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Authentic literature's effect on student attitudes towards individuals with disabilities

Sara Alves

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**AUTHENTIC LITERATURE'S EFFECT ON STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS
INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES**

by
Sara Rose Alves

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Teacher Education
College of Education
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at
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Thesis Chair: Marjorie E. Madden, Ph.D

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I would like to dedicate this study to the many important people in my life who have helped me every step of the way. To my parents, without your love and support, I would never have been able to accomplish as much as I have. To my brother, Kevin, I thank you for always believing in me when I needed it. To my Co-hort, for the past five years you all have been my rock. I thank each and every one of you for the memories you have shared with me. And to Dr. Marjorie E. Madden, I thank you for all of your support over the years; words can not explain how much I appreciate your dedication.

Abstract

Sara Rose Alves

AUTHENTIC LITERATURE'S EFFECT ON STUDENT ATTITUDES TOWARDS INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

2010/2011

Marjorie E. Madden, Ph.D.

Master of Science in Teaching

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect authentic literature had on student attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. This study was conducted by implementing a disabilities unit through read alouds in a second grade classroom. Eighteen students participated in the research model. Data collected included surveys, audio taped interviews, audio taped discussions, student response cards, and personal teacher research journal. The data was analyzed recursively across all data sets to determine patterns and themes. Data was coded according to three main patterns; if the pattern was found to be prevalent across all data sets it was found to be conclusive. Effects resulting from the use of authentic literature in this study are discussed including student learning through engagement, text to self connections and an increase in the acceptance of differences.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Four remarkable children sit at their desks in a self-contained classroom. Each, as kind hearted as the next, have disabilities that are easily noticeable. A snapshot of the room frequently shows similar behaviors from the students including unique speech, movement, and conversation. As I sit here in my clinical internship I placement watching these students, the 5th grade male student with autism sits calmly, constantly repeating in a song-like tone, “I want to go to the Wawaaa”. To the right of him a 4th grade female student, who is multiple disabled, consistently rocks in her chair for sensory stimulation. At the next two desks, two second grade students, one male with communication impairments and one female whom is multiple disabled are engaged in a private conversation but only after my clinical partner and I have reminded them to not converse with the teachers but with each other. In our safe haven, each student’s differences are embraced; but how do their peers view their differences? Do they understand why these students act or speak the way they do? If not, how can we make them more aware?

Each child spends the first half hour of their school day within their assigned homeroom, a general education classroom. This along with specials and lunch are the only time in which the general education students of the school are given the opportunity to interact with the students in the self- contained program. During an observation of the 5th grade male student with autism in his physical education special with his assigned general education homeroom class, both acceptance and neutrality was seen. A non-disabled female student paid special attention to the student with disabilities, showing acceptance and determination to get him engaged with the activity and other students. The other students did not particularly pay attention to the student with disabilities,

keeping a safe distance. Was this an effect of being unacquainted and fearful, or an effect of rejection?

Story of the Question

In order to fully understand my position in this research, it is important to understand my personal connection to the topic. As a future educator, I am personally connected to the topic in my role as both a student and a pre-service teacher. My studies of both elementary and special education included work towards an endorsement in reading. I have a special interest in literature and the power it has on a student's education. So this is where I started when thinking about what my research would revolve around and my question became centered on the ways in which I can use authentic literature in the classroom.

I started questioning what would happen to students' independence in the classroom if I used authentic literature to promote it. Lack of research behind the idea of solely creating independence within students guided me away from that topic. I quickly moved into questioning what would happen to the entire classroom environment. When asked to define what my ideal classroom environment would entail, I found myself agreeing with the 6 pillars of character: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship (Josephson Institute, 2011). It was then that I realized that I was looking more towards what using authentic literature in the classroom would do to the students themselves, as individuals and not the whole classroom environment. Looking more deeply into the 6 pillars of characters, although I wanted to promote all of them for more positive and independent students, more importantly I wanted to promote the acceptance of diversity within educational settings.

By narrowing my interest to impacting students directly, I knew I would need a focus for my authentic literature and what I wanted the students to accept so I could measure it for data. As a future educator, I plan to instill in my students a view of acceptance for all types of individuals, especially those with disabilities. My decision in pursuing education as my future career stemmed not from experience with non-disabled students but with students with various disabilities. Personally, I have had many experiences with individuals with disabilities in and out of the classroom that resulted in acquiring knowledge about disabilities which led to my full acceptance of those who are different from me. My aspirations for my teaching career include working closely with students with special education and I would like to share that interest with my students in clinical internship II.

My personal goals led me to wonder how my students in clinical internship II will perceive those who are different from them. Being in my special education placement in clinical internship I and seeing first hand how little interaction occurs between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers made me question: Can this small window of time for “social interaction” really make an impact on non-disabled students, especially if teachers are not educating them about the diversity of disabilities? By observing the student with autism during his physical education class with his typical peers, I questioned if more students in his class would show acceptance towards him if they knew more about this classmate’s disability. My questions explored the possibilities of my research; I knew I had discovered what I could do with authentic literature. I would examine whether the exposure to individuals with disabilities in authentic literature

would increase the acceptance in non-disabled students towards their peers with disabilities. And so begins my investigation.

Purpose Statement

Authentic literature is a tool educators use to effectively teach their students in various areas. Consisting of both narrative and expository texts, authentic literature is text that is in the original form as written by the author (Cooper & Kiger, 2009). Not only does authentic learning provide students with an appealing way to learn but its strength in providing students with connections allows more than just an increase in literacy skills to occur. When used with students, authentic literature not only needs to be developmentally appropriate, appealing, and have quality literary elements, but cultural and social authenticity is also necessary (Cooper et al., 2009). This is where authentic literature's strength lies; in its ability to help students develop an appreciation and understanding of how others live together. The elements of authentic literature cultivate learning by fostering interest, capturing attention and motivating students to further explore the world of text (Cooper et al., 2009; Ponder & Marshall, 1996). This exploration allows students to experience a multitude of information leading to quality learning.

The effectiveness of authentic literature is shown in several studies (Nixon-Ponder, 1995; Leal, 1999; Forgan, 2002) identifying its ability to increase student interest, promote engagement, and positively foster problem-solving skills. By using authentic literature, students acquire a love for reading, which in turn fosters more reading and more learning (Nixon-Ponder, 1995). Students are also able to become more fully engaged with the content of a piece of literature if it is authentic (Nixon-Ponder, 1995). A study done by Leal (1999) resulted in students applying positive character traits

to their personal lives after having explored those in authentic literature. Characters within authentic literature provide positive character traits that students can emulate as well as different perspectives on an experience (Edgington, 2002). This allows students to learn about the different ways people perceive and handle situations and to see that their own decisions and actions can affect the lives of others (Edgington, 2002; Colesante, 1999; O'Sullivan, 2004).

In many cases, authentic literature has been used to increase positive attitudes towards diversity within students. Studies have resulted in positive increases of attitudes and acceptance of both culture and homosexuality (Singer & Smith, 2003; Wham, Barnhard & Cook, 1996; Schall & Kauffmann, 2003). These studies have shown that authentic literature is another way of communicating important topics to students. Instead of relaying information to students about diversity, and how one should accept it, through lessons, authentic literature provides relevance to students' lives and personal views and opinions to be identified and discussed. Studies (Singer & Smith, 2003; Wham, Barnhard & Cook, 1996; Schall et al., 2003) suggest that authentic literature is an effective tool to use in fostering acceptance of diverse topics within students.

Research within various educational settings has examined the attitudes of students towards peers with disabilities (Prater, Dyches, & Johnstun, 2006; Sipsas-Herrman, Roberts, Pyburn, Herrmann, Dugan, & Eppinger, 1996; Swaim & Morgan, 1991). Negative attitudes and poor acceptance towards individuals with disabilities have been found in much of the research showing the need to educate and expose our students to the world of disabilities (Swaim & Morgan, 1991). There are 6.6 million students in the United States public school system who are identified with disabilities and if

educators do not work towards informing others about disabilities, these students will continue to be rejected (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

The purpose of this study is to inform non-disabled students about their peers with disabilities through authentic literature. The use of authentic literature has had success with fostering both acceptance about culture and homosexuality in students (Singer et al., 2003; Wham et al., 1996; Schall et al., 2003). This provides reason for its possible success towards increasing positive views about individuals with disabilities.

Unfortunately there have been few studies conducted that look at the relationship between the use of authentic literature and the acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

Research Problem and Question

The question presented in this research study is: In what ways will the use of authentic literature about individuals with disabilities impact students' attitudes towards their peers with disabilities?

Organization of the Thesis

Throughout the remaining four chapters, the use of authentic literature to foster acceptance will be thoroughly examined and studied. In the next chapter, existing research about what authentic literature is, why the use of authentic literature is important, and how it is used to foster acceptance in educational settings with an emphasis on individuals with disabilities is examined. Previous studies are included that use authentic literature as a tool of teaching acceptance and the conclusions that are reached. Chapter two will also highlight why the acceptance of disabilities was the focus that was chosen and why this particular study is necessary. Chapter three provides the context of this study as well the research design. The chosen methodology for this study

will be thoroughly discussed as well as the methods of data collection. The data from the study will be analyzed and discussed in chapter four. Chapter five provides this study's findings as well as implications for future research.

Chapter 2 **Review of the Literature**

“We read to discover we are not alone” – C.S. Lewis

Introduction

This study strives to find out what effect using authentic children’s literature about individuals with disabilities has on a 2nd grade classroom. Chapter II examines the research associated with using authentic children’s literature in educational settings. The first section defines what authentic literature is. The second section addresses why using authentic literature in educational settings is important. The third section discusses how authentic literature can successfully be used to foster acceptance. The fourth section reports how the acceptance of individuals with disabilities is being fostered in educational settings with an emphasis on the authentic literature strategy.

