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## **Identity of Persons with Disabilities: Looking at People and Characters in Novels and Media**

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by Toni Aliskowitz

### **Introduction**

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“Learning who you are is what you’re here to do.” Mr. Browne, the beloved English teacher in author R.J. Palacio’s book *Wonder* starts the school year with this precept. He is referring to the Ancient Greek aphorism posted on a plaque of their school’s entranceway which reads: *Know Thyself*. These two short words of this essential human maxim carry the power to sustain us amidst a variety of assaults which occur on our personal and collective identity. In kidspeak, comments like, “You’re fat, ugly, gross, etc.”; in the media, images of so-called “normal” families, or of celebrity idols, or messages to groups of people who should be hated and feared. The way we see ourselves as valued, as individuals and as members of various societal groups, shapes the way we interact with and receive services from the world. Your views of the distribution of wealth and resources depend upon your culture, race, and environmental factors, but mostly your identity. When facing physical and mental disabilities, how do we view our world? How do we preserve our identity?

### **Rationale**

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This curricular unit, intended for fourth and fifth-grade students, will serve to examine the identity of persons with disabilities through first-person accounts of fictional characters and individuals with physical and mental challenges. As far back as Homer and Sophocles, we’ve met disabled characters. Characters in classic literature have often been portrayed in a less than positive light, or to be viewed with pity, or simply dismissed. Think of Victor Hugo’s Quasimodo, or Faulkner’s Benjy. In many works, the disabled character functions as a service to our narrative appetite for difference, at times trumping femininity, race, or class.<sup>1</sup>

Recent portrayals are starting to change that narrative, and to give voice to the power of being a person who is differently-abled. Recent works such as *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio and Sharon Draper’s *Out of My Mind* are helping us see the world through their perspective of humanness and their striving for collective identity. These characters search to be seen, be heard, and belong, despite the visual recoil their conditions suggest. Through the readings of a variety of novels, I hope to challenge my students to know themselves, and how

their behavior can help or harm the identity of others.

Issues of racial discrimination are at the forefront of the daily lives of the urban population of the elementary students I serve. As community, state, and national events focus attention on this topic through the mishandling of judicial and law-enforcement decisions, I, as an educator, am called upon to communicate with even greater cultural sensitivity and awareness. We cannot effectively educate without respecting those racial and cultural differences. Issues of identity, with racial and socioeconomic differences in mind, are covered in my curricula in order to serve my particular population. While we have made efforts to combat Euro-centric curricula with multi-cultural considerations, we have yet to make strides towards educating about mental and physical differences, and combatting the myths and stereotypes surrounding them. How do people outside the norms of a particular group or social setting fit in? How does a particular group help or hinder them in doing so? How do we measure group impact on identity? What are some of the forces at work which impact the identity of marginalized groups? This unit seeks to give voice to the essential humanness of us all.

## Background

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My Pittsburgh school serves a diverse population of students in Pre-K through fifth grade. Dilworth Traditional Academy is an Arts and Humanities Magnet school, which encourages arts integration into the reading and language arts curriculum. We are an inclusion school, where our students with exceptionalities are a part of all classes. Our gifted and talented population receives in-class inclusion enrichment and in-school specialty courses. Special education goals are met with providers working inside the mainstream classrooms. While most of the disabled students we serve are identified as learning disabled or on the autism spectrum, we have and will continue to serve students with more serious physical disabilities. It is our goal at Dilworth to help students understand how our world and lives are interconnected through their academic, arts, and humanities experiences. Learning how to more effectively communicate about persons with disabilities is essential to this philosophy, and this curricular unit aims at bringing that into the classroom by reading novels, speaking to disability advocates, and viewing current media which promote inclusive understandings that serve to honor individual and collective identity.

## Conceptualizing Disability

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Within the last decade, a new academic field of study has emerged within the social sciences to reflect the need to speak to the issues surrounding disabled persons as persons with similar concerns as other marginalized groups. This field, called Disability Studies, seeks to explore the nature, meaning, and consequences of disability as a social construct. This is in contrast to a medical view of disability which seeks to treat and cure the condition. Disability Studies serves to continue to broaden access and civil rights to those differently-abled individuals. Sensitizing my students to a range of physical and mental individual differences and the stereotypes experienced by these persons can serve as a bridge towards a greater awareness of the human condition. As Tobin Siebers, in his article from *Disability in Theory*, stated:

“They do not want to feel dominated by people on whom they depend for help, and want to be able to imagine themselves in the world without feeling ashamed.” (Siebers 2001)

There are four key overarching goals regarding identity this curricular unit will achieve informed by current understandings of persons with disabilities:

1. Bring awareness to the kinds of attitudes and perceptions which marginalize disabled individuals.
2. Show students how to support and interact with students experiencing a physical disability or neurodiversity, such as those on the autism spectrum.
3. Embrace classroom inclusion as a model of social justice.
4. Recognize that disability is a significant human experience that occurs in every society, family, and most every life.

