

Just Ask about Diversity

A New Librarian Uses Books to Teach Empathy

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As a beginning librarian and MLS student, the phrases “on-the-job-training” and “trial by fire” took on new meaning for me. There was so much I had to learn by doing.

Soon after starting my library science program at East Carolina University, I accepted a media coordinator position at Lillington-Shawtown (NC) Elementary School, a moderate-sized public school in a small rural county. The pre-kindergarten through fifth grade school had a population of about seven hundred students.

Learning by Doing

As a new librarian, I had to learn how to order and catalog books before I ever had a cataloging class or understood how to develop a collection. I am grateful for the help I received from peers and mentors in those early days.

As a new librarian, I also learned that diversity was a popular and important topic, especially when examining and building library collections. While it is important for students to be able to see themselves in the books they read, it is also essential to have books that negate negative stereotypes and promote positive aspects of various cultures, races, religions, and genders.

Diverse books also help students to identify uniqueness in individuals and to begin to understand how those differences shape each of us.



The hope is that through reading diverse books, students will begin to celebrate individual uniqueness and develop compassion for others.

As I learned about evaluating library collections and diverse books, I wanted to ensure that our collection reflected our student population. I took a collection development class at ECU, in which I had to examine a variety of factors (like demographics, economics, student testing, and curriculum) in both the local community and the school community. I had to identify a few areas in my collection that were lacking or weak and make a plan to improve them.

In doing so, I planned to order more multicultural books based on our demographics, but I also found that our collection lacked books featuring characters with disabilities. Our



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school had a large Exceptional Children's (EC) population at that time, consisting of nine classes of students with varying disabilities. These nine classrooms of EC students made up almost twenty percent of our school population. When I searched our database for topics on disabilities or special needs, I found very few books that represented my students and what I did find was severely out of date.

When I started in the school library, most of the students I served were considered regular education students. I provided media classes and book checkout as part of the enhancement programs at our school.

Initially, I had very little contact with our EC students, as many of those teachers provided their own library instruction in their classrooms. Some of those EC students mainstreamed for enhancements, but generally there was limited interaction between them and their regular education peers.

Slowly, I began serving these EC classes in the library and getting to know the students and their teachers. Part of my mission became to help our students understand each other's differences and identify their similarities. But I wasn't quite sure how to begin.

A Lesson on Diversity

In one of my library science courses, I learned about various awards given to authors and illustrators of children's books, including the Schneider Family Book Award, which is given to authors and illustrators for excellence in depicting the disability experience for young readers.

One of the winners in this category was U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor's exceptional title *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You*. In this book, a young Sonia discusses having juvenile diabetes and reminds readers that it's okay to ask questions if they don't understand something.

Throughout this story, Sonia's friends, who each have some sort of disability or challenge, explain what makes them different and unique. This book explains differences that the students may be familiar with like allergies, ADHD, and asthma. It also describes disabilities like blindness, deafness, and physical impairments, as well as other conditions such as Tourette's syndrome, autism, and Down syndrome. I decided to use this book to introduce my students to differences and disabilities.

This story became a launch pad for some very powerful conversations, providing a framework in which my students

were able to identify differences, disabilities, and challenges in themselves and in others. They were able to see their own unique challenges as strengths, of which they were the experts. They shared from their own experiences instead of trying to hide them.

This lesson also helped some of my students to develop understanding and empathy for others who struggle with different challenges.

When I first shared the book with the kindergarten through second grade students, they liked the colorful and engaging pictures. After the story, as part of our discussion, many of them made connections with the boy in the story who was deaf because they knew about a first grade student at our school who was deaf. They were fascinated with how he communicates through sign language with his interpreter.

Students also connected with the concept of allergies (especially peanut allergies) and asthma. Multiple students shared that they dealt with one or both of these conditions and readily shared from their experiences. Some students also related to terms like ADHD and diabetes. Many commented that they had heard about diabetes because a parent or grandparent had it. There was still an abundance of questions about

what it was and how people got it. One of the students shared with his classmates that he had juvenile diabetes like Sonia, and he was able to answer some questions about the machine that monitors his blood sugar. Some students had heard the term ADHD or were able to identify with it themselves. This group of students enjoyed the story and was able to make some personal associations with it.

