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## Wonderstruck: Disability Awareness Through Visual Storytelling

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### Introduction

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Tears rolled down my 10-year-old face. My eyes were glued to the television screen. A knobby, glowing finger touched Elliott on his forehead. “I’ll be right here.” E.T.’s raspy words brought on the waterworks. This unlikely friendship between a lonely boy and a lost alien struck a chord with me. A great film brings our humanity into focus, even when it features a strange creature from a distant planet. In one of his final interviews, late film critic Roger Ebert spoke about the transformative power of film.

The purpose of civilization and growth is to be able to reach out and empathize a little bit with other people. And for me, the movies are like a machine that generates empathy. It lets you understand a little bit more about different hopes, aspirations, dreams, and fears.<sup>1</sup>

According to Dr. Jim Coan, associate professor of clinical psychology and director of the Virginia Affective Neuroscience Laboratory at the University of Virginia, we as filmgoers “immerse ourselves in the perspective of another person. And in doing that, we start to subtly accrue those perspectives into our own universe...and that’s how empathy is generated.”<sup>2</sup>

Film is not alone in its capacity to create empathy. Literature has long been a vehicle for messages of compassion, understanding, and friendship. A 2014 study published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* found that reading books that feature marginalized characters improves attitudes towards stigmatized groups. Participants who read the *Harry Potter* series were more likely to express empathy towards immigrants, refugees and people in the LGBTQ community.<sup>3</sup> Reading about fictional characters who face prejudice and attempt to find their place in the world helps us better understand the perspectives of others.

As a social studies teacher, I know the immense value of studying history and discussing the lessons we can learn from our collective past. It’s also important to explore current events impacting our community, state, country and world. By studying the past and exploring the present, students gain the knowledge needed to shape the future. But education is more than just instilling knowledge. Young people need emotional tools like empathy and acceptance to navigate our complex world. With this unit, students will build their social

and emotional intelligence through the study of disability, inclusion and identity. They will build empathy along with analytical skills as they explore a film adaptation of a book that increases awareness of disability.

There is no better time to explore these topics than 5<sup>th</sup> grade. This year marks a turning point for many students. They are beginning to explore their identities and place in the world. Hormonal changes and evolving social dynamics can lead to feelings of awkwardness and lack of belonging. Cliques are beginning to form, and those on the outside feel the sting of exclusion. While this formation of a social hierarchy seems inevitable, there are ways to counteract it. By exploring the spectrum of humanity and all the differences that make each of us unique, we can build a more inclusive community in which diversity is celebrated.

My future 5<sup>th</sup> graders were my students this past year, so I know them well. Forty-three are of Hispanic descent. Many of their parents and grandparents are immigrants from Mexico, Central America, South America and the Caribbean. One student arrived at our school last year as a refugee after Hurricane Maria ravaged his home in Puerto Rico. Several students are mixed race, 1 is African American, and 3 are Caucasian. The group is also very diverse when it comes to cognitive, behavioral and learning differences. Some students receive reading support from our resource teacher. Several students are on the autism spectrum, some struggle with anxiety, and several students experience vocal and motor tics. Many have attention and executive function deficits that impact their learning. They are a highly creative and curious group, and many enjoy expressing themselves through visual means. Their unique abilities, needs and talents inspired me to create this curriculum unit.

## Content Objectives

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*Wonderstruck: Disability Awareness through Visual Storytelling* will explore issues around disability, inclusion and identity through the use of contemporary children's literature and film. Students will build empathy along with analytical skills as we explore Brian Selznick's graphic novel *Wonderstruck* and Todd Haynes' film adaptation of the book.

*Wonderstruck* follows two stories set 50 years apart. Rose's story, set in 1927 New York, unfolds entirely in full-page illustrations, while Ben's, set in 1977 Minnesota, is told in words. The book weaves back and forth between the two stories, eventually intertwining them in both plot and style, and ultimately revealing a familial connection between Ben and Rose. Another key connection between the two characters is revealed early on: both Rose and Ben are deaf. Ben was born without hearing in one ear, and part way through the book, he loses hearing in his other ear. Rose, on the other hand, has been deaf since birth.

### Ben's Story

It's June 1977, and Ben is an 11-year-old boy living in Gunflint Lake, Minnesota. He was born deaf in one ear. Recently his mother Elaine, who was the town librarian, died in a car crash. Ben now lives with his aunt, uncle and cousins across the lake from the house he grew up in. He never met his dad, and feels compelled to find out who he is. Ben finds a book of his mom's called *Wonderstruck*, which is about the history of museums. He opens the book up and begins to read. He learns about cabinets of wonders, also known as cabinets of curiosities or wonder rooms. Cabinets of wonders originated in mid-sixteenth-century Europe, and were small collections of extraordinary objects, typically located in a person's home, which endeavored to categorize and

tell stories about the wonders and oddities of the natural world.<sup>4</sup> They were essentially a precursor to the natural history museums of today, but with elements of superstition alongside the science. Objects often included specimens, diagrams, and drawings from many disciplines, as well as tribal masks, shrunken heads and other items collected while traveling. These cabinets could be literal cabinets made of wood with glass doors, but oftentimes these collections filled an entire room, covering the walls and sometimes the ceiling. The *Wonderstruck* book featured a two-page photograph of a Cabinet of Wonders room that had been erected at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City and exhibited to the public in the 1920's.