What is authentic literature?

The focus of this section is to clearly define what makes literature authentic. The term authentic literature (also referred to as trade books) is used to identify narrative and expository texts that are in the original form as written by the author (Cooper & Kiger, 2009). These do not include reading materials such as workbooks and basal readers. Narrative text tells a story or gives an account of real or imaginary events and contains the elements of setting, character, problem, climax, and solution (Cooper et al., 2009). Expository texts present information; describing objects, events, or processes in an objective manner (Cooper et al., 2009).

Cooper et al. (2009) argue that in addition to being in original form, literature should follow four basic criteria to be deemed high quality for students: (1) developmental appropriateness, (2) student appeal, (3) literary quality, and (4) cultural

and social authenticity. Developmentally appropriateness means that a teacher must conclude that the students will understand the concepts within a piece of literature. These concepts also must have connectivity to the students in order to get the most out of the piece of literature. The second criteria, literature must have a certain appeal to students, deems it necessary for students to want to read and/or listen to the piece of literature in order to conclude meaning from it. Ponder & Marshall (1996) agree that when literature is both authentic and high quality, it sparks an interest that basals cannot. Third, there must be literary quality (Cooper et al., 2009; Dyches & Prater, 2000), meaning a piece of literature must contain strong elements of plot, characterization, setting, theme, style, and point of view (Cooper et al., 2009, Dyches & Prater, 2000). Prater, Dyches & Johnston (2006) argue that illustrations within authentic literature are of extreme importance as well. Quality pictures within both narrative and expository texts assist readers in interpretation by enhancing interest and literary elements, especially in picture books (Prater, et al., 2006). Cooper et al.,(2009) argue that making sure literary quality is present is time consuming for teachers which is why many basal programs are used in schools. The fourth and final criteria, literature needs to have both cultural and social authenticity, allows students to go beyond the written text by connecting and responding to its content. By containing cultural and social authenticity, students are able to work towards an appreciation and understanding of how others live and work together (Cooper et al., 2009).

Why is using authentic literature in educational settings important?

When used in educational settings, authentic literature can increase interest (Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson,& Soler, 2002), promote engagement (Horvitz &

Paulus, 2006; Leal, 1999), foster problem solving skills (Forgan, 2002; Mathis, 2001;), and inform about diversity (Singer & Smith, 2003; Schall & Kauffman 2003; Swaim & Morgan 2001). Simply reading text does not foster true learning; students need to experience literature that fosters reflection, response, and connections so that they are actively learning (Mathis, 2001; Singer et al., 2003). Authentic literature cultivates learning by fostering interest, capturing attention and motivating students to further explore the world of text (Cooper et al., 2009; Ponder & Marshall, 1996). Exploration allows students to experience a multitude of information through both authentic narrative and expository literature. Nixon-Ponder (1995) found that when given authentic books to read, adult learners not only increased their critical-thinking skills but developed a love for reading. These students attended class more regularly, went to the library voluntarily to gather material to read, and actively participated during class in relation to discussing literary elements and connections (Nixon-Ponder, 1995). A teacher within the study compared watching her students' interest in books grow to "watching a light go on"; confidence levels rose as their interest in reading soared (Nixon-Ponder 1995). Peterson (2007) argues that teachers need to work through the challenge of bridging the lives of students and the curriculum and broad society (p. 29). Authentic literature is one way of building that bridge that is also natural and comfortable to teachers (Edgington, 2002; Bosma & Brower, 1995).

A study done by Bosma & Brower (1995) focused on using authentic literature to increase interest within first grade students during the academic subject of science. During a four week unit on animals from the science curriculum containing the basic concepts of observing, classifying, inferring, measuring, and predicting, the teacher

incorporated at least one piece of authentic children's literature to guide the lessons. The students were able to respond to both the photographs and text to collect data pertaining to the science topic. Bosma & Brower (1995) state, "Informational books provided depth and richness of detail. They introduced the topic of study, provided the factual content, or became vital sources of additional information" (p. 22). Bosma & Brower (1995) found that by using literature in classrooms, students' imaginations were kindled; first grade students were observed to be motivated as they lead discussion and activities by responding to the written text. Not only did the students' interest of the curriculum increase but their engagement, as learners, was clearly influenced in a positive way. Comprehension is one aspect of literacy that is positively affected through the ability to make personal connections (Singer et al., 2003).

Incorporating authentic literature allows for student engagement to occur within a classroom (Leal, 2009). Leal's study of assessing authentic literature, which was conducted with both a research team and middle-grade classrooms, took children's literature and examined the character traits within each literary piece (1999). When assessing character traits within authentic literature, the research team found themselves engaged in thorough discussions about the issues that were present in the books (Leal 2009). Leal, understanding the importance of the engaged learning occurring, branched out to examine how school-aged children would respond to assessing character traits within authentic literature (2009). Her study found that students explored the literature and took part in lively discussions and demonstrated understanding of the plot, themes, and characters (Leal 2009). The learning that Leal was able to foster with authentic literature did not stop there; students were engaged further by discussing the character

traits they found and how they could incorporate them into their own lives (2009). Leal's research concludes that the content within children's literature may also be used in order to make an impact on student's lives (2009).

Along with grammar rules and state capitals, students learn important life skills such as communication and how to problem solve. Bibliotherapy is the use of authentic literature to inform students about issues they may personally face and ways in which to properly handle them through identification with characters (Forgan, 2002; Edgington, 2002; Aiex, 1993; Kurtts & Gavigan, 2008). Hollingsworth, Didelot, & Smith (2003) argue that students who develop solid problem-solving skills are likely to make a positive impact in and out of an educational setting. The use of literature in bibliotherapy provides readers with experiences that he/she might or might not have ever experienced (Cooper et al., 2009; Singer et al., 2003; Forgan, 2002). Edgington (2002) argues that when students explore literature about various issues, they are able to use their own experiences in conjunction with the perspectives of the characters within the text. This allows students to learn about the different ways people perceive and handle situations and that their own decisions and actions do affect the lives of others (Edgington, 2002; Colesante, 1999; O'Sullivan, 2004). The role models that authentic literature give to students through characters will assist them in emulating what they learn about problem solving in their own situations (O'Sullivan, 2004; Forgan 2002).

How can authentic literature be used to foster acceptance?

Nieto (1994) states, "Acceptance is the next level of supporting diversity. It implies that differences are acknowledged and their importance is neither denied nor belittled". Authentic literature is one way to help foster acceptance in students by

containing strong cultural and social authenticity that immerse students into situations that are both unfamiliar and universal (Cooper et al., 2009; Singer et al., 2003). Being engaged in these situations lead students to not only find themselves within texts but also provides them with opportunities for seeing the world through another person's eyes (Singer et al., 2003). These important experiences will only assist students in fostering their acceptance of others (Singer et al., 2003).

Wan (2006) argues that authentic literature can be used for educating students about various cultures which could combat intolerance and foster a sense of acceptance. Mathis (2001) agrees by concluding students will be greatly affected by exploring authentic multicultural literature because of how educators' insights and understanding of different cultural groups have been enhanced by them. Wan's research has concluded that reading authentic literature that is centered around culture significantly improves their tolerance for differences and development of positive attitudes (2006). A study done by Wham, Barnhard & Cook (1996) used multicultural storybooks with students in kindergarten, second grade and fourth grade to study whether there was an impact on their awareness and attitudes towards culture diversity. Wham et al.,(1996) conducted their study in two classrooms at each grade level using the authentic literature in one and the second classrooms as the control groups. Student attitudes were examined at both the beginning and the end of the study and showed that exposure to multicultural literature resulted in increased acceptance of other cultures while there was negative change in all three control group classrooms (Wham et al., 1996).

A study done by Singer et al. (2003) used a piece of authentic literature, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* by Jacqueline Woodson (1995), that raised several diversity

issues with teacher-education students. The study found that readers were able to learn how meaningful other people's lives are though they differ from their own. White readers showed the beginnings of understanding the difference of race and the importance of learning about it while black readers showed an acceptance of their own culture due to the strong cultural identification the main character has in the story (Singer et al., 2003). Edgington (2002) argues that authentic literature's relevance to the lives of students is what makes it effective in the classroom. The study done by Singer et al. (2003) supports the importance of making sure literature is relevant to the lives of the students by also finding that the students, who found themselves within the book, were able to have a greater motional engagement.

Authentic literature may also be used to foster acceptance for another form of diversity- homosexuality (Schall et al., 2003). Prince (1996) argues that when it comes to acceptance of homosexuality teachers need to educate their students so that they understand, not focus on putting speech restriction on the classroom because of name calling. Nelson's study included the use of authentic literature about homosexuality; supporting the need to educate students on diversity, not form rules for it (2004). Nelson (2004) found that using authentic literature allowed for students to stay attentive to the topic, and discussion to emerge about what stereotypes look like. Making discussion surrounding homosexuality in the classroom acceptable, the study resulted in students having their own informal conversation in support of homosexuality (Nelson, 2004).

Using literature is another way of communicating with students and helps them to share opinions, values, experiences, and feelings (Wan, 2006). Schall et al., (2003) concluded that communication was the greatest response from their study, which used

literature containing gay and lesbian characters with students. Experiencing this topic of diversity was new to the students and they were completely engaged. Similar to Nelson (2004), the students in this study took the topic seriously, and their discussions went far beyond the content of the book in searching for more information about homosexuality (Schall et al., 2003). This study suggested that authentic literature could lead students in discussions that foster comfort and knowledge; two crucial components for acceptance (Schall et al., 2003; Nelson, 2004).

How is the acceptance of individuals with disabilities being fostered in educational settings?