The students in third through fifth grades had many more questions and made some very good correlations. Many of them openly shared about conditions that they had or knew about, while others freely asked questions about what they didn't understand. The most frequent comment made by students was about a family member who had diabetes, which prompted a discussion about the difference between adult diabetes and juvenile diabetes.

In different classes, multiple students identified themselves as having ADHD when it was brought up in the story. These students were not only able to identify with the characters from the story, but they were proud to share what they knew about it. This validated their experiences and provided an opportunity for their ADHD to be viewed in a positive light.



There is an increasing number of picture books that illustrate inclusion.

As the story was read, a third grade student shared all about his sister who has Down syndrome. He was so excited to see a character like her represented in the book and wanted to share how amazing his sister was. He raved about what made her unique and that he loved her so much. Other students also identified with characters in the book.

One student shared that she was shy and didn't like to share in class; she explained that her Tourette's syndrome was the reason she blinked a lot, repeated her words, and made noises. She received positive feedback from her classmates who previously didn't know about her condition. Overall, students felt comfortable enough to share their personal experiences. Some students were able to discuss their struggles with stuttering, autism, allergies, and dyslexia. For many of my students, this book validated them and helped them to understand that the things they struggle with are also the things that make them unique and an expert on their own experiences.

Most of the students were highly engaged and found something that they could share as part of our discussion. I was so proud of them for being so brave and willing to share their personal experiences. There were no negative comments or jokes made during this lesson. If there were students who were disinterested, they did not make it known. The students all found something to connect to in this story.

Reading this story not only helped many of the students to understand themselves a little better, but it also assisted them in identifying some of the things that make others different and unique. I have seen some of these students develop a more compassionate and kind attitude toward those that are different than themselves. There appears to be more understanding and patience for EC students who mainstream into regular education classes. The regular education students see that EC students are kids just like them, but with different challenges.

I have also used the book *Rescue and Jessica: A Life-Changing Friendship* by Jessica Kensky and Patrick Downes to help develop empathy and understanding of others. Like the story *Just Ask*, *Rescue and Jessica* is a true story written from the perspective of a young girl. Jessica had an injury that required partial amputation of both of her legs. She had to learn to walk again using prosthetic legs. During this time, Rescue, a service dog, is being trained to help her. This book deals not only with the physical challenges that Jessica faced, but it also beautifully depicted the range of emotions that accompanied her loss, struggle, hope, and eventual joy after her accident.

Recommended Reading

Arnold, Elana. *A Boy Called Bat*. New York: Walden Pond Press, 2018.

Davis, Bela. *Every Day Sign Language Series*. Minneapolis, MN: Abdo Kids Junior, 2021.

Harrington, Claudia. *My Special Needs Family*. New York: Looking Glass Library, 2017.

Kensky, Jessica and Downes, Patrick. *Rescue and Jessica: A Life-Changing Friendship*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick, 2018.

Palmer, Erin. *Katie Can: A Story about Special Needs*. Vero Beach, FL: Rourke Educational Media, 2018.

Reid, C.L. *Emma Every Day Series*. North Mankato, MN: Capstone, 2020.

Sotomayor, Sonia. *Just Ask! Be Different, Be Brave, Be You*. New York: Philomel, 2019.

This story demonstrates the struggles of change and explores the friendship that Jessica builds with Rescue. Through this story and our discussion, the students again were able to empathize with Jessica and her struggles, as well as gain a better understanding of the purpose and use of service dogs.

As a result of these lessons and the reaction of the students, I have purchased additional and varied titles that depict a range of disabilities and differences.

Overall, there have been positive interactions between our regular education students and EC students, especially with the students who are mainstreamed. There is still much more work to do in building relationships between students and helping them to understand individual differences are what make us unique, but the foundation has been set.

I look forward to building bridges between the students in our school, continuing to populate our school library with books that focus on disability as a vital component of diversity, and utilizing books to build empathy in our students. &