This book fascinates Ben, as he has been collecting various items like fossils, one of his baby teeth, stones from a meteorite, and a bird skull in a compartmentalized wooden box for many years. As he is reading, he finds a bookmark with the name, address and phone number of a bookstore in New York City. He also finds an inscription on the inside of the book that is signed "Love, Danny." Ben wonders if Danny is his father and decides to call the number on the bookmark. As he is calling, a bolt of lightning strikes his house, travels through the phone line and knocks him unconscious. He wakes up in the hospital and realized he is now deaf in both ears. He decides to sneak out of the hospital and run away to New York City to look for his father. Eventually he finds himself at the American Museum of Natural History. He meets a boy his age named Jamie, whose dad works at the museum. Jamie leads him to an unused storage room where he hides out. Something about the room seems oddly familiar to Ben. He notices that the wooden shelves along the wall are very ornate and decorative, uncharacteristic of a storage room. He looks down at the floor and recognizes the checkerboard pattern, but can't put his finger on where he's seen it before. He notices an old piece of fabric covering up a tall rectangular structure. He pulls off the fabric and finds a cabinet of wonders. He realizes that this storage room is actually the site of the Cabinet of Wonders exhibit that he had seen so many times in the *Wonderstruck* book. After exploring the Cabinet of Wonders, Ben lies down to take a nap, and ends up sleeping the whole night. The next morning he sets out to try to find his father. He locates the bookstore listed on the bookmark, and there he meets Rose.

### **Rose's Story**

It's October 1927 and Rose lives with her authoritarian father in Hoboken, New Jersey. She was born deaf, and does not attend school or leave the house. She is visited regularly by a tutor, who, in addition to teaching her academic skills, is attempting to teach Rose to speak and lip read so that she can better assimilate into the world of hearing people. Rose does not like this approach and wishes to learn American Sign Language instead. She feels lonely and trapped at home, and is seen sitting in her room compiling a scrapbook of news clippings featuring her idol, silent film star and stage actress Lillian Mayhew. She decides to run away to New York City to see Mayhew perform in a play. She sneaks into the theater and is discovered by Mayhew, who turns out to be Rose's mother. Mayhew is furious, and tells Rose it's not safe for a deaf girl to be out of the house alone. She locks Rose in her dressing room, with the intention of eventually sending her back to her father. Rose escapes and goes to the American Museum of Natural History. She attempts to hide out there, and is found by her brother Walter, who works at the museum. It's obvious that Rose and Walter have a warm relationship, and he understands her frustrations. He takes her back to his apartment, and promises to speak to their parents on her behalf.

### **1977**

Ben arrives at the bookstore and meets Rose, who is now in her 60's. After some communication challenges due to their mutual deafness and Ben not knowing sign language, Ben and Rose use a notepad to learn more about one another. Ben finds out that his father is indeed Danny. As it turns out Rose is Danny's mother, and

therefore Ben's grandmother. Rose takes Ben to the Queens Museum where she tells him the story of her life. She tells him that after she ran away to New York City, her brother helped her find a school for deaf children, where she learned American Sign Language. Rose also tells Ben the story of how his parents met. He learns that Danny was a diorama designer at the American Museum of Natural History and met Ben's mother Elaine while visiting Gunflint Lake to conduct research for a wolf diorama. Ben learns that Danny died of heart failure many years back. Rose shows Ben the Panorama of the City of New York, the largest architectural model ever built, depicting the city's 5 boroughs and all 895,000 buildings. Rose was on the team that hand-built the Panorama for the 1964 World's Fair. The book ends with the blackout of 1977, and Rose and Ben looking up at the stars from the roof of the Queens Museum while waiting for her brother Walter to pick them up.

Brian Selznick was inspired to write *Wonderstruck* after watching *Through Deaf Eyes*, a documentary for PBS about the history of Deaf life in America from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. He decided to write a book about two deaf characters living years apart in different parts of the country. He knew he wanted Ben's story to be set in 1977, the year of the famous blackout in New York City. Selznick had been the same age as Ben, 11, when the blackout happened and he remembers seeing the headlines in newspapers. Selznick grew up in New Jersey and visited Manhattan often as a child. His favorite spot on the island was The Museum of Natural History, and his favorite diorama there was the wolf diorama, which is set in Gunflint Lake, Minnesota. When doing research for *Wonderstruck*, Selznick thought about the diorama and the idea that someone from Gunflint Lake might visit the museum and discover this connection to their hometown.

