From Social Studies to Social Action for a Disability Inclusive World

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Abstract

Using rich literature in social studies contexts is a powerful tool for fostering awareness of, and respect for, difference. Though certainly admirable, these outcomes are, by design, limiting. This article advocates the reconceptualization of how classroom teachers approach and subsequently use disabilities-based literature. Premised on critical literacy and social justice, such literature has the potential to move students from a passive recognition of difference to a response based on advocacy and action.

Key Words: Children’s literature, inclusion, social action, instructional strategies, integration, social studies, literacy
Introduction

Some may argue that, in the past 60 years, our country has made great strides towards equality for all. While strides have been made toward equality for some (Belenky, Clinchy, & Goldberger, 1986; Williams 2004), there still are many groups and individuals who experience discrimination on a consistent basis (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1996). People with disabilities are one such group. Tim Shriver, chairman and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Special Olympics, recently discussed his views regarding people with disabilities:

They still feel alone. They still feel that they don't belong. In general, they don't feel supported by their communities. People look at them and walk the other way. They cross the street. We're not educating kids to understand them. We're not educating kids – even asking kids in their own schools to reach out and form friendships, to reach across the aisle to someone with a disability or with an illness and be a buddy, be a mentor, understand differences (Shriver, 2011).

In this quote, Shriver recognizes intolerance toward people with disabilities as a continuing significant problem in our society: a problem that must be addressed through education. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) (2010) argues that, “The primary purpose of social studies is to help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an independent world” (p. 9). This context of intolerance makes social studies classrooms the perfect places in which to examine issues of discrimination, from both historical and contemporary perspectives.

It is essential that communities, like the one Shriver envisions, where students understand, accept and include peers with disabilities, be created in classrooms around the world. We believe communities like this might be achieved through social studies curriculum that uses
FROM SOCIAL STUDIES TO SOCIAL ACTION

children’s literature and critical conversation to interrogate the injustices and mistreatment of people with disabilities for the purpose of taking social action. In a time when more and more schools are moving to full-inclusion models for educating students with disabilities (Theoharis & Theoharis, 2008), a critical stance toward the treatment of people with disabilities as well as the environmental conditions within which disabled students are being placed is necessary. We present a structure for using disabilities literature to critically engage elementary school students in conversations that lead to social action.

Children’s Literature and Classroom Instruction

Children’s literature can be a powerful instructional tool (Columba, Kim, & Moe, 2005; Laminack & Wadsworth, 2006). With high-quality literature, teachers can improve school curriculum by exploring ideas with more depth and breadth than typically is found in textbooks. The skilled use of children’s literature enriches curriculum, and has the potential to make positive contributions to the social needs of students. In the fields of both literacy and social studies, children’s literature has been used to create empathy among students, for racial and cultural groups who have, historically, experienced discrimination (Christensen, 2009; Peterson, 2009). The use of multi-cultural literature in classrooms to explore multiple perspectives of historical events, and to foster empathy and tolerance for marginalized cultural groups, is considered best practice and is an expectation for both new and practicing teachers (Au, Bigelow, & Stan, 2007; Wade, 2007). There is an abundance of research and children’s literature that can be used to support teachers in shifting students’ perceptions, understandings, and attitudes toward cultural groups. However, until recently, persons with disabilities, who also have been marginalized and discriminated against, have scarcely appeared in these bodies of work. As a result, teachers often find it challenging to identify appropriate children’s literature
and to use that literature to create curriculum that positively impacts students’ perceptions, attitudes, and actions towards peers with disabilities.

In their efforts to include students with disabilities in their classroom communities, educators have become increasingly aware of the need to have access to children’s literature portraying people with disabilities as productive members of society (Nasatir & Horn, 2003). Gaining access to this literature, however, may be more difficult than one might expect. While there are some good examples of inclusive literature available, “discriminatory language and/or negative stereotypes about disability continue to be present in a range of more contemporary children’s books” (Beckett, Ellison, Barrett, & Shah, 2010, p. 373). Thus, teachers need to be aware of the research on disabilities literature, if they are to become critical consumers and users of such literature.

Critically examining disabilities literature identifies both positive and negative attributes. Camille Jackson (2009) points out that, in some children’s books, “characters with disabilities often inhabit their own separate world, where disability is the only story, and people are either heroes, victims or sidekicks” (p. 1). Literature portraying characters with disabilities in these ways may serve to further isolate students with disabilities from their non-disabled peers in inclusive classrooms. In other books, characters with disabilities have individual and complex personalities “with a full range of activities and emotions such as joy, anger, enthusiasm and love” (Koc, Koc, & Ozdemir, 2010, p. 157).

