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Inclusion on the Bookshelf

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Feature
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Overview:

In fiction, children with disabilities are often still segregated, labeled, lonely and lost. These titles will help bring your school's library into the age of inclusion.

Dominic and Victor are two boys who do lots of fun things together. They make up stories about clouds, they go swimming, they tell each other ghost stories and they ride roller coasters together. Victor even cheers at Dominic's baseball games.

So begins the children's book, *My Pal, Victor/Mi Amigo, Victor* (Raven Tree Press, 2004). Written for new readers, the book shows us Victor through the eyes of his best friend Dominic. The illustrations suggest the boys are alike in every way. It isn't until the last page that we learn that the most important thing about Victor is that he accepts Dominic just the way he is. The two boys drape their arms across each other's shoulders and we see: Victor is in a wheelchair.

No big deal. The story is about friendship, not about Victor's wheelchair.

Books like *My Pal Victor* are all too rare in today's classroom. Three decades have passed since federal law mandated inclusion — ending, officially at least, a system that segregated students with disabilities from the rest of the student population. The publishing world has yet to catch up. In children's books, characters with disabilities often inhabit their own separate world, where disability is the only story, and people are either heroes, victims or sidekicks.

Finding books that are disability-positive may take some digging, but it is worth the effort. Truly inclusive books serve to dispel stereotypes, prevent bullying and support students who are labeled "disabled."

"The reason to include socially inclusive books in the classroom is to educate everybody about everyone," said Patrick Schwarz, a diversity-in-learning professor at National-Louis University in Chicago and the author of *From Disability to Possibility*. "Prejudice is a learned behavior and the way to get away from it is through education and experience."

Students aren't the only ones who harbor prejudices. Teachers, too, often cling to misconceptions about the barriers to academic success for students with disabilities. A book with a positive message can welcome students who are hyper-aware of their difference — and foster a discussion that will set the record straight.

"Using stories of children with disabilities, both fiction and non-fiction, is a strong strategy for helping children understand and consider disability as just another element of diversity," said Donna Bailey, an education consultant at the University of North Carolina's Center for Faculty Excellence.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 12 percent of people in this country have some sort of disability. With numbers like that, one would expect a strong market in books that depict disability in all its complexity.

But if you look at the bookshelves at a major book retailer, you might get a very different idea. Books about people with disabilities are often out of stock, improperly categorized or missing.

Few studies have been conducted to assess the availability of inclusive books on disability, but Canadian elementary school teacher Tracy Beck learned firsthand how hard the search for truly inclusive books could be. While researching a children's literature project, she looked in libraries for books on disabilities. Only about one-fifth of the books she found contained messages that were inclusive.

"Many of the books were respectful, but not appropriate to sit and have story time about," said Beck, a graduate of the Ryerson School of Disability Studies.

Still, there are gems out there, if you know where to look. *Dad and Me in the Morning*, written by Patricia Lakin and illustrated by Robert C. Steele (Albert Whitman & Company, 1994) is a preschool tale about a tender father-son relationship. The son, Jacob, wakes early in the morning to a special alarm clock, puts in his hearing aids and sneaks into his father's room to wake him. Together they go to their special place and watch the sun rise over the lake near their home. The two use American Sign Language, but also communicate in other ways, "lip reading or just squeezing each other's hands."

When choosing books for younger children, Beck advises, teachers should pay close attention to illustrations, to make sure the images don't reinforce stereotypes. The simple illustrations in *Susan Laughs* by Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross (Red Fox, 2001) show an active Susan doing anything any other child can do. She sings, paints, throws, plays a trick on her grandmother, gets mad at her cat and rides a swing with her father. As in *My Pal Victor*, it is not until the last page that we learn Susan is in a wheelchair. The book is about Susan's personality and interests, not about her disability.

All the characters in a book should be presented as individuals with unique gifts and talents, as well as challenges, Beck says. Students need to see characters with disabilities holding culturally valued positions and engaging in age-appropriate activities, she says.