Selznick knew he wanted his other character, Rose, to live in New Jersey, where he grew up. He knew that Rose would be deaf from birth, and planned to tell her story in drawings in order to reflect the way she experienced life: visually. But he was unsure of what year to set the story in. Then he remembered that films began to have sound in 1927. Prior to that, all films were "silent movies." If characters were having a conversation, words would be written on the screen on "title cards." But often most of the story was told visually, through action and facial expressions, as well a dramatic live music that was played in the theater during screenings of the movie. He decided to set Rose's story in the year that silent films became "talkies." At one point in the book, Rose sneaks out of the house to the local movie theater to watch a silent film starring her mother, Lillian Mayhew. At the theater, there are signs posted announcing that the theater will soon be equipped to show the new "talkies."

In addition to writing the book, Selznick wrote the screenplay for *Wonderstruck*. He had long been a fan of film director Todd Haynes, and was thrilled when he found out Haynes wanted to direct the film adaptation of his book. In a 2017 interview with the Los Angeles Times, Haynes talked about what first attracted him to *Wonderstruck*.

The thing that excited me was that I'd never done a movie about kids, a film kids could see. But I wanted it to be as complex, sophisticated and rich as any cinematic experience, to make something really sublime for kids. Great kids films are great films.<sup>5</sup>

Todd Haynes is known for films that take an unconventional approach to the narrative form. His 2007 Bob Dylan biopic *I'm Not There* features six different actors playing six different versions of Dylan at various stages in his life. Selznick's *Wonderstruck* plays with the narrative form through its parallel storylines. It uses visuals in an inventive way, with Rose's story being told entirely in drawings. These experimental elements make *Wonderstruck* an ideal novel for a director like Haynes to adapt. Haynes worked with Selznick to complete the

screenplay, and many early creative decisions resulted from the collaboration of writer and director. However, Haynes took on the primary authorship role once filming was underway, in keeping with the modern role of director as “auteur.” The role of film auteur, however, does not mean sole authorship, and Haynes worked closely with the cinematographer, production designer, costume designer, editor and actors to craft the film. Haynes was especially concerned with capturing the look and feel of silent films from the 1920’s. He watched many silent movies in preparation for filming Rose’s story in *Wonderstruck*. He was particularly inspired by the nighttime cityscapes of F.W. Murnau’s *Sunrise* and the miniature models used in King Vidor’s *The Crowd*. *The Wind* starring Lillian Gish was the inspiration for *Daughter of the Storm* starring Lillian Mayhew, the silent movie depicted in *Wonderstruck*.

In many ways, Todd Haynes’ *Wonderstruck* is quite faithful to the source text. After all, Brian Selznick, the book’s author, wrote the screenplay with the help of Haynes. Selznick’s book contains visual elements resembling film. His pencil illustrations of Rose’s story have a cinematic quality, resembling a sequence of wide shots and close-ups depicting action. There are however, some significant aesthetic differences between the book and the film. One of the key adaptation decisions was made by Selznick while writing the screenplay. He decided that Rose’s story would be filmed in black and white, and would be shot and edited like a silent film, while Ben’s story would be shot in color, with sound. Shooting Rose’s story as a silent film reflects the way in which her character experiences life: visually.

Another important aesthetic decision was made by Todd Haynes and Mark Friedberg, the film’s production designer. They had the challenge of depicting the scene where Rose tells Ben the story of her life, along with her son Danny’s, taking place over a span of 50 years. Haynes and Friedberg had the idea of filming the entire sequence in miniature, much like dioramas in a museum or the Panorama of the City of New York. They worked with model makers and stop motion animators to create the sequence, using nineteen miniature sets and over 300 characters. Perhaps the most striking part of the sequence comes at the end, when puppets with photographic heads encased in locket are used to depict Rose, Danny, Elaine and a young Ben. In creating these miniatures, Haynes used the dioramas and panorama in Selznick’s book as inspiration, all the while putting his own stylistic stamp on the film. The miniatures, especially the puppets and the way they are animated, echo the use of Barbie dolls in Haynes’ debut film *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*.

Filmmakers have more storytelling tools at their disposal than novelists. These tools include camera framing and movement, inventive editing techniques and use of lighting, color, production design, costumes, music and sound. One sequence in the *Wonderstruck* film beautifully illustrates this difference. When Ben is struck by lightning in the book, the text describes Ben picking up the phone. We see a drawing of a lightning bolt. On the next page, the text describes Ben lying on the floor staring up at the ceiling, a terrible burning smell in the air. In the film’s version of this scene we see a close-up of Ben’s hand turning the dial on a rotary phone. As he dials the last number, we hear a high-pitched ringing sound followed by loud crackling, buzzing and overlapping music and sound effects. On the screen we see flashes of light, negative film exposures and soft focus shots of classic cartoons and Ben’s mother, cut together in quick succession. Shots are layered on top of one another to give the appearance of a double exposure. As we watch this surreal, jarring sequence it feels as if we’re penetrating Ben’s subconscious. All this occurs in a matter of seconds, as the lightning hits the house and travels through the phone line to Ben’s ear. For those few visceral seconds, the viewer is fully immersed, feeling the jolt of lightning as it strikes Ben and knocks him unconscious. In the sequence following, we see Ben regain consciousness. His confusion and disorientation are underscored by out-of-focus shots of the doctors and fluorescent ceiling lights. The only sound we hear is an eerie ringing as Ben’s aunt writes on a notepad, explaining to him that he has lost his hearing. Moments like this have the power to generate empathy in the viewer. When a well-crafted book is adapted into film, the potential emotional

impact on the viewer is great. In the words of Todd Haynes, “When we fill a movie in with our emotions as spectators it becomes powerful and alive.”<sup>6</sup>