### **Attitudes and Perceptions**

Step into any elementary school across America, and you will notice signs, posters, and policies hanging against bullying. Children receive lessons, participate in assemblies, counselling services, and more in an effort to combat the demoralizing effects of bullying. Central to that topic is the notion of “sameness” or someone being threatened or excluded due to their looks, speech, or other behaviors which reside outside of the collective norms. In teaching about the topic of personal and collective identity, we can move to an inclusive model that moves deeper into our understanding on the treatment and respect for differences.

Anyone in a position of power, as in a student/teacher relationship, must be able to understand the student’s particular situation in light of that student’s self-identity vs. an expected societal one. Exposing my students to consider communications and reactions due to social constructs and various views of “the norm” helps strengthen their self-awareness when interacting with the world-at-large. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, in her book *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, argues that a person’s identity acts as a lever to either deny or allow a set of choices among our society’s moral expectations.<sup>2</sup> Our current national leadership in government is enacting legislation with little regard and respect for any special needs students might bring to the classroom. Not only are marginalized groups being damaged by policy changes, they face a barrage of verbal abuse through statements and judgments broadcast almost daily via social media. The American cultural climate is such that these positions are working to further marginalize groups to seek solace within themselves. If we cannot look to our leadership to model respect for differences, where can we turn? In this way, identity and the connection to agency become muddled when an authority group in an abusive power system propagates morally degrading identities.

Lindemann Nelson also offers a source of healing for damaged identities in what she considers as “narrative repair”. As humanities teachers, we have the special opportunity to bring text, image, and media to our students to help repair and prevent damage to identity. Lindemann Nelson brings to light the concept of *Counterstory*: sharing narratives which are counter to harmful ones serves to change the perceptions and attitudes which prevail in harmful ways. A similar concept of countersory has been developed in Critical Race Theory, changing the identity narrative and the communication surrounding those derogatory stereotypes.<sup>3</sup>

My personal definition of identity is as follows: “Identity is the way you see yourself interacting with the world at any given place and time.” While beginning research in the area of Disability Studies, I came across this perspective from Rose Garland-Thomson in an online article in *The Emory Report*, “Ability and disability are not so much a matter of the capabilities and limitations of bodies, but more about what we expect from a

body at a particular moment and place.” She goes on to note that “Disability is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to the fictions of race and gender.”<sup>4</sup>

## Support and Interaction

For persons with disabilities, the desire to be viewed as “normal” becomes the roadblock for their achieving that status. To ignore the physical signs and symptoms that a particular individual is facing is not respecting their differences; rather, it simply becomes dismissive. Students need to know that in order to support that individual on their terms, understanding of their specific needs can be necessary. While addressing those needs, it is important to examine the common myths and stereotypes surrounding disabled individuals, and to dispel the fear that may be present among children (and adults) from interactions with those persons. Scholars have studied the roles this classification system poses to either view of persons with disabilities. If we focus only on the disability, we limit opportunities for those persons and stigmatize them. Whereas, if we ignore the disability (like colorblindness) we oppress them. The current and evolving view seeks to mend any divisions to create a more fluid definition of disability to include a similar *and* different view of disability in developing our culture of disability.<sup>5</sup>

It is estimated that 650 million people are living with a disability. The social model of disability espouses that disability is fluid based upon the situation at any given time. This lies in contrast to the medical model of disability, which assigns a definition of impairment. While important and necessary for proper medical treatment, this standpoint has permeated our culture in that we view the disabled as people to be “fixed”.

In 2010, the state of New Jersey banned the use of the term “retarded”, suggesting that some legislators believe the words or phrases people speak reflect values. Now, however, with the current political climate, we find the need to help students sort and understand how derogatory these terms are to identity.

Students can and should be taught a people-first language; a semantic approach that describes what a person *has* rather than what a person *is*. Therefore, the title of person comes before the tile of disability, or the label. The following chart shows some examples of this type of communication change.

### What Do You Call People with Disabilities?

Examples of what you should say.

people with disabilities

person of short stature

person who is unable to speak, person who uses a communication device

person diagnosed with a mental health condition

person who is visually impaired

person with a learning disability

accessible parking, bathrooms, etc.

Examples of what you should not say.

the disabled  
the handicapped

a dwarf  
a midget

dumb, mute

crazy, insane, psycho  
mentally ill  
disturbed, demented

the blind

learning disabled

handicapped parking, bathrooms, etc.

