

(Con)textualizing Disability:

Building Empathy with R. J. Palacio's *Wonder*

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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

Middle Grades (5-8)

Wonder by R.J. Palacio (Grades 5+)

- August (Auggie) Pullman just wants to blend in and be normal. The problem is that most people see him as the exact opposite of normal. Auggie was born with facial differences and health concerns that kept him home-schooled until now, when he's about to start fifth grade. Can he and his new school learn to see beyond appearances and start to appreciate who they all are inside?

This sweet, funny, and heart-tugging story pushes readers to think about the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that we look at, react to, and interact with those around us. Through the use of a shifting narrative style—beginning with Auggie's narration and moving outward to other kids in the story—*Wonder* offers us a story rich in perspective, challenges, and strength.

Other reviews/descriptions:

- <http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/book/wonder-0#cart/cleanup>
- <http://www.booklistonline.com/Wonder-R-J-Palacio/pid=5101813>

Discussion Questions

- What is Auggie's relationship with each of his family members? How do his father, mother, and sister each respond to his facial difference, and how has this impacted each of their lives?
- Do you agree with Auggie's family that it's time for him to start growing up and go to school? Why or why not?
- What characteristics make a good friend? Which characters in the book demonstrate these qualities? Is Auggie a good friend?
- What are Auggie's strengths and powers? How does he change those around him and what do other people learn from Auggie?

Short Writing/Reflection

- Auggie has interests, skills, dreams, and jokes that many people miss because they don't take the time to see past his face. What is a skill, strength, or something about you that most people don't know?

- Is there a character that you empathize with most?
- Have you ever been in a situation where you felt or acted like one of the characters? Describe what happened and how you felt.

Activities/Projects/Assignments

- *Precepts*
 - According to Mr. Browne, a precept is anything that helps guide someone when making important decisions.

Students create/design/illustrate their own precepts, based on existing quotes or something they write, that would help foster empathy in their own school. What types of precepts would help make school a kinder, safer place?

- *Creating Kindness*
 - At the end of the school year, Mr. Tushman asks the students to try to act a little kinder than necessary in order to make the world a better place.

As a group(s), brainstorm ways that the class/school/community can be more kind to each other. How can we enact kindness in the school and include people who are new, different, or often left out? Can we build a project or space in the school that would help people feel included and equal?

- *Reflection Letter*
 - Students will write an individual letter to their teacher where they have a chance to reflect deeply on the novel and to articulate their ideas in writing. The goal here is more about connecting the issues in the text and ideas of empathy to their own lives, rather than pushing an argument.

Additional Texts

- *Five Flavors of Dumb*, Antony John*
- *My Thirteenth Winter*, Samantha Abeel*
- *Handbook for Dragon Slayers*, Merrie Haskell*
- *Out of My Mind*, Sharon Draper
- *Marcelo in the Real World* by Francisco x. Stork*

Additional Resources

- <http://rijpalacio.com/for-teachers.html>
- [2014-2015 CA Young Medal Resource Guide](#)
- <http://www.webenglishteacher.com/palacio.html>
- <http://wonderwebbook.weebly.com/wonder-ful-activities.html>

* Indicates a Schneider Family Winner and available in the C& I Library