My 5<sup>th</sup> graders will engage in a close reading of *Wonderstruck*, both the novel and the film. They will learn to analyze both text and film, and explore the relationship between the two media. They will examine the innovative ways in which a novel can be adapted into film, as described above. *Wonderstruck*, with its themes of identity and the search for belonging, along with its depiction of deaf children, will serve as a jumping off point for our exploration of disability. We will learn more about deaf culture by watching the documentary *Through Deaf Eyes*, which is the film that inspired Brian Selznick to write *Wonderstruck*. The film tells the story of deaf life in America, as told by members of the deaf community. We will discuss the debate between advocates of American Sign Language (ASL) and proponents of Oralism, the education of deaf people through oral language by using lip reading, speech and mimicking of mouth shapes and breathing patterns. This debate was illustrated in *Wonderstruck* when Rose refused to allow her oralist tutor to teach her lip reading, and instead wanted to learn ASL. This will lead to a larger discussion of disability, inclusion and identity. We will discuss the importance of understanding and embracing diversity by exploring the perspectives of those who are different from ourselves.

In the second phase of our unit, we will continue to explore disability culture, history, theory and look at some of the specific physical and cognitive disabilities that impact people. We will explore these topics through an immersion in various media such as news articles, books, excerpts of memoirs and biographies, and video clips of documentaries and narrative films. We will continue to discuss disability, inclusion and identity. We will explore the connotations of words like “handicapped,” “disabled” and “disability” and consider alternative words and phrases such as “differently abled” and “differences.” We will look at the ways in which these differences can impact daily functioning and how accommodations and universal design can address these challenges. Students will participate in simulation activities that will allow them to experience what it might feel like to have a particular disability. We will explore the concept of equity and how it differs from equality. We will discuss “person first” language and why many believe it’s a more accurate and respectful way to describe people. We will explore the history of disability in the United States, with a particular focus on the Disability Rights Movement of the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century that led to landmark legislation such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA).

We will read biographical and autobiographical picture books that tell the stories of people who have various disabilities. After reading these books as a class, each student will express interest in a particular book and the disability it depicts. Students will form inquiry circles based on shared interest. Each inquiry circle group will use their picture book as a jumping off point to further explore their chosen disability using various resources such as online news articles, informational books and documentary films.

Once all group members have a strong understanding of their disability, as well as the biographical story depicted in their chosen book, they will adapt that biographical story into a visual storytelling format of their choice and present their visual stories to the class.

# Teaching Strategies

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## **Inquiry Circles**

Inquiry circles are a form of small group project-based learning based on the ideas of authors Stephanie Harvey and Harvey “Smokey” Daniels. Harvey and Daniels describe the inquiry process as four distinct stages: immerse, investigate, coalesce and go public.

### **Immerse**

The “immerse” stage is taught in a whole class setting and most closely resembles a traditional social studies unit. Students are immersed in a broad topic (in this case disability awareness and history) and flooded with information using various forms of media such as news articles, books, excerpts of memoirs and biographies, and video clips of documentaries and narrative films. In addition to exploring the sources listed above, we will engage in a targeted study of six picture book memoirs that chronicle the lives of real people with various disabilities. We will use interactive read aloud and discussion strategies to analyze these books. Throughout the immerse stage, students will ask questions about things that spark their curiosity and make them wonder. We will have a “wonder wall” where students will post their questions as they occur to them during the immerse stage. The teacher will encourage students to ask deeper questions that focus on the “how” and “why.” In a typical inquiry unit, students would look over their questions at the end of the immerse stage and narrow them down to their top three. The teacher would then look over students’ questions and group students based on shared interest. These groups are called “inquiry circles”. In this unit, instead of choosing their top 3 inquiry questions, students will choose the picture book memoir they’re most interested in, along with a second choice. The teacher will use students’ selections to create inquiry circles.

### **Investigate**

At this stage, each group will re-read their chosen memoir. After reading, they will come up with a list of questions they have about the disability that is discussed in their memoir, as well as any further questions they may have about the person depicted in the book. Questions will be divided up evenly amongst group members, and they will begin their research. They will consult various sources, including those used in the immerse stage. Students will also engage heavily in Internet research during this stage. They will be given guidance on how to discern reliable sources and avoid sources such as Wikipedia that may contain inaccuracies. The teacher will check in with groups periodically throughout this phase to provide guidance and help students stay on track to complete their research.