Along with the diversity of culture, race, and homosexuality, there is also a large issue of diversity concerning the abilities of individuals (Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003). In educational settings, individuals with disabilities often cannot match the achievement levels of their peers so they are isolated in special education classrooms, which does not help foster peer acceptance (Trent, 1994). Putnam, Markovchick, Johnson, & Johnson, (1996) argue that although the inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom does occur as a way of providing them opportunities for positive and meaningful interaction with their non-disabled peers, there is question to whether that interaction is actually successful in doing just that. Research and studies show that there is still a negative view towards individuals with disabilities that needs to be addressed (Shapiro, 1999; Swaim et al., 2001; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Trent, 1994; Rillotta & Nettelbeck, 2007; Putnam et al., 1996; Smith-D'Arezzo & Moore-Thomas, 2010). Shapiro (1999) argues, "We learn negative attitudes towards disability early in life from such strong cultural influences as school, the media, our language, and literature".

These cultural influences, if used positively, can foster a great deal of acceptance for individuals with disabilities (Shapiro, 1999; Terpstra & Tamura, 2008; Campbell et al., 2003; Kamps, Barbetta, Leonard, & Delquadri, 1994; Trent, 1994; Rillotta et al., 2007; Piercy, Wilton, & Townsend, 2002; Putnam et al., 1996; Andrews, 1998; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Prater et al., 2006; Kurtts et al., 2008; Koc, Koc, & Ozdemir, 2010). For the 6.6 million students in United States public school systems who are identified as having a disability, acceptance is needed (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

In order to cultivate a positive view about individuals with disabilities, one must acquire awareness, understanding, and acceptance (Prater et al., 2006). Shapiro (1999) argues,

“ Because a central purpose of our education is the promotion of values and attitudes crucial to our pluralistic society and democratic form of government, it becomes especially important to address those beliefs and attitudes that lead to discrimination- the denial of certain members of society the right and opportunity to full social, educational, economic, and political participation” (p. 15).

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), currently 13.4% of students enrolled in the United States public school system receive services for disabilities, and they have the right to be recognized and respected for who they are. Prater et al., (2006) argues that students do not always have experiences outside of educational settings with diverse groups of people so it is up to educators to fill that void in order to build awareness.

Educators can use a variety of strategies in educational settings to generate acceptance within their students that include interacting with individuals with disabilities (Terpstra et al., 2008; Kamps et al., 1994; Trent, 1994; Putnam et al., 1996; Rillotta et al., 2007; Piercy et al., 2002) and/or informing students about individuals with disabilities (

Trent, 1994; Rillotta et al., 2007; Andrews, 1998; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Prater et al., 2006; Kurtts et al., 2008; Koc et al., 2010). Both play and social interactions allow non-disabled students to learn more about their peers with disabilities as well as help those peers with disabilities be more active within an educational setting (Terpstra, 2008). Peer tutoring is a strategy that educators use in order to increase both academic learning and acceptance between peers (Kamps et al., 1994; Trent, 1994). A study done by Kamps et al.(1994) found that peer tutoring between high-functioning students with autism and their peers followed by some unstructured free time together resulted in an increase in reading comprehension for both groups as well as increased unstructured social interactions between the students with autism and their typical peers. Another effective teaching strategy used to successfully foster acceptance between students is cooperative learning (Putnam et al., 1996; Piercy et al., 2002). Putnam et al. (1996) argue that since many negative views about peers with learning disabilities stem from perceptions that they are lower in intelligence and that their behavior disrupts the learning of others, grouping the groups together would foster a more positive view from non-disabled students. Research studies show that when cooperative learning is used for students with disabilities and their peers to collaboratively work together, peer acceptance increases (Putnam et al., 1996; Piercy et al., 2002). Other studies found that a combination of exposure and information led to positive results on acceptance of individuals (Rillotta et al., 2007; Trent, 1994).

Informing students about disabilities is important in order to create awareness and acceptance (Prater et al., 2006). Formal instruction and training, independent research, video/audio, guest speakers, and authentic literature are all ways in which valid

information can be learned about disabilities (Terpstra et al., 2008; Trent, 1994; Rillotta et al., 2007; Campbell et al., 2003). Terpstra et al. (2008) argue that individuals benefit from sensitivity training and how to initiate communication and respond to an individual with a disability. Research studies show that training non-disabled students how to better interact with peers with disabilities has positive results (Goldstein, Kaczmarek, Pennington & Shafer, 1992; Goldstein, English, Shafer, & Kaczmarek, 1997). Campbell et al. (2003) found that after preservice teachers had formally learned about Down syndrome through a semester assignment their attitudes towards not only inclusive education with Down syndrome students increased but their perception about the disability in general became more positive. An awareness program used by Rillotta et al. resulted in an increase of positive views on individuals on disabilities; this program not only included interaction among non-disabled and disabled persons but contained guest speakers to inform non-disabled persons about school and family life for an individual with disabilities (2007). However, guest speakers are not the only way to foster acceptance in a visual and emotional way; both video and simulation activities are equally as successful (Rillotta et al., 2007; Trent, 1994). Video allows individuals to gather information about disabilities through both audio and visual stimulation while simulations allow individuals to actually experience disabilities (Rillotta et al., 2007; Trent, 1994).

The use of authentic literature is considered to be an effective teaching strategy for teaching non-disabled peers about individual with disabilities (Andrews, 1998; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Koc et al., 2010; Kramer, 1999; Kurtts et al., 2008; Prater et al., 2006). Smith-D'Arezzo (2003) argues that educators use children's literature to achieve the

same goal that multicultural literature is used to attain: to reduce prejudice and educate individuals about diversity. It is a great tool to use to educate individuals in order to change negative attitudes to attitudes of respect and acceptance (Koc et al., 2010; Kramer, 1999). Reading authentic literature is a way to fully immerse students in the world of disabilities in an appealing way (Andrews, 1998). Kurtts et al. (2008) state,

“The use of children’s literature is a way to share powerful examples of how we all may or may not relate to individual differences. This can be especially true for understanding how disabilities impact the lives of individuals and their families and friends” (p. 23).

Authentic literature provides students with new perspectives on a more personal level about the understanding and acceptance of individual differences, and how important it is to be sensitive to the issues that are part of the lives of individuals with disabilities (Kurtts et al., 2008).

As with all literature based instruction, the most important aspects come after the content is read- reflection, response, and connections (Mathis, 2001; Singer et al., 2003; Kramer, 1999). High quality authentic literature allows students to exercise all three of these aspects by supplying real life situations in which to explore (Prater et al., 2006). Prater et al., (2006) argue that using authentic literature as a tool for teaching allows readers to look within themselves in order to understand personal feelings, relationships, and experiences at a deeper level and also to connect to characters, even though they may be separated by space, time, culture, language, or ability. By connecting to characters, readers are able to get a glimpse of what life is like for someone with a disability (Prater et al., 2006). Prater et al. (2006) state that a powerful piece of literature can be the force that changes readers’ lives as they become aware and begin to accept their own inadequacies, feelings, and reactions to individuals around them, especially those who

differ. While several reviewers and experts have promoted the use of this teaching method in order to promote acceptance for individuals with disabilities (Andrews, 1998; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Koc et al., 2010; Kramer, 1999; Kurtts et al., 2008; Prater et al., 2006), there are few that have actually conducted studies on this area and succeeded.

Studies using authentic literature were conducted in order to find out if they would foster a more positive attitude in non-disabled students about their peers with disabilities (Sipaes-Herrman, 1996; Smith-D'Arezzo et al., 2010). Neither study resulted in any clear increase in acceptance. Sipaes-Herrman et al. (1996) studied the effect both fiction and non-fiction texts would have on non-disabled students in fourth through sixth grade. Pre and post data was taken which provided information on no change of perception towards peers with disabilities (Sipaes-Herrman et al. 1996). The study done by Sipaes-Herrmann et al. presented both fiction and non-fiction authentic literature about disabilities to the students followed by discussion of the material (1996). Using fifth grade students, Smith-D'Arezzo et al. (2010) conducted a study with two authentic books that each featured a main character with a learning disability. They argued that simply reading literature does not change students' attitudes; thus the study included structured book discussions following the reading (Smith- D'Arezzo, 2003; Smith-D'Arezzo et al., 2010). The pre data collected showed that the fifth graded students saw a learning disability as a largely negative quality. Smith-D'Arezzo et al. reported that this perception was not significantly nor positively affected by the literature and the accompanied discussions (2010). For future research they suggested extending the study to include numerous books and multiple discussions rather than having it as a one time event, and perhaps pairing it with exposure to individuals with disabilities in order to

further study how authentic literature can positively affect student perceptions on individuals with disabilities (D'Arezzo et al., 2010).

Conclusion

As this review of the available research suggests, authentic literature can be an effective method in increasing interest, engagement and acceptance within students. While most research focuses on its success with fostering acceptance towards diversity of race, ethnicity, and sexuality, many authors address the possibilities that authentic literature has on educating students about disabilities in order to foster acceptance (Andrews, 1998; Smith-D'Arezzo, 2003; Koc et al., 2010; Kramer, 1999; Kurtts et al., 2008; Prater et al., 2006). Using authentic literature to foster acceptance about individuals with disabilities in non-disabled students may result in positive results when numerous, high-quality texts and discussions are used and/or interaction is incorporated. Once implemented in the classroom, it can be used to not only educate about individuals with disabilities but as a tool to enhance reading and comprehension skills, better discussion skills, build community and change the way students view individuals with disabilities.

Currently, there has not been a significant amount of research conducted on the use of authentic literature in the elementary classroom to foster acceptance of peers with disabilities. It is hoped that this study will highlight the benefits of using authentic literature that have been discovered by the authors addressed in this literature review, as well as add to the research on using authentic literature to improve/enhance students' acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

Chapter 3 Methodology

This chapter begins by examining the research paradigm used in this study and the methods of data collection and analysis. It concludes with a description of the context and participants of the study.