In further examining characters with disabilities in children’s literature, Kevser Koc et al. (2010) identified positive and negative categories describing how authors portray relationships between disabled and non-disabled characters. Of the 46 texts examined, the researchers identified 11 types of relationships; 5 positive, 3 negative, and 3 they considered neutral. Among
the positive categories were relationships in which disabled characters achieve goals and other characters are proud of them, and disabled and non-disabled characters are friends and have fun together. Examples of relationships categorized as negative were those in which the disabled character is lonely and unhappy because the non-disabled character ignores or teases him/her, and those in which the disabled character is disadvantaged and disappointed and the non-disabled character is the helper/protector.

The analysis of inclusion literature is a necessary first step toward truly inclusive education. It is important, however, that the move toward more effective inclusive education does not stop when educators are able to identify disability-positive literature to share in their classrooms. Quality children’s literature is necessary, but not sufficient, when the goal is to “dispel stereotypes, prevent bullying and support students who are labeled ‘disabled’” (Jackson, 2009, p. 1). Equally important are the interactions occurring between learners and texts. Well-planned, socially structured interactions with quality literature can lead to students becoming socially responsible citizens in their classroom communities and in the world.

**Considering Theory and Reality in Inclusion Education**

According to Beverley Brenna (2008), there are two distinct benefits to using inclusive children’s literature in the classroom: first, non-disabled students develop a fuller understanding of students with disabilities, and second, disabled students see characters who have similar challenges and are able to overcome those challenges. Researchers in varying fields have examined students’ perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions towards peers with disabilities (Safran, 1995; Smith-D’Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010; Swaim & Morgan, 2001). More recently, researchers have begun to investigate the role of disabilities literature on students’ perceptions, attitudes and actions towards peers with disabilities (Kurttis & Gavigan, 2008;
Smith-D’Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Fifth grade students, for example, were engaged by Wendy Smith D’Arezzo and Cheryl Moore-Thomas in book club discussions of two books featuring a main character with a learning disability. Students read one of the books during a four-week period and participated in weekly discussions in which they were encouraged to “talk about their feelings toward the book.” The researchers analyzed pre- and post-checklists, interviews, and observations, concluding that the short-term intervention showed no clear increase in positive attitudes toward peers with learning disabilities.

While relatively little work has been done in this area, findings suggest that reading disabilities literature in classrooms is not enough to shift perceptions, attitudes, and/or actions towards peers with disabilities (Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008; Smith-D’Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Though we agree with Brenna’s (2008) contention that there are definite benefits to using inclusive children’s literature in classrooms, we believe that critical stance might lead to social action. We argue that teaching students about disabilities through the use of children’s literature and teaching students to empathize with the plight of people with disabilities so they choose to take positive action are not the same, and that the former does not naturally translate to the latter. Sharing disabilities literature in classrooms is only a first step in creating classroom communities where teachers and students work toward fairness for all, with the hope of mitigating discrimination both inside and outside the classroom.

It is time we acknowledge a widely held assumption that choosing and reading quality children’s literature that positively portrays people with disabilities leads to a change in attitudes and actions toward people with disabilities. Whereas it may be true that sharing quality literature builds awareness, understanding, and acceptance, research suggests this is not enough to change students’ attitudes and/or actions toward people with disabilities (Swaim & Morgan, 2001;
Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). We feel compelled to ask, therefore, the purpose of education. Is the purpose to promote change for a better society? Building awareness, understanding, and acceptance is a first step in changing attitudes and actions toward people with disabilities. To take the next step, we suggest merging critical literacy and social studies to create critical curriculum around children’s literature that focuses on social action.

Critical Literacy and Social Justice

Critical literacy is a stance, a view of education that perceives readers as active participants in the reading process. Educators who approach learning from a critical literacy perspective believe that no text is neutral. They invite learners to question the power relations existing between readers and authors. The notion of critical literacy has been around for some time. Paulo Freire (1970) described critical attention to power relations that promotes reflection, transformation, and action as necessary to combat what he defined as the banking concept of education. Here, “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72). Freire argues that the banking concept “negates education and learning as processes of inquiry” (p. 72), and stands in the way of education as a practice of freedom. He contends that education, a process of liberation and humanization, emerges from the practice of problem-posing and is grounded in “acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (p. 79). While we would argue that education still overwhelmingly reflects the banking concept, more and more researchers and practitioners are acknowledging the value of critical literacy in teaching toward active citizenry.