### **Coalesce**

This is a short but important stage in the inquiry process. Students will meet in their inquiry circles to pool their research. Each student will share what they found in regard to the questions they researched. They will essentially be teaching and learning from one another in order to create a collective body of research. They will look at the ways in which their answers to various questions relate to one another. They will synthesize their findings into the key takeaways that they wish to convey to their classmates in the “go public” stage.

### **Go Public**

At this stage, inquiry groups will come up with a way to share their findings with the whole class. The “go

public” component of this particular unit is unique in that students will be using their knowledge of film adaptation to translate their group’s picture book memoir into a visual storytelling piece, using their disability and biographical research to inform their project. The teacher will review with students what it means to adapt a book into a visual medium such as film. Visual storytelling can take on many forms, and students will have the opportunity to choose from a wide range of visual mediums. Their options will include: short film, animation, puppet show, short graphic novel, multi-level diorama, cabinet of wonders, dollhouse, pop-up book, scrapbook, and museum exhibit. As a group, they will choose the medium that best suits their story and the talents and abilities of group members. In addition to telling the biographical story originally depicted in the picture book, the final project must include key takeaways from the group’s research on their chosen disability. These key takeaways can either be included within the visual story, or as supplemental narration or informational plaques.

Students will be assessed (using a teacher-created rubric) based on creative choices made during the adaptation process, key takeaways from research on their chosen disability, and the ways in which disability, inclusion and identity are represented in the final piece. After each visual story is presented, the creators will hold a question and answer session (also known as a director’s Q & A) where audience members will have the opportunity to question the directors and provide comments and feedback. After all presentations are completed, students will complete a self-evaluation and peer evaluation in regard to cooperative skills and participation.

### **Interactive Read Aloud**

In an interactive read aloud, the teacher plans out the read aloud ahead of time with a specific purpose or purposes in mind. The purpose may be to build a particular comprehension skill, such as compare and contrast, or making inferences. The read aloud may be designed to build content knowledge, teach new vocabulary, or introduce students to the story elements such as characterization, plot development or theme. The teacher will plan to stop at certain points in the story to address a specific teaching point or ask a comprehension question. Typically I will write these questions or teaching points on sticky notes and place them in the appropriate spots throughout the story, as a reminder of where to stop during the read aloud.

### **Turn-and-Talk**

When stopping at specific points to ask questions, the teacher may ask students to voluntarily respond by raising their hands, or may ask students to engage with one another in a turn-and-talk. A turn-and-talk simply means each student will turn and talk to the person sitting next to them and address the teacher’s question or prompt. The teacher will let the students know how long they have to turn-and-talk, typically limiting talk time to 1 minute. The teacher will remind students to allow enough time for both partners to talk and to listen attentively. As students talk, the teacher circulates and listens in on conversations. This serves as a formative assessment, and often helps the teacher facilitate the next step, where she asks students to turn back to her and volunteer to share what they discussed with their partner. The teacher may strategically call on a student who she overheard giving an insightful comment or expressing a misconception. The teacher may also ask students to specifically share what their partner said during the turn-and-talk. This is a good way to assess whether students were listening closely to their partners. Turn-and-talk is designed to be a quick way for students to share their thinking with one another and the class, without interrupting the flow of the read aloud.



## **Think-Pair-Share**

Think-pair-share is similar to turn-and-talk, but allows students think time before they discuss with a partner. This strategy works well for higher-order questions that require more processing time. Think-pair-share can vary in length depending on the depth of the question being asked, but typically within the context of an interactive read aloud, students are given 1 minute to think independently, and 1-2 minutes to discuss their thinking in pairs. As in a turn-and-talk, after the time is up, students will turn back to the teacher, and some students will share their thinking with the whole group.

## **Stoplight Discussion**

Stoplight discussions<sup>7</sup> are the creation of Lindsay Ann, the teacher/blogger behind the blog [lindsayannlearning.com](http://lindsayannlearning.com). A stoplight discussion is a student led discussion strategy that works well for whole class discussion. Students sit in a circle facing each other. Each student has a red, yellow and green plastic cup. Prior to the discussion, the teacher asks a thought-provoking, open-ended question. The question may be about a text the class is reading, or a topic they have been exploring. The teacher gives students a minute or so to think on their own, and may ask them to do a “quick write” where they jot down their initial response to the prompt. The teacher will remind students that they are leading the discussion, and will stress the importance of equity and participation. The colored cups are used to signal a student’s readiness to join the discussion. If a student places a red cup in front of them, it means they are processing their thoughts and aren’t ready to be called on yet. If a student places a green cup in front of them, it means they’re ready to jump into the conversation and would like to be called on. If a student places a yellow cup in front of them, it means they would like to take the conversation in a new direction. Calling on someone with a yellow cup can “shake up” a discussion that is getting repetitive. The teacher will launch the discussion by calling on someone who has a green cup in front of them. That student will give their response, at which point other students may switch their cups as necessary. That first student will then call on another student who has a green cup in front of them.