Research Design

This study was conducted using a qualitative research paradigm of teacher research in the classroom. The intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group, or interaction (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1987). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) refer to this method of inquiry in the field as a way for teachers to “examine their own assumptions, develop local knowledge by posing questions and gathering data” (p 40). This research approach was chosen because it will allow me to conduct my study in an unrestricted way. It will allow me to use multiple methods of data collection and my own interpretation as a basis for understanding and answering my research question: Will using authentic literature about individuals with disabilities have an effect on student’s attitudes towards their peers with disabilities?

Qualitative teacher research is the most appropriate for my study because it focuses on the development of student acceptance in an educational setting, as opposed to quantitative research consisting of variables determined to solve a specific problem. It also uses flexible questioning which allows the researcher to enter the study with specific questions but alter them and/or the focus as the study progresses if deemed necessary (Wimmer and Dominick, 2006). The qualitative research approach is often varied in terms of data collection and/or analysis based upon the study and researcher (Wimmer et

al., 2006). By using the qualitative research paradigm, my study will progress in the most effective way possible.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) discuss that teachers play various roles in their inquiries because they are an important part of the setting in which the study is set as opposed to a researcher that is on the outside looking into the classroom. The qualitative research paradigm will allow me to take on the role of both researcher and teacher, being fully invested in the outcome, throughout the study (Cochran et al., 2009). Being in both roles will not only allow me to effectively conduct the study in the field but also directly observe the outcomes of how students and the classroom environment are affected. The outcomes that will be observed will be in several different forms of data collection such as focus groups, field observation, in-depth interviews, and case studies (Wimmer et al., 2009). My study, like teacher research, will be using multiple sources of data which are both interactive and humanistic such as observations, dialogue, and surveys.

For the purpose of this study, in my student teaching placement, I am fully immersed in the everyday life/events of the students. Teacher research is an inquiry by teachers in their schools and in the natural setting of the classroom (Cochran et al., 2009). Qualitative teacher researchers aim for involvement from their participants and seek to build rapport and credibility with the individuals taking part in the study. This study fits the teacher research methodology of qualitative research because it is implemented as an extension of learning occurring in the classroom. This natural setting and involvement allows me to further the learning of the individuals in the study and my own professional learning, as a teacher and a researcher.

Procedure of the Study

The first step in conducting this study was submitting my application to the Institutional Research Board at Rowan University to get approval for research. Once I was approved, I sent home permission slips outlining the study and asking parent permission (Appendix A). Those students who returned signed permissions slips would be included in the study. All research was conducted in Ms. Warne's 2nd grade classroom setting. All twenty students listened and participated during read-aloud activities but only those who obtained signed consent were included in this study. The data was gathered during March of 2011.

Prior to the initiation of the research, I administered surveys to the students to collect baseline data. Three surveys were completed only by those who obtained signed consent to part of the study; one survey per day. Surveys one and two were both adjective checklists modeled after the Adjective Checklist created by HG Gough (Antonak and Livneh 2000). Survey one asked students to circle all the adjectives they felt could describe an individual with disabilities (Appendix B). Survey two asked students to circle all the adjectives they felt could describe a good friend (Appendix B). Adjectives included in the surveys were equally categorized as favorable or unfavorable traits. Students also completed a third survey modeled after a social distance scale created by ES Bogardus (Antonak et al.2000).The survey included corresponding pictures to assist students in comprehending each question asked. Students were asked to circle their response (yes, maybe, or no) for each social interaction with an individual with disabilities (Appendix B). All three surveys were read aloud for all students to ensure comprehension. No questions about individuals with disabilities were answered; students

were allowed to ask questions about the adjectives on surveys one and two. Students were asked to put up test folders and use their classroom numbers as pseudonyms to maintain anonymity in the study for all baseline surveys.

Baseline data was then collected by conducting unstructured interviews with a focus group. The focus group consisted of 6 participants, 3 male and 3 female students, chosen at random with no attention to age, race, social class, and/or cognitive ability. Each individual interview was facilitated by the teacher researcher by use of three questions (Appendix C). Student responses were transcribed within the teacher research journal.

The study was conducted during the read aloud portion of the school day. It commenced with a grand conversation about what having a disability means. The goal of the study is to analyze the effect authentic children's literature has on student attitudes towards individuals with disabilities so the students must first discuss and know what having a disability entails. I then shared with the students that for the next six days the stories they experience during read alouds will follow the theme of difference and individuals with disabilities. All students were expected to listen to read alouds conducted by myself. The following stories were used as authentic children's literature for read alouds: Ish by Peter H. Reynolds, All Dogs have ADHD by Kathy Hoopman, It's Called Dyslexia by Jennifer Moore Mallinos, Understanding Sam and Asperger Syndrome by Clarabelle Van Niekerk and Liezl Venter, Andy and his Yellow Frisbee by Mary Thompson, and I am Utterly Unique: Celebrating the Strengths of Children with Asperger Syndrome an High-Functioning Autism by Elaine Marie Larson.

Students were placed in a seated circle to listen and actively discuss each of the read alouds. Literacy skills such as predicting, questioning and various other reading strategies were continuously practiced and used in order to comprehend the texts. Prior to beginning the first discussion of the study, I told the students that when having a discussion one needs to give the respect one would expect from others when talking. Students were asked to stay attentive and turn to look at the classmate speaking. I told students that I wanted to contribute as little as possible to the discussions; I wanted them to discuss amongst themselves by agreeing and/or sharing new thoughts with each other. When needed, I facilitated the discussions with questions such as “How would you feel if you were _____?”, “Would you have done anything differently?”, and “How did the book make you feel?” Students verbally responded to each of the six read aloud stories which were audio recorded. Students who did not have permission to be a part of the study were not audio recorded.

Once all six days of the read aloud unit and discussions were completed, students were given the same three surveys for culminating data. The three surveys were completed only by those who obtained signed consent to part of the study; one survey per day. All surveys were exactly the same as those administered for baseline data. Again, all three surveys were read aloud to students in order to ensure full comprehension. No questions about individuals with disabilities were answered; students were allowed to ask questions about the adjectives on surveys one and two. Students were asked to put up test folders and use their classroom numbers as pseudonyms to maintain anonymity in the study for all baseline surveys.

An interactive bulletin board, titled “Book Thoughts”, was the final component of the research study.



The cover page of each story was displayed on a tri-fold board along with a mini mailbox underneath each one. A stack of blank note cards were placed in front of the bulletin board so students could easily contribute to the board. Students were told that “Book Thoughts” was a place where they could personally reflect upon any of the five stories included on the board. Ideas that were given to the students for optional responses were feelings that resulted from experiencing the story or any personal views or ideas that might have changed from experiencing the story. This board allowed students the

opportunity to share any thoughts that might not have made it into the discussions or that they may not have been comfortable sharing aloud with their peers.

Data Collection

Data was collected from five main sources. The first source was my own personal teacher journal in which I recorded anecdotes, quotes, questions, thoughts, and any personal reflections on the read aloud lessons.

The second source of data was surveys filled out by the students. The surveys were given to the students prior to the beginning of the study before any authentic literature was used with the students. The same surveys were issued to the students post use of the authentic literature. Teachers did not provide any guidance on the surveys except for defining troublesome adjectives and reading each survey in its entirety to the students.

The third source of data was audio recorded one on one student interviews. A focus group of 6 students, 3 boys and 3 girls, were randomly selected to answer three questions in an unstructured interview (Appendix C). All teacher-student interviews discussed their attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. The interviews were conducted prior to the beginning of the study before any authentic literature was used with the students as well as post use.

The fourth source of data was audio recorded whole class discussions. These discussions took part after a piece of authentic literature was presented and read to the students. Only students who had permission to be included in the study were audio recorded during the discussion.

The fifth and final source of data was the student response note cards collected by the interactive bulletin board. The students wrote personal responses to the stories posted on the bulletin board; which ever stories they wanted to respond to as well as many times as they wanted. I suggested responding using feeling and/or any changes in attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. The only note cards used for this study were from students that had permission to be included in the study; all other note cards were discarded.

Data Analysis

The data recorded over the course of the study from a teacher research journal, surveys, audio taped interviews, audio taped class discussions, and student response note cards were analyzed by focusing on themes that emerged throughout the data. All sources were organized so that I could draw conclusions about 2nd grade attitudes towards individuals with disabilities pre and post exposure to examples within authentic children's literature. The qualitative data was analyzed by looking first at individual sets: the teacher research journal, surveys, audio taped interviews, audio taped class discussions, and student response note cards. Data analysis was recursive in that data was analyzed multiple times across all platforms to gain more details and accurate conclusions.

Context of the Study

District

Collingswood is a borough in Camden County, New Jersey. According to the 2010 United States Census, the borough population was around 14,000 residents. Collingswood Borough School District includes 7 schools that serve around 2,000

students in grades PK through 12. There are 5 elementary schools: James A Garfield, Mark Newbie, Thomas Sharp, William P Tatem, and Zane North; Collingswood Middle School, and Collingswood High School. In the Collingswood Borough School District, 1% of students are English Language Learners (ELL) and 18% of students have an Individualized Education Program (IEP). Most families come from a middle class socioeconomic status and about 90% of residents are Caucasian.

School

Thomas Sharp Elementary School is a Title I school that includes grades Pre-kindergarten to 5th. There is one classroom of each grade level with an exception to kindergarten which has two classrooms. According to the New Jersey Department of Education 2009-2010 School Report Card, there are about 165 students enrolled in the school with 93.9% of them speaking English as their first language. 14.5% of students are students with disabilities who have their own individualized education plans. The average class size at Thomas Sharp Elementary is 23.6 making the student/faculty ratio about 17 to 1. Student enrollment is about 53% male and 47% female with 48% of all students Caucasian, 27% Black, 15% Hispanic, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, <1% American Indian/Alaskan, and 6% two or more races. Thomas Sharp has 37% of students eligible for free lunch and 7% of students eligible for reduced priced lunch which is based on family income levels. The school day is six hours and thirty minutes.