While not exhaustive, this chart gives educators the idea of current best practices in their communication with and about persons with disabilities. There are many on-line sources available to assist in teaching this

disability etiquette.

## **Classroom Inclusion as Social Justice**

Any teacher will tell you that addressing the needs of individual students within their unique developmental capacities at any time is indeed a challenge. Consider learning styles, maturity level, reading level, and you already have a full palate of conditions to consider. When adding a student's limitations due to disabilities, many of us have often wondered if inclusion is the best choice for them (and the remaining mainstream students) academically. Every child in most democratic societies is at present legally entitled to a free, public education. However, the legislative focus on right to access has not provided clear direction for achieving academic outcomes in educational settings.<sup>6</sup> With inclusion, there is a constant push and pull between the "regular" classroom teacher's responsibilities and the special education teacher's. Often, we are left feeling as though we are not doing enough for our special needs students, and we realize, as other scholars have noted, that exposure does not equal experience.

These factors play a role in the classroom culture when students with disabilities are included. How the students treat each other or vie for teacher attention creates another dynamic which complicates individual or collective identity. The field of Disability Studies serves to change cultural practices of schooling that marginalize and exclude not only on the basis of disability, but also on race, class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, sexuality, and religion. Taken from this viewpoint, we begin to see inclusion as a dominant force in a democratic society, and actively take steps to make learning happen for all regardless of our given job descriptions and roles.

"...discussions often fail to recognize that the space of the regular classroom, far from neutral, is constructed for a nondisabled, neurotypical, white, male, middle-class "norm" that neither reflects nor accommodates the wide range of diverse learners within it, regardless of whether these learners have been diagnosed with a disability. A Disability Studies in Education perspective sees the educational environment, not students with disabilities, as the "problem" and calls for a Universal Design for Learning approach to education, or the design of instructional materials and activities that allows the learning goals to be achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities and backgrounds." (Doolittle-Wilson 2017)

This intersection between race, class, gender, religion, and disability, as mentioned above, brings another layer of significance to our public schools and speaks to the very nature of democracy. We have the privilege and power to educate every student that enters our doors. We do not refuse anyone the *right* to an education, but the environment in which we serve them can limit any student's access if we do not consider, respect, and empower the individual learner's needs. Universal Design for Learning, or UDL, is a set of principles for curriculum development that gives all individuals equal opportunities to learn. Using the Universal Design for Learning approach, we can move to greater access for all marginalized groups. The UDL principles serve to guide lesson construction and delivery so that educators keep access at the forefront of their planning.

## **Disability as More Common than Uncommon**

On average, any two individuals share greater than 99.5% of their DNA sequences.<sup>7</sup> It is an amazing statistic, when pondering the small variations which cause such huge cultural distinctions and societal barriers. We may superficially state the phrase, 'We are more alike than different,' but put to statistical data analysis when we

consider the half percent of genetic variation between humans, we are left with nothing more than awe. And yet, upon meeting an individual for the first time, we naturally scan their being for similarities *and* differences. We cannot help that our identity is tied to our appearance. In her book *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson takes a deep dive into the aspect of those lengthy looks we give to other humans.<sup>8</sup> In essence, even though chemically our bodies may be very much alike, the outward genetic expression of that slight difference causes us to fear those unlike ourselves. We can help this by noting that something as simple as wearing glasses (corrective lenses) can be categorized as a physical impairment, or disability. In those terms, we begin to see those differences more in light of the idea that a disability merely impairs our function and interactions at certain moments in time.

## Unit Highlights and Novels

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How we see ourselves in light of how others see us is the work of identity. This concept is the key to understanding characters we meet in novels. Those characters, then, guide us through our daily interactions, asking us to reflect upon our heroes and archetypes we meet throughout our days. We see and learn that these characters regularly act and react according to their environment and circumstance. We watch as these characters face challenges and question their identity. These characters serve as role models for our own lives. We learn that our true heroes are often not our heroes for what they've accomplished, but rather for what they have accepted within themselves. By honoring characters with disabilities, I hope to show my students the power of this acceptance. Therefore, the unit will open with brining awareness to individual versus collective identity.

My main overarching question is, "How do popular attitudes, perceptions, and limitations affect a person's identity at any place and time?" Central to this question is the awareness from Rosemarie Garland-Thompson that our society does not fully recognize and validate human variation. Through small-group experiences and discussions, students can be more specific when reading about a particular disability, or sharing personal experiences. Through these stories, I want students to know how to support and interact with others facing a physical or mental difference. Through deep character analysis, I want my students to know that even with outside influences impacting their identity with definitions they do not honor, they themselves are in control of their own evolving personal narrative. This lens may help them step out of their own challenges towards a new vision for what is possible in the world, and may encourage them to advocate for others.