Social justice is defined as “the process of working toward, and the condition of, meeting everyone’s basic needs and fulfilling everyone’s potential to live productive and empowered lives as participating citizens of our global community” (Wade, 2007, p. 5). Teaching for social
justice involves educators in creating and working toward a vision of a socially just world. It means taking a critical stance. Mary Cowhey (2006) suggests “teaching critically listens to and affirms a minority voice that challenges the status quo. Instead of forcing assimilation and acceptance of dominant culture, it reexamines cultural assumptions and values and considers their larger ramifications” (p. 13). Social justice education is student-centered, collaborative, experiential, intellectual, and critical (Wade, 2007). We believe it takes a curriculum in which students are expected to question, collaborate, and act to create classroom communities that are fair and just for all. The ideal setting in which such a community can occur is in the social studies classroom. In the following sections, we provide a structure for engaging learners in critical conversations around the treatment of persons with disabilities. The structure for the conversations is theoretically grounded in social justice education and moves from looking outward, at how persons with disabilities are treated in texts, to looking inward, at how persons with disabilities are treated in our own communities. The goal for these critical conversations is to lead to an action plan for the fair and just inclusion of persons with disabilities in our communities. Quality children’s literature will be the foundation for just such conversations.

**Teaching for Social Justice**

In order to move beyond developing an awareness of disabilities to shifting the perceptions, attitudes, and actions toward people with disabilities, we have designed a structure for interrogating the treatment of persons with disabilities. Using quality children’s literature, our structure supports educators in helping learners:

1. Disrupt the stereotypes surrounding people with disabilities.
2. Consider how contexts marginalize people.
3. Envision how things could be different.
4. Create an action plan.

When identifying texts with which to use this structure, it is important to choose those that have main characters with disabilities. Texts including main characters with disabilities will provide many opportunities (contexts and situations) for critical conversations. Two texts we particularly like for employing our structure are Erskine’s (2010) *Mockingbird* and Codell’s (2003) *Sahara Special*. *Mockingbird* is about Caitlyn, an 11-year-old girl with Asperger’s syndrome, a mild form of autism spectrum disorder, who is dealing with the death of Devon, her older brother. *Sahara Special* is about a fifth grade girl who is labeled learning disabled and is pulled out of her regular classroom for special education services because she refuses to complete her schoolwork.

**Interrogating the Treatment of People with Disabilities in Texts and in Our Communities**

The National Council for the Social Studies (2010) believes that the civic mission of social studies demands the inclusion of all students in social studies classrooms that are laboratories of democracy. Quality children’s literature is an essential tool when working toward building communities, or “laboratories of democracy,” that are fair and equitable to all members. Such literature can elicit critical conversations around issues and injustices that can be dealt with from a distance until it is safe to bring the discussions closer to home. Before children can interrogate issues and injustices in their own space, they must learn to see them from a distance. Children’s literature provides a distance, preparing learners to acknowledge and act on injustices in their own space.

**Disrupting the Stereotypes Surrounding People with Disabilities**

Disrupting stereotypes involves making stereotypes public and presenting and acknowledging conflicting information as it arises. This process can happen throughout the reading of a text by using a variation of a what we know, what we want to know, and what we
learned (K-W-L) chart (Ogle, 1986). In preparation for reading *Mockingbird*, for example, ask learners what they know or believe about people with autism. Record the students’ perceptions on the “K” section of the chart. As you read and find something in the text conflicting with a student perception, record that on the “W” section of the chart. Discuss the differences and what they might mean and then record new understandings on the “L” section of the chart. Use the following questions to support the discourse.

- How is what happened in the text different from what you thought?
- What do you think that means?
- Do you think what you thought is always true? Why or why not?
- How are you thinking differently now?

This process is one effective way to get the conversation started and to potentially debunk stereotypes. The process can be accomplished with any well-chosen text and any type of disability. In using *Sahara Special*, for example, the same K-W-L chart could be created about learning disabilities.

**Considering How Contexts Marginalize People**

People often are marginalized by the context within which they are placed. The context dictates the actions of people, especially in the all too familiar contexts of school. In *Mockingbird*, Caitlin, the 11-year-old main character with autism, does not like to participate in group work at school, preferring to work alone. Her regular classroom teacher frequently asks the class, including Caitlin, to work in groups. While Caitlin has a counselor who works with her on these kinds of issues, she often struggles with her teacher during group work activities, which can lead to what Caitlin and her dad refer to as TRM’s (Tantrum Rage Meltdowns). This
excerpt from the text provides an opportunity to discuss whether or not the context marginalizes Caitlyn, and if so, how? The following questions can be used to support this conversation.

- Is it fair for Caitlin’s teacher to force her to work in a group? Why or why not?
- How does Caitlin’s disability factor into this situation?

Most quality texts including main characters with disabilities will provide multiple opportunities for students to consider how contexts marginalize people. In the following excerpt, Sahara, the narrator of *Sahara Special*, is explaining what it means to be in special education.