Classroom

The 2nd grade general education classroom consists of twenty students from 7 years of age to 8 years of age, one teacher, one basic skills teacher during specific times of the day, and a student teacher/researcher. There are 3 students with IEPs and five

receiving a basic skills program. There are two students who receive Speech therapy and one student that receives occupational therapy. Programs used are Everyday Mathematics, Harcourt Social Studies, and Writer's Workshop. The current reading program is a mix between the Trophies Program and Guided Reading.

All twenty students were asked to participate in this study. Only those students who returned a signed permission slip from their parents were able to participate. Eighteen students total were involved in the study.

Looking Ahead

Chapter four discusses the findings of the study and data analysis. Chapter five presents a summary of the findings, conclusions of the study, limitations of the study, as well as implications of the student and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis

Introduction

Chapter four discusses and analyzes the findings of my study as it pertains to the research question: In what ways will using authentic literature about individuals with disabilities impact students' attitudes towards their peers with disabilities. This chapter discusses the findings and the three major themes that emerged from the study: learning through engagement, text to self connections, and the acceptance of differences.

Learning through Engagement

Throughout the study students were thoroughly engaged during the read alouds and enjoyed learning new information about people in society. On the third day of the study an entry in my teacher research journal reads: "*Students are excited for a new read aloud in our disabilities unit. I am so happy that they have interest in what they are learning and are asking each morning whether they are going to hear a new book or not. They don't seem to be getting bored with the constant discussion about individuals with disabilities and/or differences among people*" (TR Journal, 3/17/11). When a female student named Catie suggested during a discussion that a new character in one of the stories might have the same disability as the main character since she seems to understand him, another female student named Krista disagreed: "She might understand his problem because she learned about it, like us!" I observed my students learning without sitting at their desks with a textbook in front of them filled with facts and figures on disabilities but by enjoying a piece of authentic literature.

After analyzing the data from the individual interviews I conducted with my focus group I found that there was growth in what students knew about disabilities. The first

question I used to facilitate conversation was “What do you think of when I say the word ‘disability’?” Out of the 6 students that were interviewed only two were on the right track with the similar definitions prior to the implementation of the study. A female student names Lauren replied, “People that don’t do things as well as others, and they need special things to do things” while a male student named Trevor replied, “Some people that can’t do stuff have disabilities like people in wheelchairs; that’s a disability”. The other four students mainly thought a disability meant someone’s feelings and/or decisions. Once read alouds were conducted and students were engaged in reflective discussion about disabilities, the same 6 students were interviewed starting with that same question. All 6 students were now able to identify what a disability is and/or some characteristics of one by recalling knowledge they had acquired during the study. Many of the students interviewed were actually able to recall specific disabilities they had been exposed to along with some characteristics. For example, a female student Rebecca stated: “Well, people with ADHD can’t concentrate, or dyslexia,-people can’t write good, and Asperger’s people really like something”. As a result of the student’s change in response during the post study interviews I recorded in my teacher researcher notebook: *“I did it! I now know the children were able to acquire at least some knowledge about disabilities from my use of authentic literature in the classroom before analyzing the rest of my data. I was hoping for a change in what they thought a disability was during the post surveys but did not expect so many of them to recall specific disabilities and their characteristics to me” (2/28/11).*

Throughout my student teaching experience in this 2nd grade classroom I found that when students are not interested in what is being taught, their learning suffers. This

was not the case with this study. When analyzing recordings of discussions, the use of authentic literature clearly promoted interest in my students by the high participation rate from my students. Since the authentic literature used in this study was specifically about difference and individuals with disabilities the students were continuously discussing and recalling information they had learned about the topic. Students consistently had questions and/or comments to add to the discussion. Every time we circled up for read aloud time, the class would be engaged in a discussion pertaining to what they had learned during the study so far before going further with a new book. “We learned about disorders like ADHD and how people’s brains work differently” recalled a female student named Josie during the class discussion; the day after All Dogs Have ADHD was read. Rebecca added, “People with ADHD mess up in school or work because they get too hyper”.

The high rate of student engagement through the use of authentic literature suggests that interest helps students to retain important knowledge about content, in this case, the disabilities they were learning about. Catie recalled, using the interactive bulletin board, that if someone has dyslexia, they look at numbers, letters, and words like they are a bowl of soup- all mixed up. My students were constantly engaged in learning through the use of authentic literature and the discussions that its use led to. My student, Krista, responded about the successes one can achieve despite having a disability; she wrote: “I feel good because Sara is learning even though she has dyslexia”. This suggests a possible increase in positive views towards individuals that suffer from a disability.

Once both Understanding Sam and Asperger Syndrome and Andy and His Yellow Frisbee were read to the students, they were able to identify similarities between the

characters. “Sam really really loves his cello music and Andy really really loves his Frisbee” stated Trevor when explaining how both Sam and Andy have obsessions due to their disabilities. By experiencing a read aloud that introduced them to the world of disabilities followed by a student led discussion, students seem to have retained knowledge to be able to identify similarities between disabilities. The students recalled the hardships that the characters they met faced in order to discuss how some things are harder for some people. Catie restated this conclusion when adding a note card to the mailbox of Understanding Sam and Asperger Syndrome on the interactive bulletin board: “It made me feel like it’s harder for some people like Sam”.

During class discussion, many students recalled facts they had learned about the disability autism: “I think that people with autism don’t really know how to make friends and they’re shy and don’t really know how to say words in the right way” stated Catie. “He’s shy and doesn’t really talk to people” recalled Zeke. When reading through Andy and His Yellow Frisbee, Josie made a prediction that Andy would eventually talk to the other character in the story:

“I think that eventually Andy will say here’s how to do it [spin a frisbee], eventually, after a while”.

“Why?” I asked.

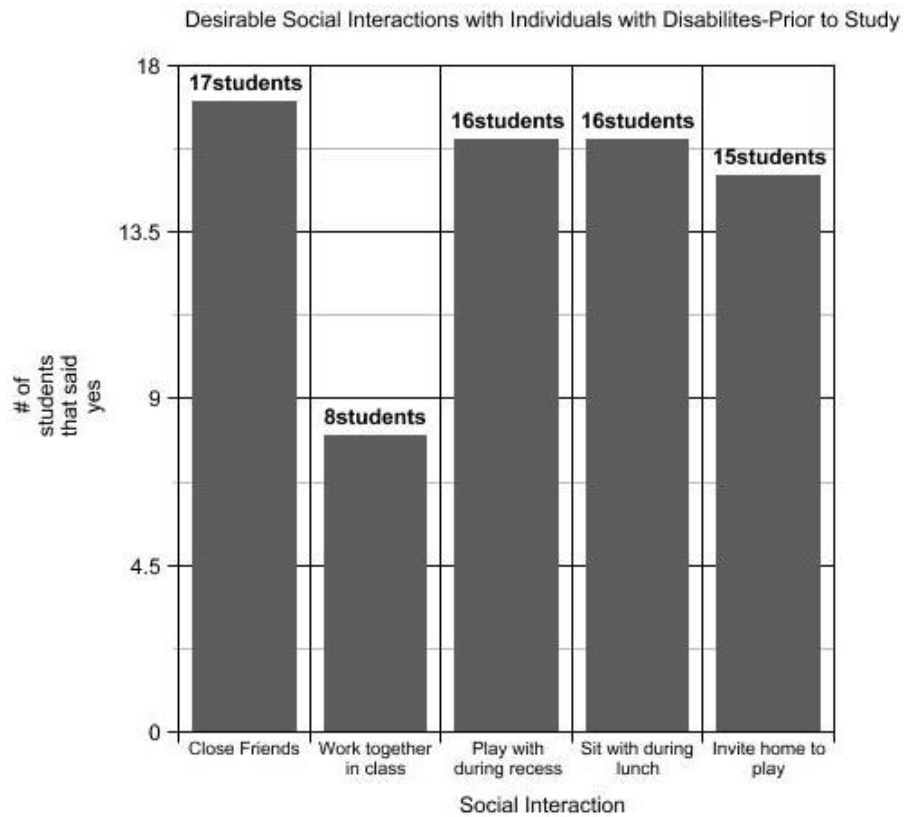
“Because the book told us his words were locked inside and it’s harder for him to get them out” answered Josie.

It seemed that the students were using the piece of literature to acquire new knowledge but not limiting themselves there. She used the knowledge she was acquiring from the text to make a logical prediction about the character. Josie had learned that it was harder

to individuals with autism to get words out and so predicted that with time, Andy would respond to the other character.