### **Novels Whose Main Characters are Physically Disabled**

The main reading will come from novels with fictional characters. I am dividing the readings by fourth and fifth-grade levels, but these titles can be used interchangeably well into sixth or

seventh grade as seen fitting. Fifth grade students will meet Melody, from the book *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper. Melody is an 11-year-old with cerebral palsy who is unable to communicate. Everyone around Melody (teachers and doctors included) believe she is incapable of learning. Students will come to know the truth about Melody's capabilities due to an assistive device that finally allows her to share what she thinks and knows. Melody is more than what her environment says she is. But, when we can't/don't have the tools to properly communicate, our voice literally cannot be heard. We will delve into character traits to describe Melody's transformations throughout the text and identify literary themes which highlight them.



Fourth graders will meet August Pullman, from the book *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio. Auggie, due to serious cranial-facial deformities and other physical ailments, has been homeschooled up until his fifth-grade year, when his parents decide he is physically stable enough to attend mainstream school. Students will learn of Auggie's struggles with identity through multiple character perspectives, which illustrate different sides of the same coin. We will read this text looking closely at character traits, literary themes, and also point-of-view.

Both stories allow the reader to access the character's thoughts directly, and to sympathize with the character's struggles from a safe, fictional distance. Since the characters are fictional, the students have the accessibility of navigating through someone's life with less mental conflict over understanding their character's conditions. These protagonists allow students to see children outside the norm with the same wants for love and acceptance that we all have. Through small-group experiences and discussions, students can be more specific when reading about a particular disability, or sharing personal experiences.

*El Deafo* by Cece Bell is a graphic memoir steeped with images to change the perception of the disabled as victim, to that of superhero. Bell was prescribed a sonic ear at the age of four, after a bout of meningitis. She shows the reader the indignities of having to wear this device on her chest throughout her school years and devises an alter-ego of the superhero El Deafo to maneuver her way through those years. Through this counterstory, she characterizes herself and her classmates as rabbits. Since the graphic novel is a current popular literary form, both grades will access this text and have the opportunity to create a fictionalized, disabled alter-ego character through graphic expression.

### **Novels Whose Main Characters are Cognitively Atypical**

Both of those above novels deal with children who are differently abled physically and are otherwise considered cognitively "normal". August's and Melody's physical impairments mask their cognitive abilities. I would like to contrast their stories with several novel selections which tackle intellectual disabilities. The first novel, and perhaps most well-known, is *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon. The popularity of this book-turned-play is based on the character of Christopher, and his, as he himself states, "behavioral difficulties."

The author himself calls the text more than a book about a kid with Asperger's, stating, "...if anything it is a novel about difference, about being an outsider, about seeing the world in a surprising and revealing way."<sup>9</sup>

Next is *Rain, Reign*, by Ann M. Martin. In this novel, we meet the main character Rose Howard, a girl with Asperger's syndrome and an obsession with homonyms. Rose's questioning by her at times abusive father is at the core of her individual identity. When she is kicked off the bus after a particular incident he tells her, "Why can't you be normal like other kids?"

Last is *Fish in a Tree*, by Lynda Mullaly Hunt. In this text, we meet Ally, who tries to hide her dyslexia. Of course, she tries to hide the fact that she can't read with attitude and bad behavior. Her life starts to change when a teacher, Mr. Daniels, recognizes where Ally's attitude is coming from, and utilizes a host of different learning style approaches to help Ally access words on a page. Since dyslexia and other learning disabilities often lead to labelling classmates as dumb, this text has the power to uplift elementary classroom culture everywhere.

### **Identity of Siblings of Persons with Disabilities**

Another aspect of the identity of persons with disabilities that we will study considers effects on the family.

Texts utilized will highlight the disabled sibling’s perspective. August’s sister’s experiences with having a disabled brother are brought to light and show how the entire family is impacted by a first-person account from her point of view. Melody faces her parents having a new child, and overhears their concerns about their next child being born with similar challenges. To further look at the impact of disability on the identity of siblings, we will utilize *Rules* by Cynthia Lord, and *Riding the Bus with My Sister* by Rachel Simon. In Lord’s novel, we find Catherine, a 12-year-old girl who is frustrated by her autistic brother. Catherine’s world becomes more challenging when she develops a friendship with a paraplegic. Simon’s book is an autobiographical account of life with her disabled sister, told in the narrative style. The selection also has adult characters, and passages will be excerpted based upon age-appropriate usage.

Another source included to explore sibling identity will be the graphic novel *Epileptic* by David B. Tapping into the accessibility of the graphic novel form, this text also deals with issues of sibling identity through unexpected trauma. This autobiography chronicles the abrupt change in the author’s identity when his brother was struck with epilepsy at age eleven.

