

Teaching Students about Difference Through Fiction

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Commented [S1]: Note that the title page is formatted in APA 6th edition style. You can get help with formatting at APA Style Central, located in the Purdue University Global Library.

*Please note that this is a **sample** Unit 8 Assignment to help inspire and guide your own original writing of the assignment. Be sure to review the assignment instructions and grading rubric, complete each task in the instructions, and contact the instructor with any questions.*

Teaching Students about Difference Through Fiction

Imagine a mother constantly receiving messages that her daughter should be “put down” or that she should have had an abortion because the child is “defective” and costly to society. This very situation emboldened Natalie Weaver, a woman whose child has severe cranial-facial abnormalities, to start a campaign on Twitter to consider disability hate speech. Due to her work, Twitter recently added hate speech towards the disabled to their reporting feature (Cassidy, 2018). Unfortunately, situations like this the one this mother experienced are not unique. Despite assertions that bullying is just kids being kids, the behavior actually comes from not understanding differences, disabilities, and specialness – a problem parents, educators, and others who work with children can solve; one way to do this is through fiction. The K8 School District should require middle school English classes to read a book dealing with disability because the conversations these books raise help to reduce bullying and encourage inclusion.

Bullying is a broad concern because schools serve a variety of special populations. While bullying occurs everywhere, children with disabilities experience it more frequently. Many student populations with differences are bullied at a higher rate than the general population. In 2013-14, the average of special populations in schools nationwide included 35% learning disabled, 21% with speech or language issues, 13% other impairment and 8% Autism as well as multiple other conditions in smaller groups (NCES, 2016). These numbers suggest the seriousness and importance of considering differences in school settings. Bullying based on perceptions of difference could affect a considerable population considering the variety of unique student concerns. For example, children with autism are three times more likely to be bullied than typical peers, and children with epilepsy and medical conditions like cerebral palsy are more likely to be bullied and called names than their typical peers (Stopbullying.org, 2018). The

Commented [S2]: Note the changes made to the thesis and introduction paragraph from the units 7 and 8 discussions. The paragraph now stays in third person, and the thesis has a more specific recommendation about how to address this problem in the author’s local community.

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lasting and detrimental consequences of bullying and name calling can be seen both in the classroom and beyond.

Children with perceived differences suffer due to the torment in a variety of ways. Kids who are bullied are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, sleep issues, health problems, and lower GPAs and test scores (Stopbullying.org, “Effects of Bullying,” n.d.). These are quite serious issues that can lead to dire consequences. According to StopBullying.gov (n.d.),

Children with disabilities—such as physical, developmental, intellectual, emotional, and sensory disabilities—are at an increased risk of being bullied. Any number of factors—physical vulnerability, social skill challenges, or intolerant environments—may increase the risk. Research suggests that some children with disabilities may bully others as well. (“Bullying and Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Needs,” para. 1).

In addition to the setbacks that typical children experience when being bullied, those with disabilities can also suffer what is called “regression,” where they lose skills they had previously gained (Walsh, 2015). For disabled children who struggle to gain each new skill, this possibility of regression due to bullying is especially painful, both for the child and her parents. Outside of the real personal and academic consequences of bullying, there is also an issue of civil rights:

When bullying is directed at a child because of his or her established disability and it creates a hostile environment at school, bullying behavior may cross the line and become “disability harassment.” Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, the school must address the harassment. Read more about federal civil rights laws. (Stopbullying.gov, n.d., “Bullying and Youth with Disabilities and Special Health Needs,” para. 5).

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Knowing the seriousness of the issue of bullying those with perceived difference, it is essential that those who can influence children's understanding of difference do what they can to help students better accept peers who have disabilities.