If the teacher feels that the discussion is becoming stagnant, and students with yellow cups are not being called on, she may jump in and call on one of them. The teacher may also intervene if the discussion is lacking equity. But the teacher should err on the side of facilitator and allow students to lead the discussion to the greatest extent possible. Students should track their own participation and reflect on it afterwards, setting goals for future discussions.

## **Conver-stations**

Conver-stations<sup>8</sup> are a small group discussion strategy created by high school English teacher and blogger Sarah Brown Wessling. This strategy uses movement to create dynamic student led discussions in small groups. Students typically start out in their table groups of 4-5 students. Prior to the discussion, the teacher will ask an open-ended question related to a text or topic the class is currently studying. Students will have a minute or so to think and do a “quick write” of their initial response to the question. Then each group will engage in a student led discussion around the question. The teacher will circulate throughout the room, listening in on discussions. She will encourage students to take notes on key points from their discussions, letting them know that each group will be presenting their ideas at the end of the activity.

After several minutes have passed, or when the teacher feels that the discussion needs to shift or be built upon, she will tell students to pause their conversations. She will then give them another question that is related to the first one, but with greater depth. She will tell two students from each group to rotate to the

next group before launching back into a discussion. In this way, the rotating students can bring their ideas to their new group. The teacher may strategically pick introverted students or those with comprehension struggles to be the first two rotators, so that they are able to “prime the pump” and build confidence in their first discussion group before rotating to the next group. After several more minutes of discussion in their new groups, students pause again to hear the next question, which goes into greater depth on the topic. Then another two students (those who did not move in the first rotation) will rotate to the next group before discussing the new question. Each rotation provides the opportunity for both the group and the conversation to evolve. After at least two rotations/three discussions have taken place, each group will spend a minute formulating a collaborative answer to the final question, referring to their discussion notes as necessary. Each group will choose a spokesperson who will stand up and share their final answer/conclusion with the class.

## Classroom Activities

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### Disability Simulations

During the “immerse” stage of the inquiry process, students will gain a greater awareness of disability and a deeper understanding of the experiences of individuals with disabilities. One of the most powerful tools for building empathy is simulation. Simulation gives students the opportunity to experience what it might be like to have a particular disability.

### Drinking Straw Challenge

This activity involves the simulation of blindness, speech impairment, and immobile limbs and fingers. It is designed to emphasize the interactions between those with and without disabilities while working towards a common goal. The class will be divided into groups of five. Each group member will be assigned a different disability.

- Student #1: no use of thumbs (tape the student’s thumbs to their hands using masking tape)
- Student #2: no use of dominant hand and arm (place arm behind back)
- Student #3: unable to talk
- Student #4: unable to see (blindfolded)
- Student #5: able-bodied (does not have a disability)

Each group will be given 40 drinking straws (we will use eco-friendly paper straws) and a roll of Scotch tape. I will then explain that each group is competing to create the tallest possible freestanding structure using only drinking straws and Scotch tape. They will have 20 minutes to build their structures. The structure may not be anchored to the table, the floor or any other structure. I will monitor the groups throughout the building process, observing the students’ interactions. After the 20 minutes is up, we will come back together as a group to discuss the experience. I will ask questions to guide the discussion.

- What did the blind person in your group do?
- Did anyone assume that the people with disabilities couldn’t be active members of the group?
- Did anyone ask the people with disabilities what they felt they could do to contribute?
- If you had a disability in real life, how would you want people to treat you when doing something like this?

## **Sock Hands**

This activity simulates the challenges experienced when someone has a muscular mobility disorder such as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy or multiple sclerosis. The teacher will place students in pairs, making sure that at least one person in each pair is wearing shoes that have laces. Each pair of students will be given two pairs of thick socks. One student in each group will place two socks on each hand. That student will then attempt to tie their shoes using their sock-covered hands. The other student will observe their partner's attempt to tie their shoes. After a minute or so, the students will switch roles, so that all students have the opportunity to experience the challenge of limited muscular mobility.

- How did it feel to try to tie your shoes with socks on your hands?
- What was the most difficult part?
- How did it feel to watch your partner struggle?
- What could you do to help someone who has these challenges?
- What are some other tasks that would be difficult for you to do on a daily basis?

## **Blindfold Challenge**

In this role-playing activity, the teacher will place students in pairs or allow them to choose their partners. One student will be the person with blindness and the other student will be the guide. One student will wear a blindfold (be sure that it's secured tightly) and the guide will help the student make their way from one side of the classroom to the other and find a chair to sit down in. The teacher will instruct some groups to go out into the hallway so that the person with blindness can get a drink at the water fountain. The teacher will then have the partners change roles. After all students have experienced both roles, blindfolds will be removed and students will return to their tables for a whole class discussion.

- How did it feel to be blindfolded?
- How did it feel to be the guide?
- What was helpful?
- What was difficult?
- What are some suggestions you have for guiding and helping a person with a vision disability?

## **Cat, Dog, Fish**

This activity helps students understand what it might feel like to have an intellectual disability. A person with an intellectual disability may process information at a slower rate than their peers. People with intellectual disabilities often need complex instructions broken down into explicit steps, and may need repeated practice to retain information. In this activity, students will stand facing me. I will model three different positions: hands in air, hands on waist, and hands on thighs. Each position will be assigned an animal name that is completely unrelated to the position.