In each reading, students will explore the status of the character and how that character’s thoughts, actions, and self-perceptions change over time based upon their interactions with peers/others. What types of responses and actions were beneficial to their identity? Which were harmful? How does one stay positive and hopeful despite victimization?

## Teaching Strategies and Activities

This unit is developed to be taught over the course of an entire school year to both fourth and fifth grade classes. Texts and activities can be singled out for use to suit the needs of most middle-grade language arts classrooms. The focus of the unit moves from the topic of identity, to identity of persons with disabilities, and back to shaping personal and collective identity. Each resource was chosen to cause students to reflect on their expectations of human capabilities and how they shape identity. The following table outlines the break-out of resources and activities specified for each level, for the school year. Accompanying the table are explanations of several activities and strategies to be used.

Activities with each Resource	Intro	Arts Integration	Journals/ Discussion	Close Read/Annotate	Text-Dependent Analysis
<b>Fourth Grade Media</b>					
TED Talk, “Who Are You Really?” by Brian Little	x		x		
TED Talk, “Music, Poetry, and Identity” by Jorge Drexler		x	x		
Podcast from Third Coast International/Re: Sound: Khon, by Andy Mills			x		
<b>Fourth Grade Novels</b>					
<i>Wonder</i> by R.J. Palacio			x	x	x
<i>El Deafo</i> by Cece Bell			x		
<i>Fish in a Tree</i> by Lynda Mullaly Hunt			x		



<i>Rules</i> by Cynthia Lord		x		x	
<i>Epileptic</i> by David B.		x			
<b>Fifth Grade Media</b>					
TED Talk, “Is There a Real You?” by Julian Baggini	x		x		
TED Talk, “Music, Poetry, and Identity” by Jorge Drexler		x		x	
Documentary Film, <i>Life Animated</i> by Roger Ross Williams				x	
<b>Fifth Grade Novels</b>					
<i>Out of My Mind</i> by Sharon Draper		x		x	x
<i>The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime</i> by Mark Haddon		x			
<i>Rain Reign</i> by Ann M. Martin		x		x	x
<i>Riding the Bus with My Sister</i> by Rachel Simon		x			
<i>Epileptic</i> by David B.		x			

## General Strategies

### Assessing Prior Knowledge

The introductory to the unit will be to uncover student awareness with regard to their perceptions about physical and mental challenges. What vocabulary do they have to express these differences? What do they already know about particular physical and mental disabilities? What do they perceive are the limitations and challenges people with disabilities face? What are their fears and insecurities regarding people living with disabilities? Most importantly, who decides whether something counts as a disability? We will use a strengths inventory to discover our own preferences and limitations as an entry point for thinking about the label of disability. Since there are hundreds available online, I will show students samples which prove there are many ways to discern a person’s strengths, and that a person’s set of strengths are varied indeed.

### Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

As mentioned above, Universal Design for Learning promotes a set of principles that are a blueprint of practices so that all individuals receive equal opportunities to learn. The National Center on Universal Design for Learning has researched a set of flexible approaches tailored to what, why, and how we learn.<sup>10</sup> UDL is steeped in neuroscience and seeks to teach to those three key areas of learning. The key to lesson planning with UDL principles in mind is the term “multiple means.” This method espouses the presentation, differentiation, and engagement of students in as many ways as possible.

The first principle is to provide multiple means of presentation. In the case of reading texts, a suitable choice under this category would be reading aloud, or providing audio versions of texts whenever possible. The second principle, differentiation, is considering multiple means of expression in student assignments and projects, which aligns with reading, writing, speaking and listening. Finally, under the broad category of engagement, is choice and authenticity. Throughout the teaching of this units, students will be given choice during reading (independently, with a partner, with audio, or with the teacher) and responding (written versus auditory or pictorial) to demonstrate their learning. There will also be a variety of supplemental texts for their

individual enrichment choices.

### **Arts Integration**

How do the arts give an identity, a voice to persons with disabilities? The very act of being disabled causes creativity in that the artist may have to interact with their medium in non-traditional ways. Working with my school's related arts team, students will be exposed to artists, dancers, composers, poets, and writers living with and creating through disability at key times throughout the school year. Jorge Drexler's Ted Talk, "Music, Poetry, and Identity" will be shown to weave the arts into this identity fabric. This unit will allow students to collaborate with their art, music, and instrumental instructors to create culminating projects that demonstrate their self-concept and group identity. The choice in their project aligns with the third principle in the Universal Design for Learning.

