

LESSON — Exploring Disability Experience through Literature

Unit: Exploring Disability through the Lens of Literature

Focus: Disability Awareness, Diversity

Grade Level: K–12

Subject(s): Language Arts, Social Studies

Overview

This is a sample of English Language Arts activities using books about disability experience. It references books that are described in more detail in the booklist posted in Unit 4 on the Include! website.

A collection of activity sheets and tools are also provided, which can be used to work on specific reading and writing standards.

Objectives

- Listen to or read and analyze literature that deals with the social experience of disability.
- Compare and contrast disability experience with other cultural experiences of difference and diversity.
- Incorporate ideas and observations from selected readings and discussions into personal reflections on experience and culture.
- Relate information about disability from fiction and nonfiction with analysis of historical and contemporary events in United States or around the world.

Standards

Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

Determine central ideas or themes from a text and analyze their development.

Analyze how and why individuals, events and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

Interpret words and phrases used in a text, including determining technical, connotative and figurative meanings, and how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.

Assess how point of view or purpose shape the content and style of a text.

Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task.

Time: Throughout the school year or during disability studies activities and units.

Preparation

Choose books, using the booklist on the Include! website, selections from the library and other resources. Some teachers may also want to incorporate film and audio materials as well as different types of literature (novels, plays, poetry, essays, autobiographies, biographies). The books and activities summarized below and in the booklist provided with this lesson are intended as suggestions to stimulate other ideas. Teachers could organize reading activities into different reading strands (e.g., to learn about and explore disability experience in different times and places; to compare and contrast presentations of and responses to disability with other social and cultural experiences of difference; or to examine how people with disabilities and individuals from other minority groups experience and deal with discrimination).

A Sampling of Ideas

- The books, “Enrique Speaks with his Hands,” “Kami and the Yaks,” “Momma Zooms” and “Sousa’s Call” use words and pictures to show children or adults with disabilities interacting with others and being a part of family and community life. Ask students to identify some of the things that helped each character be successful. Ask students to identify and share other examples of objects or behaviors that help people deal with differences. Some examples of disability (and other) accommodations that may come up during this discussion include sign language, a teacher, or the help of friends, family or animals, or a wheelchair. (Elementary grades.)
- The characters in several historical fiction books (e.g., “Sees Behind Trees,” “Warrior Scarlet,” “Wonderstruck” “and The Cay”), contemporary novels (e.g., “Wonder” and “Out of My Mind”) and in the biographies in the Include! Booklist all had to find ways to live with their disability, respect themselves and be accepted in their community or culture. Ask students to

- discuss and write about the characters, setting and plot of their story, describe the main characters and share what conflict or challenge the main character had to address. (Middle school through high school.)
- Have students of different ages and grade levels read a sampling of picture books as examples of a particular literary art form that works for people of all ages and across grade levels. For example, in the alphabet book, “I am Utterly Unique,” the main character uses the alphabet to celebrate his/her strengths. The book invites readers of all ages to play with words in the same way that poetry does. Read the book with the class and ask students to create an alphabet for themselves, their class, or their family using images and words to celebrate unique things.
 - “The Seeing Stick,” by Jane Yolen, is another example of a picture book that can be used across age groups and reading levels. The book is a good example of a teaching story or wisdom tale. Ask students to read the story (perhaps in conjunction with reading other wisdom tales from different cultures) and discuss how the old man is able to help a girl find her own abilities and vision despite not being able to see. Ask students to identify the plot and the role of each character in the story. Invite students to write and illustrate their own wisdom tale.
 - The books “Dad, Jackie, and Me,” by Myron Uhlberg, “The Cay,” by Theodore Taylor, and “To Kill a Mockingbird” by Harper Lee are written for readers of different ages and/or reading abilities, but all deal with both race and disability. Students can use these stories to observe the physical, attitudinal or social barriers experienced by people of color and people with disabilities. Ask students to use their journal or reading log to write down specific examples in the text that document physical, attitudinal barriers or discrimination. How do specific characters in each book either reflect stereotypical responses to race or disability or challenge and change attitudes? As readers, how does the book change your view of an individual with a disability, someone who is Deaf, or a person of color?
 - “The Storyteller’s Beads” tells the story of young people sent away to escape the terrible drought in their county. The main character, Rahel, has to deal with social and physical issues relating to her being blind, but the journey also helps her confront and question the conflicts between her people and another tribe. Have students to read this story and then discuss other group conflicts they have either read about or seen in their community. Ask students to work in small groups to create a story or one-act play in which two or more of the characters have to deal with conflict caused by different beliefs, cultural practices or responses to disability or other differences.

- Have students read biographies about people with disabilities and write a book report or a journal entry that identifies the important people, events, challenges and accomplishments in their life and why they are important today.

Books with Films and Films with Writing: Powerful Combinations!

- Read “All the Way Home,” by Patricia Reilly Giff, while also reading about Franklin D. Roosevelt and/or the economic Depression of the 1930s. Watch one of the online documentaries about polio and/or the Depression and discuss what the book tells us about living through both the polio epidemic and the hard economic times of the period.
- Read “Wonderstruck” while also viewing the public television film “Through Deaf Eyes.” Author Brian Selsnick said that this film inspired him to write his book.

Additional Resources

Other suggestions are included in several Include! lessons, including Disability and the Arts, Animals and Us, Famous People with Disabilities and Disability Pride.