The title character Brian in *Brian's Bird* by Patricia Davis (Shen's Books, 2000) has a visual impairment. He uses his fingers to figure out his birthday present, a pet parakeet. Then, to his family's surprise, he teaches the bird to talk. When the parakeet escapes through an open door, Brian works with his brother Kevin to coax the bird from a nearby tree.

According to Beck, readers "shouldn't feel that the moral of the story has anything to do with disability." Still, when a disability is presented as just one of the challenges faced by a multifaceted character, students with disabilities may find a kindred spirit. In *Niagara Falls, Or Does It?* (Grosset & Dunlap, 2003) actor Henry Winkler and co-author Lin Oliver introduce us to Hank Zipzer, a fourth-grader with all the likability and resourcefulness of the best of children's-book heroes. Like so many characters in children's literature, Hank finds himself getting into all sorts of scrapes and misunderstandings in school. His dilemmas are often caused by the fact that he has dyslexia. He works his way out of his problems with pluck and creativity.

The 14-book Hank Zipzer series was based largely on Winkler's own experiences growing up

with dyslexia. Experts say it's always a good idea to keep the author's perspective in mind when choosing books about disability. Does the writer have any personal experience with the topic?

In *Do You Remember the Color Blue: The Questions Children Ask About Blindness* (Viking Juvenile, 2000), the author Sally Hobart Alexander answers frequently asked questions about blindness. Alexander, who lost her sight at age 26, travels around the country giving talks at schools about her experience with blindness. She answers the practical questions — *how do you know what's in the fridge when you're hungry?* — and the philosophical ones — *is it better to be blind or Deaf?* Alexander's experience with blindness gives her authority.

Focusing on disability in this way might not be appropriate for students in earlier grades — who need to learn to see the person first, not the disability. But by middle school, experts say, kids want to know more about the practical aspects of life with a disability. In particular, they want to know how to establish and maintain relationships with friends and relatives who have a disability.

Middle school children often develop an acute sense of embarrassment about their relatives — and relatives with disability are no exception. In *The Man Who Loved Clowns* by June Rae Wood (Hyperion, 1995), we meet 13-year-old loner Delrita Jensen, who loves, but can't stand to be seen with, her uncle Punky Holloway. Punky is a complex and well-developed character who has Down syndrome, and Delrita must come to grips with her feelings about all the facets of his personality. Cynthia Lord strikes a similar tone in *Rules* (Scholastic Paperbacks, 2008) in which a younger brother with autism becomes an annoyance to his older sister. He is, after all, a younger brother.

Teachers should choose books that depict children with disabilities as empowered with "no negative value judgments implied," according to the educators at the University of Kansas Circle of Inclusion Project. The illustrations and text should offer genuine insights into another person, these experts say.

One good example is Josie, a 13-year-old girl with cerebral palsy, who appears in a series of free-verse poems in Tracie Vaughn Zimmer's *Reaching For Sun* (Bloomsbury USA, 2007). Josie feels embarrassed to be in special education classes, and her home is on a grim patch of land being bulldozed for new development. But when an inquisitive, lonely boy moves in next door, she finds a true friend. Josie's cerebral palsy is not treated as a medical condition to be "fixed," and the book does not highlight her difference, but instead draws on the similarities she shares with other teens struggling with social isolation.

When a person with a disability writes a memoir, the public expects a story of perseverance and patience. For the classroom, it's important to get outside that box — selecting books that show the intelligence and creativity of the writer. One good example is Jean-Dominique Bauby's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* (Vintage, 1998). Bauby was the editor-in-chief of French *Elle* when he suffered a rare stroke that left only his left eye functioning. By blinking, Bauby used his left eye to patiently dictate this book. In it, he describes life with "locked-in" syndrome, but also the grand and adventurous life of his imagination. Ultimately, it's Bauby's deft writing that comes to the fore.

The lives of children with disabilities are adventurous, funny, romantic and active. There are many books available that contain characters with disabilities, but few that truly embrace social inclusion. The real story is so much more compelling than the stereotypes: if you dig deep and ask the right questions, you can find books that bring the real story to your students.

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