### **Reading Strategies and Activities**

#### **Close Reading and Annotating Text**

Close Reading is a key requirement in Common Core State Standards for all students beginning in grade three. Once the foundational skills have been taught, we seek to teach comprehension in deep and meaningful ways in order to ensure our students are college and career-ready. Close Reading promotes the kind of critical analysis of text to help students acquire more than a superficial summary understanding of what is read. We will read key pieces of text repeatedly, while looking for evidence which reveals a particular viewpoint, plot element, or literary device. We will use this technique with each main novel as well as with pieces of the other novels mentioned as time permits.

Annotating text is a metacognitive strategy which allows all students to engage with the text during reading whereby they mark, comment, and think about parts of the story they find surprising, interesting, enlightening or confusing. Annotating brings the text to life as an interactive force to allow us as teachers to see our students thinking as they move through a body of work. Students will annotate selected chapters of each text we read and/or have access to post-it-notes to engage with the text as they read.

#### **Read Like a Reader/Read Like a Writer**

Two modes for looking at our works will be employed. Accompanying the Close Reading strategy, this means of looking at text allows students to view the story as a narrative device, as well as think about specific choices an author makes to develop character, plot, and setting within the narrative realm. When we read like a reader, we might think of this as the "normal" way of reading in which we try to figure out what a piece of writing means by understanding the words a writer is using. Reading like a reader employs the metacognitive strategies of questioning, predicting, inferring, feeling, connecting, and evaluating.

When we read from the perspective of a writer, we focus less on what the writer is trying to say and more on *how the writer is saying it*. Reading like a writer demands we delve into the areas of ideas or content, organization, voice, word choice, and sentence fluency. Specifically, we look at

the techniques the writer is using to get his or her message across and how those techniques affect us as we experience the text.<sup>11</sup>

## **Viewing, Speaking, and Listening Activities**

### **Listening/Viewing/Discussion Opportunities**

The establishment of group norms for discussing issues outlined above will promote discourse in our work to unearth similarities between ourselves and persons with disabilities as well as emphasize strengths of the disabled. Essential to that understanding is dispelling the myth of the monster in instances of physical disability. Children with physical disabilities need extra help performing certain tasks, just as all classroom students seek teacher assistance during certain projects or lessons. Keeping in mind our own set of strengths and weaknesses, the discussions will highlight the ways in which our novel characters were assisted with the right type of device or communication. We will use the people-first strategy of communicating about these disabilities, as outlined in the table above. Turn and Talk, where students in close proximity share their thinking, will be utilized as a means to allow students to try-out their thinking before discussing with the larger group. Inside-out circles, where a smaller group discusses relevant themes, while the larger, outside group listens, will be one way of moderating book discussions and giving all voices a change to be heard.

Other media examples dealing with identity and/or disabled persons will be utilized.

First is the Ted Talk. One talk, by Brian Little, titled “Who Are You, Really?” This 15-minute lecture delves into character traits and personality, and how they don’t necessarily define you.

As described in the talk’s description, psychologist Brian Little is more interested in moments when we transcend those traits -- sometimes because our culture demands it of us, and sometimes because we demand it of ourselves. Little dissects the surprising differences between introverts and extroverts and explains why your personality may be more malleable than you think. This talk will get students thinking about one aspect of their identity. Another, by Julian Baggini, is titled “Is There a Real You?”, also challenges our ideas about identity and personality. Baggini is the author of the adult book *The Ego Trick* which serves to prove that our identity is fluid and changing over time.

Next is the podcast. Represented on several podcasts such as Re: Sound, Transom, and Radiolab, is the story of Khon. Podcast producer Andy Mills is the friend of Khon. After an accident, Khon had a change in his speech so that he talks very slowly, yet hears himself at regular speed. The story brings to light the self-awareness that Khon receives when he hears himself singing on tape and realizes the difference in his own voice.

Finally, the film *Life Animated* will be shown. Based on the book by Ron Suskind, the film tells the story of his son Owen, who was unable to communicate. With the help of Disney films, Owen learned how to express himself and interact with his world using Disney role models to teach him how to share himself with the world-at-large.

Agencies such as the Western Pennsylvania School for Blind Children, and School for the Deaf will be contacted with regard to how we might partner and give students some hands-on experiences with classroom visits to enrich the unit. A final culminating speaking project will allow those students who wish to teach on the topic to visit other classrooms in our building, read and share a picture book on disabilities, and teach a mini-lesson to that group of students.

### **Writing Strategies**

## **Journaling/Responding/Interactive Reading**

Students will be asked to keep a journal where they reflect on issues of identity in their own lives throughout the course of the unit. These journals will serve as brainstorming and conference topics to assist them in formulating their narrative writing. Their journals will also serve as a reader's response piece where they record what they notice and wonder as we read. Guiding general questions will serve as a check for understanding. There are four main question stems which are: "What is going on?", "How do you know?", "Who are the characters?", and "How do the events fit/stray from what we know about them?"