- Hands in air = CAT
- Hands on waist = DOG
- Hands on thighs = FISH

I will lead the students as they practice each position a few times. I will then begin giving a string of commands while modeling the movements.

- Hands on FISH

- Right hand on FISH
- Left hand on DOG
- Right hand on CAT
- Left hand on DOG

I will give them commands again, this time without doing them myself. I may increase the complexity by telling students to widen their stance or bend at the knees. We will discuss the experience as a class.

- How did it feel?
- What was challenging?
- What helped you succeed?

### **Dyslexia Simulation**

Victor Widell, a Swedish web developer, created an online simulation that gives viewers the opportunity to experience what it might be like to have dyslexia. While the experience of having dyslexia varies widely from person to person, many people with dyslexia have noted the similarities between Widell’s simulation and their own experiences. The simulation can be located by conducting a Google search for “Victor Widell” and clicking on the top search result, which is Widell’s blog. Here Widell has posted the text from the Wikipedia page on dyslexia, and has used his knowledge of JavaScript programming to manipulate the letters so they jump around on the page. I will use our classroom projector to show this simulation to my students. We will discuss how it made them feel.

- Were you able to read it?
- What was difficult about it?
- How did it make you feel?
- What could we do to help a person who has dyslexia?

### **Sensory Sensitivity Simulation**

This activity will allow students to experience what it’s like to have sensory sensitivity. People with autism are often hypersensitive to noise, movement and touch and can become overwhelmed in sensory-rich environments. People with ADHD can also experience sensory sensitivity. A stiff clothing tag on the back of the neck or the sound of a distant faucet dripping can make it very difficult for a person with ADHD or autism to concentrate on anything else. For this activity, I will divide the class into groups of 5. I will tell students that they will each have a job to do. I will go over their jobs and tell them to wait for the signal to start. One student in each group will play the part of someone with autism. The other 4 people each have different jobs:

- Student #1: You are a person with autism. You will listen to what Student #5 is reading so you can take a test on the material. Try to ignore everything else.
- Student #2: Stand behind the Student #1. Rub the edge of an index card against the back their neck. You do not need to rub hard, but keep doing it over and over.
- Student #3: Grab a book, lean close to Student #1 and read in a loud voice the entire time.
- Student #4: Pat Student #1 on the shoulder the entire time.
- Student #5: Using a normal voice, read a paragraph to Student #1 then ask them questions about what you read. Do not try to drown out the other noises.

After all students have had the chance to be Student #1, we will discuss the experience.

- How did it feel to have so much commotion going on?
- Did it make you want to scream or run away?
- Were you able to concentrate on the paragraph being read? What might have helped?

## Hearing Impairment Simulation

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This activity will allow students to experience what it might be like to have a hearing impairment. The spectrum of hearing impairment ranges from not being able to hear certain sounds to being completely deaf. Typically, having a hearing impairment means that sounds are garbled, muffled or unclear. For this activity, I will give each student a pair of foam earplugs and demonstrate how to use them. Using a tablet or smart phone connected to a speaker, I will fill the room with white noise using a white noise app. I will read a long newspaper article or book passage. I will read rapidly, using a mumbling monotone voice, running words together and pausing in odd places. I will ask students five questions about the content of what I read. I will continue to talk in a soft, mumbling voice. I will turn off the white noise and instruct student to remove their earplugs. We will discuss the experience.

- Were you able to hear anything I was saying?
- How did the experience make you feel?
- How did it feel to be asked questions about a text you could hardly hear?
- What could I have done to help you understand the passage and answer the questions correctly?

### Band-Aid Activity

In an inclusive classroom, students receive differentiated instruction based on their individual needs. It's important for students in this setting to learn the concept of equity. The Band-Aid Activity helps students understand that fair doesn't always mean equal. I began using this activity with my students after hearing about it from numerous educators. It's a simple, yet effective way to teach equity to children of all ages. The teacher will start by telling students that they will be pretending to have an injury. The teacher gives an index card to each student. Each card is inscribed with an injury or ailment such as "headache," "cut on leg" or "broken arm." The teacher asks students to announce their injury to the class one at a time. After each student shares, the teacher gives them a Band-Aid, regardless of the injury. If anyone complains or questions the Band-Aid, the teacher will simply say that it wouldn't be fair if we didn't give everyone the same thing. Once each student has a Band-Aid, the class will engage in a guided discussion.

- Was it equal that everyone got a Band-Aid?
- Was it fair that everyone got a Band-Aid? Why or why not?
- What other things in the classroom are our "injuries" like? What else can the Band-Aids be compared to?

As a variation, the teacher could give all but the last student a Band-Aid, and during the discussion could ask that student how it felt to be the only one without a Band-Aid.

The key point to impart to students is that fairness does not mean that everyone gets the same thing. Fairness means that we all get what we need, and we all need different things. For older students, the teacher may introduce the word "equity," explaining that equity means that everyone gets what they need.

