

## Using Children's Literature in the Classroom to Teach About Disabilities

While there are many factors which facilitate the successful inclusion of pupils with disabilities within mainstream education, children's attitudes towards their peers with disabilities is a most important factor. Positive attitudes can be developed through the use of children's literature.

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Inclusion supports integration of individuals with disabilities into all facets of the school community, and eventually our society (ARC/Texas, 1991; Stratenotes, 1993). It has been suggested that the success of inclusion is dependent upon attitudes and involvement of several key players, including administrators, general and special education teachers, students with disabilities and their parents. As we move toward more inclusive schools, it is important to recognize the importance of another key player - the student in general education. General education students play a major role in determining the outcome of inclusion because of the increased contact between them and their peers with disabilities. Although Salend (1994) reports that the results of some studies indicate that students view their counterparts with disabilities positively, the majority of studies reveal that nondisabled students hold negative views.

### INTEGRATION AND ATTITUDES TO DISABILITY

Attitudes of children toward their peers with disabilities increasingly has been researched since the passage of PL 101-476, the Individuals with Disabilities Act, formerly PL 94-142 (Plumb & Brown, 1990; Stainback, Stainback & Wilkinson, 1992; Voeltz, 1980, 1982). The basis of such research is that children who possess positive attitudes toward individuals with disabilities will be more accepting of them. Acceptance will lead to better integration of children with disabilities into general education classrooms and eventually adults with disabilities into society.

Horne (1988) suggests that positive attitudes can be facilitated through a variety of interventions. First, teams and cooperative learning experiences can be used to promote student interactions. A growing body of literature supports the success of cooperative learning (Goor & Schwenn, 1993). A second intervention is to improve the social skills of students with disabilities. Literature also suggests that social skills training has been effective in helping students with disabilities more effectively navigate the mainstream (Jones & Jones, 1995). Organizing small-group, nonacademic experiences to facilitate the acceptance of students with disabilities is another intervention used to promote positive attitudes (Bishop & Jubala, 1994). We also can provide opportunities for personal contact with students with disabilities and/or knowledge about disabilities.

Attitudes of nondisabled persons toward individuals with disabilities are positively influenced by providing experiences that include contact as well as information about the disability (Anthony, 1972). "Neither alone is sufficient, significantly and consistently to have a favorable impact on attitudes toward disabled persons" (p.123). However, information without contact has only a limited positive effect and may even reinforce existing attitudes. In a review of literature on the use of contact and information to change attitudes toward individuals with disabilities, Horne (1988) noted the difficulty of making specific recommendations, but concluded that programs providing contact and information are more successful in modifying participants' attitudes toward peers with disabilities than either alone.

The nature of inclusion demands contact between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers. A major advantage of inclusion is that it will foster understanding of those with disabilities. Merely placing students together (contact) may not achieve the desired goal of understanding. Students in regular education will also need information. The purpose of this article is to describe two projects designed to provide information and to heighten awareness of disabilities in regular education settings where inclusion was being planned. Each involves the use of children's trade books and/ or videos about individuals with disabilities.

### **PROJECT 1: DISABILITY AWARENESS**

The first project involved fifteen pupils in first grade (class) between the ages of six and eight. The class included students who received resource, gifted/talented and speech services. With no previous discussion, the teacher gave the students a piece of paper and instructed them to "write and illustrate what you know about individuals with mental retardation." The students were given approximately 30 minutes to complete the assignment.

The next day, a formal lesson on the topic of individuals with disabilities was presented. To begin the lesson, the teacher read a book to the students about a young boy with Down Syndrome who attended regular education classroom. The book described how he was different and how the other children accepted him into their class. Following the story, the class discussed how the boy was different from them and how he was like them; how the children in the story helped the boy and became his friend; and how they thought it would feel to be the boy in the story. In addition, students were asked to share previous experiences with individuals with mental retardation or other disabilities. Students were given a second opportunity to write and illustrate what they knew about mental retardation.

### **RESULTS OF PROJECT 1: CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS**

In the first illustrations, 13 of the 15 children drew pictures of individuals using a wheelchair (11) or crutches (2). Six students illustrated a person with a disability playing with others, while nine were of the individual with a disability alone. The settings of the drawings varied and included individuals playing or working inside, outside, coming out of a "handycapt school" and coming from a hospital.

Seven children defined handicapped in their narratives. The definitions included factors such as wheelchair use, broken legs and arms, need for medical assistance and not being able to walk. Three narratives focused on the limitation of a disability - on what individuals with disabilities could *not* do.

For example, "they can't talk, they can't walk, they can't sing" or they "can't play." Three narratives indicated that the authors had previous experiences with individuals with disabilities. These narratives described the individuals, what they *could* do and how nice they were. One student wrote about her uncle who has mental retardation (see Figure 1).