## **Text Dependent Analysis**

The Text-Dependent Analysis essay, or TDA is a requirement on the Pennsylvania State Assessment given to all PA public school students beginning in grade 4. Students must support a thesis developed from a prompt, which asks them for evidence from one or more pieces of text and an analysis of each piece. Students will use transcripts from talks and film viewed, along with novel selections to state their theory of identity as a culminating activity.

## **Writing the Personal and Fictional Narrative**

To deepen the writing content of the personal narrative, we will use the topic of identity to help us shape writing in the required personal and fictional narratives. This unit will utilize the sibling experience to help students with their own life-writing, in thinking about the positive or negative impact a sibling's identity brings to their lives. I would like them to determine the significance of sibling influence on individual identity. In the case of an only child, what other influences substitute for a sibling's influence on identity? In fictional narratives, an understanding of personal vs. collective identity can help them shape their plot in a much more sophisticated fashion than just thinking at their level as the plot being the "problem" in their writing. In this way, their writing can naturally develop into more reflective pieces as they look for those signs in everything they read. Students will reflect on the changes, challenges, and growth of the examples from novels and media, and will use their journals as a source of reflection and direction for their own writing.

## **Conclusion**

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I began my career in public education in 1993. It was suggested that we include a personal philosophy of teaching in our interview portfolio. Twenty-four years later, I find my words still relevant, especially with regard to the goals of this unit. I said: 'As our world continues to become more diverse through advancements in technology and communication, teachers in the twenty-first century will be faced with ever increasing challenges. Students will need to be prepared to become productive members of society in which they will be asked to interact with people from a variety of backgrounds and socio-economic levels. I believe the function of public education should include teaching students to accept responsibility for their actions, encourage creative problem solving and critical thinking, while honing their decision-making skills in preparation for their adult roles in society.'

Learning about identity, the way it is shaped and how to appreciate and accept others aligns with the philosophy I stated so long ago, and will allow it to grow with the identities of all the students this unit serves.

## Resources

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### Novels

#### Fourth Grade Selections

*Wonder* by R.J. Palacio

*El Deafo* by Cece Bell

*Fish in a Tree* by Lynda Mullaly Hunt

*Rules* by Cynthia Lord

*Epileptic* by David B.

#### Fifth Grade Selections

*Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime* by Mark Haddon

*Rain Reign* by Ann M. Martin

*Riding the Bus with My Sister* by Rachel Simon

*Epileptic* by David B.

### Media

#### Fourth Grade Selections

TED Talk, "Who Are You Really?" by Brian Little

TED Talk, "Music, Poetry, and Identity" by Jorge Drexler

Podcast from Third Coast International/Re: Sound: Khon, by Andy Mills

#### Fifth Grade Selections

TED Talk, "Is There a Real You?" by Julian Baggini

TED Talk, "Music, Poetry, and Identity" by Jorge Drexler

Documentary Film, *Life Animated* by Roger Ross Williams

### Supplemental Materials

All books listed below were selected from the TeacherVision website under the heading: Children's Books About Disabilities. More Titles and a short synopsis of each book can be found there.

Resource Type	Title/Author	Disability
Picture Books	<i>Andy and His Yellow Frisbee</i> by Mary Thompson	Autism (Sibling Perspective)
	<i>My Brother, Matthew</i> by Mary Thompson	Mental Retardation (Sibling Perspective)
	<i>A Very Special Sister</i> by Dorothy Hoffman Levi	Deafness (Sibling Perspective)
	<i>Silent Observer</i> by Christy MacKinnon	Deafness
	<i>Happy Birthday Jason</i> by C. Jean Cutbill and Diane Rawsthorn	Dyslexia
Easy Readers	<i>What It's Like to Be Me</i> by Helen Exley	Various Disabilities
	<i>Cookie</i> by Linda Kneeland	Down Syndrome
	<i>Fair and Square</i> by Nan Holcomb	Physical/Wheelchair
	<i>Naomi Knows It's Springtime</i> by Virginia L. Kroll	Blindness
	<i>Sarah's Surprise</i> by Nan Holcomb	Articulation Impairment
Juvenile Fiction	<i>What About Me? When Brothers and Sisters Get Sick</i> by Allan Peterkin, M.D.	Chronic Illness (Sibling Perspective)
	<i>Joey and Sam</i> by Illana Katz and Edward Ritvo	Autism (Sibling Perspective)
	<i>Adam and the Magic Marble</i> by Adam and Carol Buehrens	Tourette Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy

	<i>A Season of Secrets</i> by Alison Cragin Herzig and Jane Lawrence Mali	Epilepsy
	<i>Eagle Eyes: A Child's View of Attention Deficit Disorder</i> by Jeanne Gehret, M.A.	Attention Deficit Disorder
	<i>How Many Days Until Tomorrow?</i> By Caroline Janover	Dyslexia
	<i>Ludwig Van Beethoven: Musical Pioneer</i> by Carol Greene	Deafness
Young Adult	<i>The Summer Kid</i> by Myrna Neuringer Levy	Language Impairments
	<i>Are You Alone on Purpose?</i> by Nancy Werlin	Autism, Physical Disability
	<i>Bus Girl</i> by Gretchen Josephson	Down Syndrome
	<i>Don't Stop the Music</i> by Robert Perske	Cerebral Palsy
	<i>Reach for the Moon</i> by Samantha Abeel	Learning Disabilities
	<i>Stevie Wonder</i> by John Swenson	Blindness
	<i>Wish on a Unicorn</i> by Karen Hesse	Mental Retardation (Sibling Perspective)

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## Appendix

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### Standards Addressed:

### Pennsylvania Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts



**1.1 Foundational Skills:** Students gain a working knowledge of concepts of print, alphabetic principle, and other basic conventions.

- CC.1.1.4 and 5.E Read with accuracy and fluency to support comprehension.

**1.2 Reading Informational Text:** Students read, understand, and respond to informational text—with an emphasis on comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and making connections among ideas and between texts with a focus on textual evidence.

**1.3 Reading Literature:** Students read and respond to works of literature—with emphasis on comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and making connections among ideas and between texts with focus on textual evidence. All fifth-grade anchors will be used to promote rigor.

Anchors for Standards 1.2 (Information) and 1.3 (Literature)

CC.1.2.5.A Determine two or more main ideas in a text and explain how they are supported by key details; summarize the text.

CC.1.3.5.A Determine a theme of a text from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

CC.1.2.5.B and CC.1.3.5.B Cite textual evidence by quoting accurately from the text to explain what the text says explicitly and make inferences.

CC.1.2.5.C Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a text based on specific information in the text.

CC.1.3.5.C Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text.

CC.1.2.5.D and CC.1.3.5.D Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.

CC.1.2.5.E Use text structure, in and among texts, to interpret information (e.g., chronology, comparison, cause/effect, problem/solution).

CC.1.3.5.E Explain how a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.

CC.1.2.5.F and CC.1.3.5.F Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in grade-level text, including interpretation of figurative language.

CC.1.2.5.G Draw on information from multiple print or digital sources, demonstrating the ability to locate an answer to a question quickly or to solve a problem efficiently.

CC.1.3.5.G Analyze how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

CC.1.2.5.H Determine how an author supports particular points in a text through reasons and evidence.

CC.1.3.5.H Compare and contrast texts in the same genre on their approaches to similar themes and topics as well as additional literary elements.

CC.1.2.5.I Integrate information from several texts on the same topic to demonstrate understanding of that topic.

CC.1.3.5.I Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade-level reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies and tools.

CC.1.2.5.J and CC.1.3.5.J Acquire and use accurately grade appropriate conversational, general academic, and domain-specific words and phrases, including those that signal contrast, addition, and other logical relationships.

CC.1.2.5.K and CC.1.3.5.L Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on grade-level reading and content, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies and tools.

CC.1.2.5.L Read and comprehend literary nonfiction and informational text on grade level, reading independently and proficiently.

1.4 Writing: Students write for different purposes and audiences. Students write clear and focused text to convey a well-defined perspective and appropriate content.

- CC.1.4.5.D Group related information logically linking ideas within and across categories of information using words, phrases, and clauses; provide a concluding statement or section; include formatting when useful to aiding comprehension.
- CC.1.4.5.M Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events.

1.4 Speaking and Listening: Students present appropriately in formal speaking situations, listen critically, and respond intelligently as individuals or in group discussions.

- CC.1.5.5.C Summarize the points a speaker makes and explain how each claim is supported by reasons and evidence.

## Notes

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1. Snyder, Bruggemann, and Garland-Thomson, *Disability Studies*, 23
2. Lindemann Nelson, Preface
3. Lindemann Nelson, Preface
4. Garland-Thomson, Emory Report, July 6, 2004
5. Devlieger, Rush, and Pfeiffer, Introduction, 10
6. Devlieger et. al, via Venta Kabzems, "Political and Social Realities in the Schooling of Disabled Students," 46.
7. Mark Saltzman, lecture on the impact of Bioengineering on Global Health, Yale University 2017
8. Garland-Thomson; *What is Staring*, 13
9. Haddon, Mark, Self-published blog, 2009
10. National Center for the Universal Design for Learning website
11. Peha, Steve, website ttms.org

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