

(Con)textualizing Disability:

Building Empathy with Cece Bell's *El Deafo*

Authors: Erica Boulay-Ali, Melissa Johnson, Aleisha Smith and Ali Zimmerman
Final Class Project for EDCI 5404: Multicultural Children's Literature, University of Minnesota

Project Context:

As a special education teacher, I am always looking for ways to help students with special needs improve their self-esteem, and to create a safe learning environment for them within the school as a whole. This means helping mainstream students recognize and include students of all backgrounds into school culture. In our society, significant stigma surrounds disability designation, and people with disabilities often feel the need to "prove" themselves or "overcome" their disability. As a reading teacher, I am in the unique position of using texts to help students of all backgrounds explore multiple ways of being and knowing. In so doing, I work towards normalizing difference and replacing assumptions and stereotypes with facts and dialogues. Multicultural literature is all about providing authentic windows into minority experiences, and also about giving minority group members mirrors, or meaningful representation in mainstream media. However, I struggle to find books that reflect my students' with special needs unique lived experiences. For these and other reasons, my graduate student friends and I sat down to create an online resource of instructional tools teaching literacy skills using books that prominently and positively feature individuals with special needs.

Project Goals:

We will focus on books that celebrate the strengths of disabled individuals and uphold the ideals of multiculturalism by promoting difference and respectfully representing individuals who have been historically excluded from literary depictions. We hope to create a resource for teachers to create instructional plans that foster discussions among students that promote empathy and understanding of disability in a classroom setting.

Sample Texts and Teaching Tools

Elementary (K-5)

El Deafo by Cece Bell (Grades 3+)

- Due to her hearing disability, Cece often feels isolated and alone, especially when she has to wear the Phonic Ear – an oversized hearing aid – to school. But then Cece realizes that the Phonic Ear allows her to hear everything, even things she shouldn't. With its help, she becomes El Deafo, a superhero!

Discussion Questions

- Does Cece always use her superpower for good? Do you think it's okay for her to eavesdrop on her teachers if it allows her to make friends?
- Deafo is an unkind word to use about a deaf or hard of hearing person. Why do you think Cece chose to call herself El Deafo?
- Imagine you are Cece's friend, Martha. How would you have behaved differently after Cece hurt her eye?
- How does *El Deafo* tell us we should speak to people who have difficulties hearing? Does speaking loudly help?
- Cece often has trouble talking to people about her difficulties hearing. Pick a part of the book where this happens and brainstorm how you would have acted differently.
- How does Cece's secret identity as El Deafo help her cope with her difficulties hearing and her feelings of loneliness? If you were a superhero, what would you call yourself? What powers would you have?

Activities/Projects/Assignments

- Art
 - Students can make their own "warm fuzzies" and share them with classmates or family members.
 - Materials needed: pom-poms, pipe cleaners, foam/thick construction paper, googly eyes, scissors, glue
- Science
 - Students can study sound and audiology. How does sound travel? How do we hear? How do hearing aids work? More information and ideas at:
 - <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/2015/may/11/how-to-teach-sound>
 - <http://studyjams.scholastic.com/studyjams/jams/science/energy-light-sound/sound.htm>
 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VOnwW6TTTT4>
 - http://www.pbslearningmedia.org/resource/phy03.sci.phys.howmove.lp_sound/sound-vibrations/
 - Students can study meningitis and other causes of deafness. More information and ideas at:

- <http://kidshealth.org/en/kids/hearing-impairment.html>
 - History
 - Students can research real-life superheroes with hearing disabilities. Suggestions include Helen Keller, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Thomas Edison. Biographies oriented toward kids can be found at:
 - http://www.ducksters.com/biography/women_leaders/helen_keller.php
 - http://www.ducksters.com/biography/thomas_edison.php
 - <http://www.biography.com/people/ludwig-van-beethoven-9204862/videos/ludwig-van-beethoven-mini-biography-2250373336>
 - For a list of famous people with hearing disabilities, see: <http://deafpeople.com/history/index.html>

Additional texts featuring deaf/hard of hearing characters

- *Sounds of Silence* by Phillip Tomasso III (novel)
- *Wonderstruck* by Brian Selznick (graphic novel)
- *Moses Goes to School* by Isaac Millman (picturebook)
- *The Mermaid's Three Wisdoms* by Jane Yolen (picturebook)
- *Shay and Ivy: Beyond the Kingdom* by Sheena McFeely (picturebook)
- *Mr. Holland's Opus* (movie)
- *Sesame Street*: episodes with "Linda the Librarian" (television show)
- Various performances by *The National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD)* (plays)

Additional Resources

- Teaching *El Deafo*:
 - <http://www.unleashingreaders.com/?p=4527>
 - <http://www.teachingbooks.net/tb.cgi?tid=40736&a=1>
 - <http://cbl.df.org/2015/06/using-graphic-novels-in-education-el-deafo/>
- Teaching deaf or hard of hearing students
 - <http://deafchildren.org/knowledge-center/educators/>
 - <https://www.deaftec.org/classact/challenges/communication/hoh-students>