One **effective** means people can use for teaching students about differences is fiction. For example, *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper (2010) allows students to experience life through the eyes of an 11-year-old who, though brilliant, cannot speak and is labeled "brain-damaged." Educating children will make them more empathetic and create a safer learning environment. The novel shows how Melody learns to communicate with others and displays her intelligence using a communication device. The novel highlights differences and similarities. *Out of My Mind* examines the social, physical, and emotional challenges that a special needs child faces but reminds readers that they can never know everything in a child's mind (Draper, 2010). This is not the only text that can fulfil the function, but it is important to note that not every text will be appropriate. Educators must choose fiction that is best suited to the students' grade level.

Just as educators need to find texts most suited to their students' level of understanding, so too should they develop supplemental exercises. For example, it is not just through reading fiction that students can start to understand difference; they can also develop understanding by creating their own works. Depending on the age of the student, there are a variety of assignments that can let students learn about difference while developing their own sense of expression and creativity. According to the National Education Association, students in grades 3-5 can create responses to literary pieces that allow them to reflect on similar experiences and feelings they might have had because of perceived differences or bullying. Students can also be instructed to create collages and other art pieces that extend on the creative activities explored in the fictional pieces (NEA, 2017). While **these** classroom activities can help to prevent bullying through

Commented [S6]: Note the last paragraph ends with a statement that leads into this topic sentence (general comment that more should be done to influence how children perceive peers with differences to a specific statement about a way this can be done).

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greater understanding of difference, some responsible for child instruction might disagree with this approach.

Parents and educators may feel that the other should have the responsibility of stopping bullying. Parents argue that since teachers are there when incidents occur more than parents, educators should take the lead. Educators may contend that character education and development, including empathy, should take place at home. Additionally, educators and parents shy away from handling issues that they feel unprepared to deal with; this may be one reason that some argue against including children with special needs in classes with their typical peers to begin with since disruptive behaviors like arm flapping could increase conflict in the classroom (Constantinescu & Samuels, 2016). Parents (and perhaps teachers) have not had formal training about disabilities, while educators worry about stepping on family values. Because the solution lies with everyone, steps must be taken to educate all members of the community. Organizations such as Choose Kind provide resources for parents, educators, students, and others (“Choose Kind Tumblr,” 2018). Through a combined approach of family and school, there can be a greater impact of the teachings that fictional works can illicit. For example, the Choose Kind campaign was started by the Children’s Craniofacial Association after the publication of the book *Wonder*, which is a piece of creative non-fiction about a boy with a craniofacial deformity. When the text is read in class,

Teachers report that after reading *Wonder* and participating in a visit or Skype session, students are more outgoing and more patient with each other, and bullying problems get resolved. This proactive kindness education is even stronger and more powerful than bullying prevention alone, because our resources help students form values that will stay with them their entire lives. The Choose Kind message is truly universal because at some

point in all of our lives we feel unsure, self-conscious, and out of place. (Children's Craniofacial Association, 2018, para. 5)

Given that *Wonder* has now been adapted to film, parents could easily watch the film with their children to further discuss the various issues of disability, difference, and bullying that could be started in a classroom by reading the novel. It is through this combined approach that everyone can feel more comfortable teaching empathy and acceptance of perceived difference and "specialness."

"If you have a choice between being right and being kind, choose kind." This quote from Dr. Wayne W. Dyer and shared by Mr. Browne in *Wonder* can highlight what fictional works can help students realize about their peers from various populations. Putting a face, whether fictional or not, to the problems posed by bullying can allow students to relate to their special peers more and grasp the importance of kindness. Bullying is a wide spread problem that needs a community solution. Because children with disabilities are bullied at a higher rate, parents and educators have to be creative in helping other children understand differences. Fiction can be an important tool in this approach. Not all books will work in all settings, but a wealth of books like *Out of My Mind* and *Wonder* provide a starting point for educators, parents, and students to start the conversation.

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Commented [S8]: Remember key rules about formatting the references page, such as using the hanging indent, alphabetizing entries, and ensuring that any sources listed here are cited in-text as well. For more details on reference page formatting and citations, see APA Style Central and review the APA resources in Units 5 and 6.

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