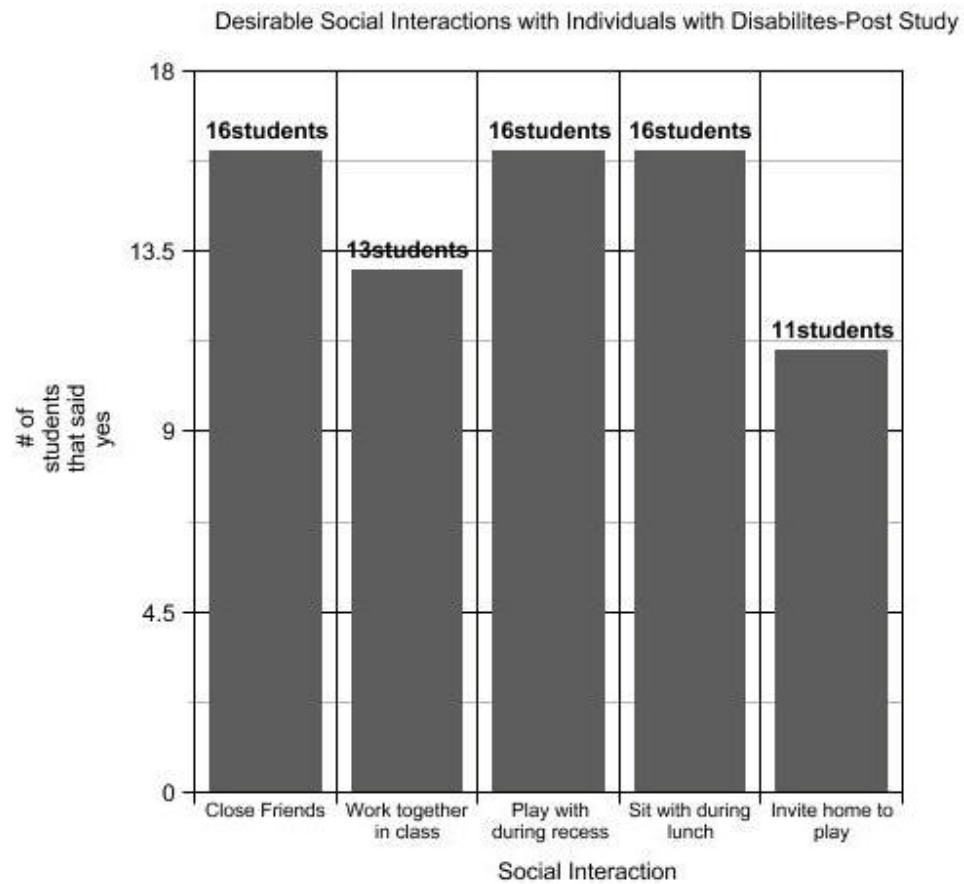
I observed the students fully engaged in learning about the characters in each of the books and more importantly caring about them. I recorded in my teacher research journal: “*Students were pointing out that people that are similar to the characters of Sam and Andy just have a little more trouble with social with other people and my students didn’t make it out to be a bad thing! There were no negative comments or disbelief that people had these types of issues*” (TR Journal, 3/21/11). Their strong engagement throughout the study allowed my students to understand the real life connection these books had. When asked who else was an important part of the team that could help a student like Sam in school the students identified friends and classmates. Catie stated, “[As a friend] you have to understand he has a problem and you can’t make fun of it and if they don’t want anyone to know, you can’t tell anyone”. During his individual interview, post study, Trevor affirmed: “Everyone has the capability of being a friend; sometimes for people with Asperger Syndrome or autism have a problem trying to make friends but they can be a friend; as long you are nice and accept them”. Looking back across each book’s discussion, it seems as though this had been the class’s conclusion and several students voiced ways in which they could reach out to befriend an individual with disabilities. For example, Rebecca identified questions that could be asked in order to strike up a conversation with an individual who has difficulty socializing. She comments, “I could ask ‘Will you be my friend?’, ‘Do you need help?’, or ‘Do you want to work with me today?’”.

The knowledge that my students acquired throughout the study seemed to make an impact on how they believed they would socially interact with an individual with a disability. As shown by the graph below, at the beginning of the study students did not have a negative outlook on socializing with an individual with a disability.



Most of the students, included in the study, responded that they would be close friends with an individual with disabilities, play with them during recess, sit with the, during lunch, and invite them home to play. But, interestingly, less than 50% of the students included in the study said they would work together with an individual who had a disability in class.

The following graph shows the results from the same social interaction survey but taken after the study was conducted.



The number of students that responded that they would be close friends with an individual with disabilities, play with them during recess, and sit with the, during lunch stayed about the same. But, now that students had more knowledge about the hardships but most importantly, the successes that individuals with disabilities can achieve, the number of students that responded that they would work together with an individual who

had a disability in class rose 27%. This rise suggests that knowledge can lead to a change in attitude towards individuals with disabilities.

Overall, I found that the students were interested in what disabilities are and genuinely wanted to continue learning about them through evidence indicated in the class discussions and focus group interviews. Students seemed to display an enjoyment of learning through the use of authentic literature in the form of read alouds. This interest and engagement that was found throughout the data sources suggest that students have a strong ability to learn and comfortably discuss the world of disabilities.

Text to Self Connections

During one of our read alouds, Understanding Sam and Asperger Syndrome connections were made by my students that I did not expect. The character Sam had Asperger Syndrome and as I read, revealing more characteristics about the disability, connections began to be made aloud. For example, Rebecca commented “It’s hard for me to make friends sometimes.” Nick offered, “I have bad eye contact”, and Joshua chimed in, “I’m bad at some things but really good at other things”. My students took the read aloud a step further; instead of sitting there solely acquiring new knowledge about a disability, they began to connect to the characters, bringing in their own feelings and understandings.

Using authentic literature in the form of read alouds seemed to help my students make connections to the characters they met and with the disabilities they learned about. I wrote in my teacher research journal after the second day of the study following the read aloud, All Dogs have ADHD: “*The students made a lot of personal connections to the characteristics of ADHD during today’s discussion. They acted a bit surprised about the*

similarities between them and someone that has ADHD. Have they ever discussed ADHD before? I feel as though our discussion will lead them to now accept ADHD in the future because of their connections. There was absolutely no verbal denial to the similar characteristics and experiences to an individual with ADHD.” (TR Journal, 3/16/11).

This was only the beginning. When discussing whether or not having a disability makes a person different from others in an individual interview with Rebecca she assured me that those individuals were not too much different than the rest of us. “People with ADHD, we have like the same things like we really want to go outside or some of us can’t write good” explained Rebecca “but they just really have it a lot”. The interactive bulletin board provided Catie, with an opportunity to personal respond to the book *All Dogs have ADHD* by writing: “The book made me feel like everyone has some of a disorder”; showing that she was able to make her own connections to various characteristics of disabilities.

As stated in chapter two, “Being engaged in these situations leads students to not only find themselves within texts but also provides them with opportunities for seeing the world through another person’s eyes” (Singer & Smith, 2003). The students were able to see the characters in the story as someone who may as well be sitting next to them in class or playing outside with them at recess. When discussing the story, It’s Called Dyslexia as a whole class, Rebecca stated: “People with dyslexia are just like us but they have different ways of how they have to learn. Like how Sara had a hard time reading and writing; some of us have a hard time reading and writing so we are just like people who have it [dyslexia]”. Other students seemed to feel the same way as they agree with what Rebecca said.

I witnessed students opening up about their own hardships in and out of the classroom. When reading It's Called Dyslexia and learning about its characteristics students were heard saying, "That's kind of like me", "me too!", showing an understanding of what the character might be going through. A male student named Nick, who has visible trouble accepting help in the classroom, opened up the most, "Me and my baby sister have ADHD. My baby sister moves around and has trouble sleeping and I have ADHD too, a lot". When using the interactive bulletin board to respond to the stories, Nick wrote, "I feel sad for the dogs that have ADHD because they get hyper like me". Using the characters in authentic literature to discuss and learn about disabilities was having an impact on my students; one that had them opening up to their own differences as well as the difference around them.

As the study progressed and more pieces of authentic literature were being used, the students were emerging themselves fully into the story. Rebecca stated during our culminating discussion: "These stories make me feel like I'm really in the story, like one of the characters. Next time if I see somebody like that I'll help them." My students were putting themselves in the shoes of the characters they met in each piece of authentic literature. Even when disabilities with more social characteristics, such as Asperger Syndrome and Autism, were introduced and discussed with the students the connections still continued. I wrote in my teacher research journal: "*When reading Understanding Sam and Asperger Syndrome, the students enjoyed the main character, Sam, which allowed them to really work towards understanding his disability. They were able to learn about the social issues that Sam suffered from and still make connections to them just like they did for previous disability characteristics*" (TR Journal, 3/18/11). A male

student name Joshua who has trouble socializing with other students in the classroom put a note card in the mailbox for Understanding Sam and Asperger Syndrome stating that the book made him think of himself and when individually interviewed Joshua stated, “The characters in the book can happen in real life”. He took away a clear understanding of how an individual with a disability like Asperger Syndrome might feel like.

Rebecca made a strong connection to the main character, Andy, in Andy and his Yellow Frisbee, which she shared during the class discussion: “This book made me feel like if I had Autism and I didn’t talk to anyone I’d feel like no one wanted to be my friend. So when Sarah came up to me, I felt like someone was trying to be my friend”. The connections my students were making to the characters were beginning to alter their views on how to behave around individuals with disabilities. Catie also had a powerful response after listening to Andy and the Yellow Frisbee: “At the park there was this girl that wouldn’t talk to me and I was thinking why won’t she talk to me? And her brother came over and said ‘I’m sorry, she really can’t use words’ and I asked ‘why?’ and he said ‘because she has Autism’. And I think I got out of the book that if you meet someone with Autism you shouldn’t make fun of them or be scared”.

Overall, I found that students were able to make strong text to self connections with the world of disabilities and individuals who suffer from them through the use of authentic literature. The data gained through class discussions, individual interviews, and my personal teacher research journal provides evidence to support the learning students took part in by making these connections. Students demonstrated a deeper understanding of individuals with disabilities by entering their world through the power of authentic literature.

Accepting Differences

“It’s awesome! It’s awesome! Different is awesome!” echoed my students as we had our culminating discussion about all of the pieces of literature they have been exposed to and learning from. I found that this statement traveled from discussion to discussion by word of the students and never lost its positive power. Student acceptance of individuals with disability was observed within many students due to their responses and participation in this study.