The second group of illustrations, created after students gained information through the story and discussion, yielded only three wheelchairs and no crutches. Seven individuals with disabilities played or worked with other people while eight individuals with disabilities played or worked alone. The settings in the second drawings were as varied as those in the first (outside, school, YMCA).

The narratives depicted a variety of disabilities. Four were about individuals with mental retardation. Five portrayed physical or visual disabilities. Ten students wrote narratives about friends or family members with a disability. Of the ten, four described the cause of the disability. Causes included accidents and disabil-

ities from birth. Other narratives focused on what the individuals could do (eg., play baseball, paint and play). Six students described how they thought individuals with disabilities should be treated. Some suggested that those with disabilities be treated like "others." The focus of other narratives was being nice and helpful or not staring.

The first drawings and narratives suggested that students viewed mental retardation and handicapped synonymously. Though asked to write about mental retardation, the students defined "handicapped." In addition, most (13 of the 15) students felt that handicapped meant that an individual needed a wheelchair or crutches. The second samples reflected a broader concept of disabilities. There were only three drawings of wheelchairs and no crutches. Though only four students wrote about mental retardation, others wrote about visual impairments and specific physical disabilities.

The second narratives also relayed more personal relationships with persons with disabilities. Compared to three students in the first sample, ten students wrote about people they knew who had disabilities. More students also discussed how they felt about individuals with disabilities. This included how they should be treated by others and how they themselves treated people with disabilities.

## **PROJECT 2: PERCEPTIONS OF INTEGRATION**

The second project involved first (n=12), second (n=15) and third (n=19) grade Chapter 1 students. As a group project they were to write a book about what it would be like to have individuals with disabilities in their classrooms. Each person was asked to write a paragraph and draw a picture. Written contributions were to be based on information gathered through reading books, class discussion and past experiences.

Their teacher began the project by discussing disabilities with the students. In addition, the concepts of "disability" and "handicap" were addressed. Discussions also included the student's perception of individuals with disabilities. Students then read and were read books about individuals with disabilities. Some students borrowed books about disabilities from the public library and brought the books to school to share. They discussed schools of the future and how children with various disabilities would be in their classrooms. In addition, the students viewed a district created video designed to assist in the inclusion efforts of a nearby school.

## **RESULTS OF PROJECT 2: CHILDREN'S VIEWS**

Three common themes evolved from the forty-six paragraphs: help/assist/protect; befriend/play with; and how persons with disabilities are like others. The most commonly expressed single theme (13) was to help, assist or protect. "I would help with his work, science project, push him around in a wheelchair. I would not let others push him, laugh at him or tease him." Eight students focused their paragraphs on being a friend and playing with students with disabilities. Four of the third graders had as their single theme that individuals with disabilities were like other people and should be treated as such.

Twenty-one paragraphs expressed a combination of the three themes. Some paragraphs (12) combined the themes to help/assist/protect with befriend/play. For example, "If somebody in my class was mentally retarded, I would be their friend and help him with his work. I won't let nobody hit him." All three themes were included in nine of the paragraphs. "If there was a handicapped person in my school, I would help them get their crayons and other stuff. I would play with them like other kids."

As with some of the students in Project 1, some students had prior experiences with individuals with disabilities. "If there was a handicapped person in my class, I will help them do the stuff they cannot do. Like my cousin, he is handicapped and he can write and draw and he can also move his legs and arms."

The drawings of these students featured children in classrooms and outside playing. Like the students in Project 1, these students associated disabilities with wheelchairs; twenty-four drawings included wheelchairs.

## **CONCLUSION**

In part, the future of individuals with disabilities lies in the hands of today's children. By integrating children properly, we have the opportunity to develop classrooms that accept and value individual differences. To date, much effort has focused on inclusive teaching practices (peer-tutoring, cooperative learning; co-teaching, collaboration). Knowledge of these practices is essential to regular and special educators to ensure successful inclusion. For students with disabilities, "peer support and friendship are not luxuries, but necessities" (Stainback et al., 1992, p.6). Because the literature suggests that these students are less frequently accepted and more frequently rejected than their nondisabled peers and are faced with isolation (Stainback et al., 1992), teachers have a major responsibility to avert such occurrences.

This article described how teachers can use literature to promote a better understanding of students with disabilities (see Table 1). Through these teaching projects, students were given opportunities to explore their knowledge and feelings about individuals with disabilities. This activity is one example of how regular and special education teachers can alleviate fears, misunderstandings, and prejudices toward individuals with disabilities.

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## **Table 1**

### **Books about Children and Youth with Disabilities**

#### ***Hearing Impairments***

- Booth, B.D. (1991). *Mandy*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books.
- Levi, D. (1989). *A very special friend*. Washington, DC: Kendall Green Publications.
- Levi, D. (1992). *A very special sister*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.
- Quinn, P. (1991). *Matthew Pinkowski's special summer*. Washington: Gallaudet University Press.