That file full of letters meant I met with a Special Needs teacher in the hallway to get something called Individualized Attention, and let me tell you, working in the hallway with a teacher is like being the street person of a school. People pass you by, and they act like they don’t see you, but three steps away they’ve got a whole story in their heads about why you’re out there instead of in the nice cozy classroom where you belong. Stupid? Unlucky? Unloved? If I could have put out a cup, I would have made some change. People from my class would hiss, “Hi Sahara Special” as they passed to go to the washroom, and don’t think they meant special like a princess or a movie star or something sparkly like that. I pretended I didn’t hear, but oh yes, I heard, and you don’t just hear meanness with your ears. My cheeks heard it and turned red, my eyes heard it and stared at the wall, at my lap, at my shoes. My fingernails heard and hid away in my teeth. I heard it all through my clothes and skin and blood and all the way to my bones, where it rattled in the hollow of me (Codell, 2003, pp. 4-5).

The context presented here, as well as the subsequent actions described by the main character, can be deconstructed through critical conversations. After deconstructing Sahara’s situation, students will be more prepared to notice situations in their own setting that may not be
fair and/or equitable to their disabled peers. At this point critical literacy becomes social studies. Shifting conversations from the text to more localized contexts is the next step in moving toward social action. Use the following questions to support the discourse.

- What do you think or feel about Sahara sitting in the hallway with her special education teacher? Is it fair to Sahara? Why or why not?
- Why do you think students call Sahara names? Is it okay to do that? Why or why not?
- Have you ever experienced a situation when you felt like Sahara feels in this situation?
- Are there things happening in our own school that are unfair to certain students?

While a specific example of a learning disabled student is being used here, we argue that any quality piece of literature with a main character who has a disability will lend itself to critical interrogation. The ultimate goal of the structure we have created is to use literature as a vehicle to critically analyze and act on injustices in our own settings, thus creating truly inclusive communities.

**Envisioning How Things Could be Different**

Once learners have acknowledged injustices in text and in their own environments, they can begin envisioning how things might be different. We recommend considering multiple possibilities and interrogating the appropriateness of each one in rectifying the injustice. With *Mockingbird*, for example, students might consider alternatives for Caitlin to do during group work times. Is it possible for Caitlin to complete projects on her own? Is it important for her to spend some time in a group? What might this classroom time look like for Caitlin? We recommend recording all students’ responses to these questions and then dividing students into small groups to explore the positives and negatives of each suggestion.
In *Sahara Special*, students could consider what might happen so that Sahara did not stand out as a student who needed special help to learn? The following questions can be used to support this exploration.

- Does this idea resolve the unjust situation? How?
- Is it a reasonable solution (something that could actually happen)?
- Does it create other unjust situations?

The same structure can be used for considering injustices in students’ own contexts. Envisioning and exploring how things could be different is necessary to get to the final step in this proposed structure: creating an action plan.

**Creating an Action Plan**

Creating a social action plan for resolving the unjust treatment of persons with disabilities is the goal of this curriculum structure. It is possible to get to this point having only developed some awareness of the marginalization of persons with disabilities. Progressing to the development of a plan of action is the critical piece. Having a plan is what empowers students to stand up and take action for what is right. Creating a plan can be simple or complex, depending on what needs to be changed. In revisiting *Mockingbird*, the action plan may be as simple as allowing Caitlin to work independently with some students while the teacher checks in with her occasionally. The text example, however, might require a complex, multi-step plan because what needs to be changed is a long-standing instructional structure. With *Sahara Special*, the action plan might begin with writing a letter to the principal highlighting the observed injustice and expressing concerns about special education students receiving their instruction in the hallway. Another aspect of the plan might be to empathize with the learning disabled student
and not call her names. Or, students might reach out and get to know her better instead of responding to a stereotype. Use the following questions to support the planning process.

- What can the students do to make the situation better immediately? If you were in the character’s position, how would you want your peers to treat you?
- How might the students initiate greater change in the school system?

Initiating a critical social justice curriculum through the use of quality children’s literature is an effective way to begin to change students’ perceptions, attitudes, and actions toward persons with disabilities. The real change, however, comes when you create a parallel structure in which students interrogate and act on the injustices in their own communities.

**Conclusion**

Because discrimination still exists in our society, it is our responsibility as social studies educators, to work for a world that is fair and just for everyone, including people with disabilities. This work must begin in elementary school classrooms and continue through the highest levels of education. One way to begin this work in an elementary school classroom is to engage learners in critically exploring children’s literature including main characters with disabilities. Approaching children’s literature from a critical stance positions learners to interrogate injustices so that they can address, and act on, similar injustices in their own communities. When learners take action in their own community, they become invested members of that community. With that investment comes feelings of ownership that instill passion and responsibility for making the world a better place.
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