During Rebecca’s post study interview she stated: “I thought ADHD was so bad! But now I learned that people with ADHD are just like us!” She was not the only one that came to the conclusion that disabilities were not a bad thing. Catie stated during the class discussion following the book It’s Called Dyslexia: “Dyslexia isn’t a bad thing; you should accept who you are and accept who other people are because we’re all different. Maybe some of us in this class have dyslexia but we don’t even know it!” Josie went on to agree: “I also say dyslexia isn’t a bad thing. It doesn’t really matter, you just need help; it doesn’t really matter-different is awesome”. My students discussed that for some individuals that is how they were made and that does not make them bad. Throughout each book’s mailbox on the interactive bulletin board, I received a note card stating that disabilities were a good thing not a bad thing, and main characters were good boys and girls, not bad ones. Krista responded with a note card in the All Dogs Have ADHD mailbox writing: “I think ADHD is not a bad but a good thing because it’s good to be different”. Josie stayed true to her stance about dyslexia writing: “It’s Called Dyslexia made me feel like people that have dyslexia aren’t bad people; they just need more help” and submitting it into a mailbox on the bulletin board.

My students began to acknowledge the fact that all people are different and went further in beginning to appreciate differences. “It’s not very fun to be the same” stated Joshua during his post study interview. Catie stated similar beliefs during her post study interview: “If people were all the same it would not be a very fun life” and on a note card responded to the book, Ish, writing: “The book made me feel like who cares what other people say, it’s what you think. Life would be very boring if we were all the same”. My students discussed respecting people’s differences and that sometimes those so called differences aren’t that different from everyone else’s. The use of authentic literature that addressed disabilities with its text and/or characters seemed to be the key that opened the gates for new knowledge to be learned, emotional connections to be made and acceptance to grow. “I think the books were about how no matter if you’re different, you’re all ok because it’s good to be different, not the same” stated Catie during the discussion following the reading of Andy and His Yellow Frisbee. Another student Nina discussed the books during the culminating discussion: “All of these books made me feel happy because people are different”. I could not have planned for such positive reactions and views about differences from my students.

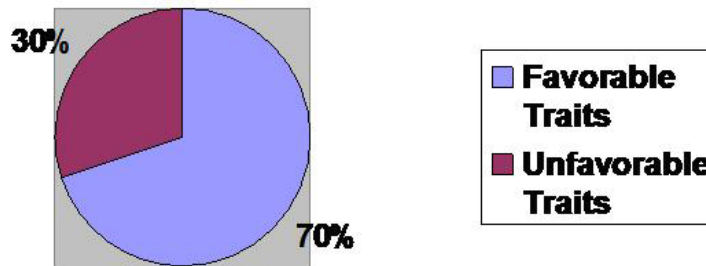
Being accepting and knowing how to treat individuals who are different in their own ways is not always easy. Prior to the beginning of my study I found myself nervous about how my second grade students might respond to the topic of disabilities. Would they care about those that differ from them or how they should be treated? An entry in my teacher research journal details how wrong I was to worry: “*Who would have thought second graders would handle such a sensitive topic like disabilities so gracefully. They have such a sense for others that I feel silly for ever being nervous in the first place*” (TR

Journal, 3/22/11). During his individual interview prior to the beginning of the study, Trevor mentioned “the golden rule” instantly putting my worries to rest. When asked whether individuals with disabilities should be treated differently he automatically answered, “No, treat others the way you want to be treated. It’s the golden rule!” This was another motto throughout many discussions; being repeated by several different students. “Just because they’re different doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be their friend” stated a male student named David during a class discussion. A female student Kayla responded towards the end of the study during a class discussion stating: “All the books made me feel like it’s not nice to make fun of people when they’re different from you”. This learning stayed with Kayla as shown when she responded to two different books using the interactive bulletin board stating: “Do not, I say, do not make fun of people because they are different”.

My students were clearly impacted by the authentic literature used during the study. Their responses during discussions were positive and understanding and their learning stayed with them after the study when many of them responded using the interactive bulletin board. Our culminating discussion was filled with lessons learned and appreciation of those who were different. Josie sums up her learning in the study by stating: “Everybody is different but they are the same in a way; they’re all people. So you shouldn’t treat them different because they’re just like you. So I think the books are a really good lesson.”

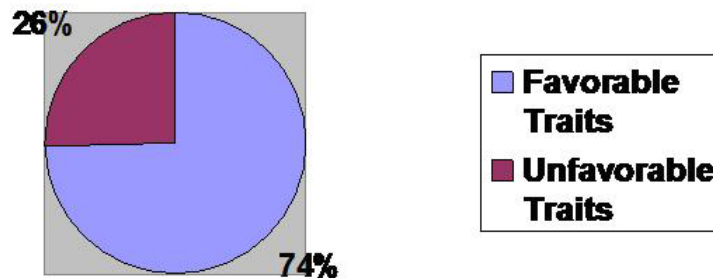
The following pie chart shows student responses to the adjective checklist survey pertaining to individuals with disabilities taken prior to the implementation of the study.

Adjective Checklist about Individuals with Disabilities- Prior to Study



In general, students had a positive view from the start about students with disabilities, whether they fully understand what having a disability meant or not. Once the study was fully implemented, the students acquired knowledge about what a disability was, discussed how to treat someone different from them, and ultimately expressed that being different was awesome. The following pie chart shows student responses from the same adjective checklist pertaining to individuals with disabilities but taken post study.

Adjective Checklist about Individuals with Disabilities- Post Study



70% of the adjectives used to describe individuals with disabilities prior to the study were favorable traits while 74% of adjectives used were favorable during the post study survey. My students described individuals with disabilities 4% more favorable after learning about disabilities and differences. Most unfavorable traits were used less to describe these individuals during the post study survey when compared to the survey taken prior to the study. A full break down of the survey results by trait is available in Appendix D.

Overall the data acquired through student surveys, class discussions, individuals interviews, and my personal teacher research journal suggests that there was a rise in acceptance towards individuals with disabilities in my students. Studies done by both Nelson (2004) and Schall & Kauffmann (2003), both discussed in chapter two, “suggested that authentic literature could lead students in discussions that foster comfort

and knowledge; two crucial components for acceptance”. This is what seems to have resulted from my study; a high comfort level as well as new knowledge which has led my students to demonstrate a new found acceptance for those who differ from others.

Interesting Findings

Although I found that my student’s acceptance levels were rising and understanding was being developed there was still a high rate of sympathy towards these individuals. Many students responded to the books using the interactive bulletin board writing: “I felt sad”. One student in particular that was often pulled out of the classroom during the implementation of the study used the board to respond to It’s Called Dyslexia: “I feel sad because that girl had dyslexia really bad”. She also responded to Understanding Sam and Asperger’s Syndrome writing: “I feel happy because I am glad that I don’t have Asperger Syndrome”. By learning about disabilities and better understanding what it means to have certain ones, students developed empathy for those who suffer from them. Although students were still accepting of the differences of others, some students did not want to suffer from a disability themselves.

Summary of Data Analysis

I noticed several things when implementing my study using authentic literature. I noticed first that students were able to recall valuable information about disabilities, including specific disabilities and their characteristics, the hardships and successes that individuals with disabilities face, and how to reach out and become their friends. Students also began to make text-to-self connections with the characters in the literature with which they were presented. I observed students develop interest and empathy towards the characters and actually putting themselves in the shoes of the characters in order to fully

comprehend both the story and the disabilities. Most importantly, my students grew to accept differences within people, and within each other. As my students exclaimed throughout the entire study, “Different is awesome!”

Looking Ahead

Chapter four discussed the data analysis and findings. Chapter five discusses a summary of the findings, conclusions of the study, limitations of the study, implications of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5

Summary, Conclusions and Implications

Summary of Findings

My study was implemented in a second grade setting over a three week period. I have found that the use of authentic literature, implemented through a disabilities unit, can have a positive impact on student attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. By cross referencing and checking my teacher research journal, tape recorded discussions, tape recorded interviews, student surveys, and personal response cards I found that the use of authentic literature impacts attitudes in several ways. I found an increase in interest in what disabilities are and a desire to continue learning about them. Students were not acquiring knowledge because they were told they needed to know it; they displayed a genuine enjoyment towards learning about the world of disabilities through stories and open discussion. They comfortably discussed this sensitive topic through the eyes of characters and the plot of a story. Student went even further and often put themselves in the shoes of characters; thus learning all about difference and disabilities.

I found that using authentic literature to learn about disabilities helped my students to make strong text to self connections. Connections were made with individuals who suffer from disabilities - individuals that my students initially strongly believed differed from them. Individuals with disabilities were no longer just people in stories but individuals that could be sitting right next to them. These connections led my students to have a deeper understanding of individuals with disabilities and a realization that they are not as different as they might have once believed.

Finally, I found that my students were more accepting of individuals with disabilities. Students had acquired knowledge about disabilities and were conversing

comfortably about those that differed from others in a positive way. Students were excited about difference and accepting that not everyone has to do things the same to do them right. They concluded that “Different is awesome” and that one needs to embrace those differences in order to be happy.

Conclusions

The research I conducted prior to the study and findings from my research have taught me a great deal about the benefits of using authentic literature in the classroom. Authentic literature can be used in the classroom for more than just learning story elements and reading strategies. Students greatly benefit from exploring this diverse world through text; it’s a way to open their minds in various ways. The majority of my findings were supported by the research I conducted.

Leal (1999) found through a study that students who explored literature and took part in lively discussions were engaged further than just demonstrating an understanding of plots, themes, and characters. She found that students were discussing character traits they found within the text and applying it to their own lives (Leal, 1999). My research affirmed these findings as I saw a large increase in students moving beyond story elements during read alouds and looking closely at characters and details to learn about disabilities. I believe that the use of authentic literature allowed a great deal of learning to occur due to the interest and engagement it promoted.

