awareness and appreciation of this genre. Related discussion and activities make inclusion literature, already a good thing, even better.

If these books are introduced in an atmosphere of safety, respect, and honest inquiry, they have the potential to become a much-needed gateway to increased understanding and improved social relations among students. Indeed, inclusion literature provides lessons for life. In the future, society as a whole will benefit from the efforts of authors, illustrators, teachers, and teacher educators to help children develop positive attitudes about differences and disabilities.

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