To further reinforce the concept, the teacher can show students visual representations of “equity vs. equality.” There are many wonderful visual representations available online. To find them, simply conduct a Google image search using the words “equity” and “equality,” along with either “bicycle,” “baseball” or “apple tree.”

## Living Timeline of the History of Disability

After having gained empathy and understanding through simulation activities, students will be ready to learn about disability history and culture. We will explore the history of disability in the United States. We will work together to create a living timeline of key events and notable people, from the signing of the Declaration of Independence to the disability rights movement of the middle 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. We will explore the disability history timeline published by the Institute for Educational Leadership and choose 10-15 key events and historical figures that we wish to learn more about.<sup>9</sup> Students will be divided into groups of 2-3 students. Each group will be assigned an event or person to research further. Students will use Internet resources and disability history textbooks to gather important information about their historical figure or event. They will then create a 2-3 minute verbal sketch that conveys their information in a creative way. They could write a monologue, song, rap or an informal conversation with the audience. The group will choose one student to be the “actor” who will perform the sketch. The group will create props and/or simple costume pieces such as hats to make their historical research come to life. They will be provided card stock, scissors, tape, and markers to create these pieces. Groups will have time to rehearse before performing the living timeline as a class. The actors will line up in chronological order in the front of the room, facing the audience. They will each “freeze” in a pose of their choosing. When it’s their turn to perform their sketch, they will unfreeze. When they are finished performing they will refreeze, signaling to the next actor that it’s their turn to unfreeze. The actors and audience will be reminded of the importance of showing respect and sensitivity during the performance, especially in light of the fact that many of the actors will be depicting people with disabilities.

## Endnotes

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## Implementing District Standards

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CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.1

Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

While reading *Wonderstruck* as a class, students will stop periodically to have whole group and small group discussions about the text, and will engage in written responses to reading. They will be citing evidence from the text during their discussions and in their written responses, where they will be explaining what the text says explicitly and drawing inferences. During and after viewing the film *Wonderstruck*, students will continue to analyze the story, quoting evidence from the film and novel during discussions and in written responses.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.2

Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem 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.

Students will use evidence from *Wonderstruck* to determine the themes of the book (identity, friendship,

family, belonging, empathy). They will analyze the ways in which Rose and Ben respond to challenges and how their actions and character traits relate to the themes. They will summarize the story in a way that demonstrates the book's unique narrative structure of parallel storylines.

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.3

Compare and contrast two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

Students will engage in a great deal of comparison and contrast throughout the unit. They will compare and contrast Ben and Rose, following their actions in parallel storylines, as the unique personalities of both characters begin to emerge. Students will

compare and contrast the settings of 1977 Minnesota and 1927 New York and analyze how the settings influence their respective protagonists. They will compare and contrast the book and film, paying particular attention to what additions and omissions the director made. They will compare the way the book and film address emotions and relationships, and contrast the visual choices made by the director with the visuals created by the author in the graphic novel.

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.5.7

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).

We will be analyzing both versions of *Wonderstruck*, the graphic novel and the film, which are very expressive and stylized in different ways. Students will analyze the ways in which the visuals in both versions contribute to the meaning and tone of the story. Students look at the additional visual elements that the film format provides, such as production design, cinematography, lighting, costume design and editing, as well as sound and music. They will then discuss how these elements impact the story.

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.1

Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on *grade 5 topics and texts*, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

During this unit we will engage in many whole class and small group discussions using various strategies such as interactive read aloud, spotlight discussions and conver-stations. Some discussions will be teacher led, but as we progress through the unit, I will move to a facilitator role, allowing students to lead discussions and learn to build on one another's ideas. The spotlight discussion strategy is designed to be student led, and allows students different access points into the conversation, so that even the most reserved students can find opportunities to contribute.

#### CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.2

Summarize a written text read aloud or information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

Students will summarize both the graphic novel (which I will read aloud as they follow along in their own copies of the book) and the film. They will summarize each text in a way that demonstrates its unique

narrative structure of parallel storylines.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.4

Report on a topic or text or present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support main ideas or themes; speak clearly at an understandable pace.

During the “go public” stage of the inquiry process, students will present on their group’s topic using relevant facts and descriptive details, telling the biographical story of a person with a disability, and demonstrating the knowledge they gained through careful research of that disability.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.SL.5.5

Include multimedia components (e.g., graphics, sound) and visual displays in presentations when appropriate to enhance the development of main ideas or themes.

When students “go public” as described above, they do so using a visual storytelling format of their choice. Their options will include: short film, animation, puppet show, short graphic novel, multi-level diorama, cabinet of wonders, dollhouse, pop-up book, scrapbook, and museum exhibit. I will utilize my background in filmmaking, as well as the expertise of my school’s new Digital Storytelling teacher, who has a background in photography and media arts, to guide the students as they create visual storytelling pieces inspired by Todd Haynes’ stunning film adaptation of Brian Selznick’s beautiful graphic novel.

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