As Singer & Smith (2003) states, being emerged in situations leads students to not only find themselves within texts but also provides them with opportunities for seeing the world through another person’s eyes. This is what occurred throughout my study, an enormous amount of text to self connections building understanding about the differences

of others. Singer & Smith (2003) argue that it is these important experiences that will assist students in fostering their acceptance of others. If students have no exposure to disabilities they do not understand the importance of their acceptance in society. As Edgington (2002) argues, authentic literature's relevance to the lives of students is what makes it effective in the classroom. My findings support this claim in the way my student personally connected to the world of disabilities. Authentic literature provided my students with characters and plot details that reminded them of their own lives. As my research confirms and Prater, Dyches & Johnstun (2006) argue students do not always have experiences outside of educational settings with diverse groups of people so it is up to educators to fill that void in order to build awareness.

Prater, Dyches & Johnstun (2006) also argue that a powerful piece of literature can be the force that changes readers' lives as they become aware and begin to accept their own inadequacies, feelings, and reactions to individuals around them, especially those who differ. My findings confirm this research. I feel as though my students became much more aware of not only the differences of others but their own differences and through that new knowledge began developing their acceptance. The students realized that everyone has their own differences which ultimately make everyone more similar than they initially realized.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted during my student teaching placement in a second grade general education classroom. This brought limitation since it was not conducted in my own classroom in an environment that I had created from the first day of school. I needed to make sure I conducted my study in a way to not disturb the environment my

cooperating teacher had created. Straying from the curriculum in order to incorporate the study throughout the school day and my time there might have thrown the classroom learning onto a path that my cooperating teacher did not want. Since the study was conducted during my student teaching placement time constraints were a large limiting factor in the study.

Time constraints were apparent in the study as a whole as well as in portions of the research conducted in the classroom. Much of the research studies I studied and discussed in my review of the literature involved several months of study. From the start, my study was going to occur over a much shorter time period. Once my study was exempted by the Institutional Research Board at Rowan University I had three weeks to conduct my study. During this three week period my study was limited mainly to the read aloud block for a total of around 30 minutes a day. Some portions of the study such as individual interviews were conducted during the independent reading block which lasted anywhere between 10-30 minutes, depending on the day.

In order to administer pre and post surveys to the students on separate days, the use of authentic literature, in the form of read alouds, was limited to a 6 day time period. I would have liked to expose the students to more authentic literature and in different ways other than just read alouds. The block of time allotted daily for my study limited the time available for discussion following each read aloud. Discussions sometimes felt rushed because of the lack of time and/or other daily constraints. I feel the students could have taken the discussions even further if more time was allotted. Not all of my students were able to voice their opinions and thoughts every single time they wanted to which could have led to missing out on important data for this study.

Overall, in the short time in which the study was conducted I began to see an impact that authentic literature had made. I do not believe the limitations compromised the study; however, if it had continued a stronger impact may have been able to occur.

Implications for the Field

Today education has shifted its focus from what is important to measuring student learning as shown on standardized test scores. This shifts classrooms back to text books and test prep passages in order to prepare students for the “almighty” test. Students may become prepared in the eyes of the education system but are they prepared for the all too real world? In a world filled with obstacles to overcome and diversity to accept, text books, test prep passages, and standardized tests are not going to prepare out students for the real world. It is my hope that the conclusions drawn from this study will show the importance of incorporating authentic literature in the classroom.

Often times teaching to the test does not foster an environment that encourages critical thinking and a love for learning. These are critical components of a classroom where students come away with knowledge and strategies in which to use to succeed in life. I hope that this study will demonstrate the positive effects that authentic literature can have on the lives of students in a classroom, as well as outside of one.

I hope my research will inspire educators to use more authentic literature in their classrooms. More importantly, I hope this study inspires teachers to take on sensitive topic, such as disabilities, in their classrooms, realizing that our students need to learn about what is outside the four walls. In my study authentic literature seems to be a useful tool in introducing and opening the world of disabilities to students.

Students are the leaders of tomorrow and as educators we have a hand in how tomorrow may turn out. I hope that my findings help educators to use resources, such as authentic literature, to broaden the views of students about their diverse world and all the people who live in it.

Suggestions for Further Research

Due to the limitations of this study, particularly the time limits, it is crucial that continued research be conducted on what effects authentic literature has on student attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. I was extremely restricted by the short amount of time I was given to conduct the study. I am curious to know what the impact would have been had I more time to conduct the study with my students. It is my personal belief that had the study continued for a longer period of time; the attitudes of my students would have become even more openly positive.

I am interested in seeing how this study would look in another grade level. I think that this study in particular has great potential for older elementary grade levels. The focus of this study could have yielded some fantastic student led discussions. Due to the young age of my students most of the discussions were facilitated by me. Older students hold the potential for facilitating their own discussions and exploring the books and topic even deeper. This may open up students even more, providing a researcher with stronger data pertaining to student attitudes toward individuals with disabilities.

I would like to see how the discussion groups work in other classroom settings. I am just one teacher in one class following an informal model of discussion groups. I had to instill in my second graders a sense of discussion etiquette since they had not experienced an open forum before. I would like to see classroom discussions where

students already have had exposure to them and see if it yields different results. Also, various other discussions models may yield different results as well. I wonder if breaking the class up into small groups for discussion after a read aloud would have affected discussion. Would the students have spoken up even more? Or would they have shied away from their peers without a teacher there to facilitate? Class discussion was an enormous source of data for this study and I wonder if a change in how it was conducted would have altered results.

And finally, something I had really hoped to do was to incorporate actually interaction with peers with disabilities. Because of my severe time restrictions and my student teaching placement I was unable to do this. I wanted to observe my students interacting with a self contained classroom of students with disabilities prior to the implementation of the study and then again after. I am very interested in seeing how this study would have affected social interaction with individuals.

Closing Thoughts

Overall I feel further work needs to be done exploring the effects authentic literature has on student attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. For such a short amount of time I saw positive results that confirmed the research I had conducted prior to my study. My results connected with the work of Prater, Dyches, & Johnstun (2006) and added to the limited work on the tools' usefulness in educating about disabilities. I feel that authentic literature can be used as a comfortable and thought provoking way in introducing students to the world of disabilities. Students become naturally interested and engaged when they are able to experience something new through a story and characters. The discussion that emerges is genuine which is what we as educators seek from our

students. One of the most important aspects of learning is the role in which the student takes. Using authentic literature allows students to take on a leading role, making their own conclusions, connections and more importantly, developing acceptance towards the differences of others.

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Appendix A: Permission Form

Dear Parent/Guardian:

I am a graduate student in the Collaborative Education program at Rowan University. I will be conducting a research project under the supervision of Dr. Marjorie Madden. I am requesting permission for your child to participate in this research. The goal of the study is to examine the effects of the use of children's books about individuals with disabilities on student understanding and acceptance of individuals with disabilities.

Authentic children's books that include characters with disabilities and/or have the topic of individuals with disabilities will be used as read alouds. Students will participate in videotaped discussions about individuals with disabilities using characters and information from the literature. I will be the only person viewing the videotaped and will retain all taped in a secure location in my home. To preserve each child's confidentiality pseudonyms, not actual names, will be used to identify individuals. All data will be reported in terms of group results; individual results will not be reported.

Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate in this study will have absolutely no effect on your child's standing in his/her class. At the conclusion of the study a summary of the group results will be made available to all interested parents. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 856-962-5707 or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Marjorie Madden, at 856-256-4772.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sara Alves

Please indicate whether or not you wish to have your child participate in this study by checking the appropriate statement below and returning this letter to your child's teacher by February 25th.

I grant permission for my child _____ to participate in this study.

I do not grant permission for my child _____ to participate in this study.

Please indicate whether or not you give permission for you child to be video/audio taped.

I grant permission for my child to be video/audio taped for this study.

I do not grant permission for my child to be video/audio taped for this study.

(Parent/Guardian signature)

(Date)

Appendix B: Surveys

Number _____

Age _____

Circle all the adjectives you feel could describe an individual with disabilities.

Healthy	Slow
Cruel	Friendly
Active	Smart
Distant	Weak
Sad	Imaginative
Kind	Confused
Disorganized	Lazy
Unhappy	Funny
Clever	Sloppy
Honest	Helpful
Stupid	Popular

Number _____

Age _____

Circle all the adjectives you feel could describe a good friend.

Healthy	Slow
Cruel	Friendly
Active	Smart
Distant	Weak
Sad	Imaginative
Kind	Confused
Disorganized	Lazy
Unhappy	Funny
Clever	Sloppy
Honest	Helpful
Stupid	Popular

Number _____

Age _____

Circle your response for each social interaction with an individual with disabilities.



Would you want them as close friends?

YES MAYBE NO



Would you want to work with them in class?

YES MAYBE NO



Would you pick them to be on your team during recess?

YES MAYBE NO



Would you sit with them during lunch?

YES MAYBE NO



Would you invite them over to your house to play?

YES MAYBE NO

Appendix C: Interview Questions

- What do you think of when I say the word “disability”?
- Does having a disability make a person different from others? Why or Why not?
- If so, should they be treated differently? Why or Why not?

Appendix D: Adjective Checklist Results by Trait

Adjective Checklist about Individuals with Disabilities

Prior to Study

Adjectives	Class Total /18
Healthy	16
Cruel	6
Active	14
Distant	5
Sad	8
Kind	18
Disorganized	5
Unhappy	8
Clever	8
Honest	12
Stupid	5
Slow	7
Friendly	17
Smart	15
Weak	6
Imaginative	11
Confused	5
Lazy	8
Funny	17
Sloppy	5
Helpful	14
Popular	14

Post Study

Adjectives	Class Total /18
Healthy	13
Cruel	1
Active	13
Distant	6
Sad	7
Kind	14
Disorganized	3
Unhappy	6
Clever	11
Honest	15
Stupid	2
Slow	5
Friendly	16
Smart	14
Weak	3
Imaginative	11
Confused	7
Lazy	5
Funny	13
Sloppy	3
Helpful	13
Popular	6

TOTAL	Favorable	Unfavorable
187	139	48
	74%	26%

TOTAL	Favorable	Unfavorable
224	156	68
	70%	30%