#### ***Learning Disabilities & Differences***

- Cummings, R. & Fisher, G. (1991). *The school survival guide for kids with learning differences (ld)*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.
- DeClements, B. (1985). *Sixth grade can really kill you*. New York: Puffin Books.

Gilson, J. (1980). *Do bananas chew gum?* New York: Pocket Books.

Janover, C. (1995). *The worst speller in jr. high.* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

Lee, C. & Jackson, R. (1992). *Faking it.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers.

Wolff, V.E. (1988). *Probably still Nick Swansen.* New York: Scholastic Inc.

### **Mental Retardation**

Rabe, B. (1988). *Where's Chimpy?* New York: Albert Whitman.

Shyer, M.F. (1988). *Welcome home Jellybean.* New York: MacMillan Children's Book Group.

### **Physical Disabilities**

Krementz, J. (1992). *How it feels to live with a physical disability.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Rabe, B. (1981). *The balancing girl.* New York: Dutton.

### **Visual Impairments**

Calmenson, S. (1994). *Rosie, a visiting dog's story.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Moulton, G. (1989). *My sister Sarah.* Seattle: The Wright Group.

### **Varied Disabilities**

Dwight, L. (1992). *We can do it!* New York: Checkerboard Press.

McConnell, N.P. (1982). *Different and alike.* Colorado Springs: Current.

## Source Books

Ball, F. (1994). *Red pages: A guide to children's books relevant to special needs*. Milton-under-Wychwood, Oxfordshire: Bradhill Books.

Carlin, M.F., Laughlin, J.L. & Saniga, R.D. (1991). *Understanding abilities, disabilities, and capabilities: A guide to children's literature*. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

Smyth, M. (1991). *Count me in: Children's fiction and non-fiction about the disabled (2nd ed.)*. Newcastle-Under-Lyme: Youth Libraries Group.

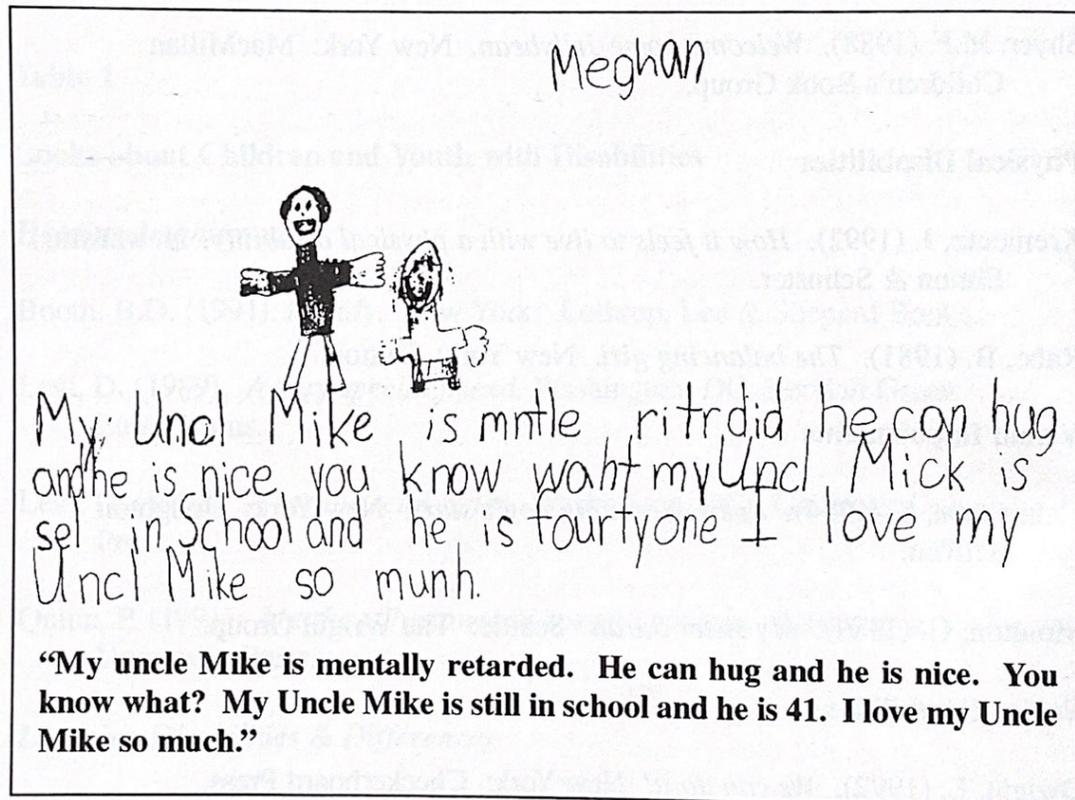


Figure 1. Narrative and drawing of a student who had prior experiences with a person with disabilities.