"Brace yourself": Motor disabilities in children's literature

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“Brace yourself”: Motor disabilities in children’s literature
By Jillian Bober

Mentor: Nina Jaffe

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Abstract:

This thesis presents the writing and sharing of an original work “Brace Yourself” with a group of second grade children including clinical and legal background as well as review of selected children’s literature with similar themes. The study incorporates samples of student responses to the story and discussion of curricular themes related to inclusion and school values.
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For the reader: Pseudonyms are used for names of children and setting for confidentiality.
I. Introduction and rationale
I. Introduction and Rationale

A. Background and Goals:

In the summer of 2011, I worked closely with a child - “Kyle” - with cerebral palsy who was non-verbal, with a feeding tube and wheelchair bound. Although I grew up attending schools with inclusion classrooms, I had never been exposed to children with chronic motor disabilities. Although we spent a few short weeks together at camp, the experience of working with Kyle was the main influence on my pursuing a career in the field of special education. At the time of his tragic passing in the winter of 2012, I decided that I wanted to gain a deeper knowledge of motor disabilities, specifically cerebral palsy, in the lives of children and families. Throughout my graduate program, I’ve come to see the importance of and need for children’s books that reflect diversity from a range of perspectives, including ethnic/racial, linguistic and cultural background as well as developmental variations. My goal for this independent study is to create resources for teachers including Brace yourself - an original story - on how to best support students with variations while encouraging typically developing students to be accepting and welcoming of all learners among their peers, school community and social environment.

From a young age I knew I was going to be a teacher, influenced by my mother who is an elementary educator. I was diagnosed with a learning disability at a young age and felt at many points that I was being singled out for the accommodations needed to be successful. This experience, although at times embarrassing, helped me to grow and learn how to advocate for
myself. I needed to find ways to express to my teachers what I needed to fulfill the requirements of projects, quizzes and exams. However, I did attend a school with students from diverse cultural backgrounds and inclusion for children with disabilities including cerebral palsy, Down’s Syndrome and autism spectrum disorders. As an educator, I feel strongly that each student deserves to have a warm and nurturing classroom environment where their experiences and those of their peers are reflected as an integral part of curriculum and literacy development. For my thesis project, I have posed questions to address a particular aspect of inclusion: How are children with physical disabilities portrayed in children’s literature and how do educators instill values of acceptance and understanding for all members of our classroom communities?

B. Cerebral Palsy: School-based and developmental implications

As defined by Martin (2006), “Cerebral Palsy is a disorder of movement and posture. It is caused by a brain injury that occurred before birth, during birth, or during the first few years after birth. The injury hinders the brain’s ability to control muscles of the body properly.” (p.2) There is no known cause for cerebral palsy; however, there is technology that can assist in identifying abnormalities. Doctors can use MRI imaging, CT scans, and ultrasound to find damaged areas. There are different levels of cerebral palsy: mild, moderate, or severe. Those with mild cases can typically care for themselves with limited assistance. People who have moderate cerebral palsy often need help with daily needs and mobility-related assistance, such as help with their walkers, putting on braces, and assistance with their wheelchairs. People with severe cerebral palsy often need help with self-care and general daily activities.

Diagnosis: Once a diagnosis has been made, the child meets with a team of specialists that typically includes a neurologist, orthopedist, physiatrist (one who helps with rehabilitation and
physical therapy), a developmental pediatrician (one who specializes in motor disabilities), and often both speech and occupational therapists in order to develop a treatment and care plan.

According to Bjorklund (2007), most children are diagnosed with cerebral palsy by age two. Many infants take longer to reach milestones such as holding up their heads, sitting, crawling, and speaking. Some children with severe forms of cerebral palsy may not be able to eat on their own, swallow, or walk. Many children with cerebral palsy have low muscle tone also known as hypotonia, which makes children’s muscles look overly relaxed. Some children have hypertonia, in which their muscles are stiff. It is possible for hypertonia to develop for people with cerebral palsy since in the wiring of their brain, the muscles do not receive the proper messages.

There are a variety of complications some children face with cerebral palsy. According to Martin (2016), since cerebral palsy hinders a child’s development and causes problems that persist into adulthood, it is classified as a developmental disability (Note: “developmental delay” is a general term indicating slowness in reaching typical benchmarks; it does not tell why or in what areas).

There are three main types of cerebral palsy: spasticity, athetoid and ataxic. Spasticity, the most common form is where the muscles are weak and stiff. Athetoid is when people are unable to control their muscle movements. Ataxic refers to shaky movements that also affect balance.

Support services: Physical, occupational and speech therapy.

Children with cerebral palsy often work with speech and language therapists on a variety of skills such as controlling muscles in their mouth and jaw as well as eating and swallowing. As children become older, some speech therapists work with students on using universal sign
language and computer equipment such as communication boards (that attach to a wheelchair) for those capable of expressing their needs in this way.

Physical therapy is helpful for students to develop their motor skills (legs, arms, core). PT therapists assist children with muscle strength and stability and work with orthopedists to design orthotics or assist in teaching children how to use canes, walkers and wheelchairs.

Occupational therapists have a variety of tools that they use with students with cerebral palsy to strengthen fine motor skills (including eating, and use of writing utensils with special straps or grips). In occupational therapy, students often practice strategies such as buttoning and tying shoes in addition to practicing with assistive technology that fits the student’s needs.

**Education:**

Because of the changes in I.D.E.A., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, all children are entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education. As a result of this act, students are eligible to receive instruction in mainstream classrooms with neurotypically functioning peers; the idea being that all students will learn together. Families have to consider whether public, private, a special education center, or homeschooling will be the best route. Public schools provide both general and special education for students and is cost-free, allowing students to interact and learn with peers. Private schools provide the opportunity for students to learn among peers in small group settings and oftentimes use an inclusive model as well. Special education centers are staffed with teachers specifically trained to address educational needs of the child including use of adaptive technology and equipment. Homeschooling is another option for children with cerebral palsy and many parents choose this option if their child struggles with mobility, short attention span or other factors that might be distracting in a classroom setting.
As early childhood educators it is important that we establish a classroom community where students are celebrated for their differences (Genishi et al, 2008). For literacy, group time and daily activities, there are a growing number of resources about building empathy which are important to introduce early on in the school year in order for a teacher to set an expectation of how to treat others and facilitate mutually respectful interactions with peers. By creating community norms and modeling them with children or other adults, students are more inclined to learn and put into practice these quality traits. We must model empathic behaviors and create a safe space where children are comfortable expressing their feelings. By dismissing children’s feelings and sending them away when there are problems between two peers (or one peer is disrespectful), we are not validating their emotions and this could potentially lead to a negative feeling about school. It is also critical for students at a young age to see role models demonstrating positive interactions; we are influential as teachers!

There are an increasing number of age appropriate children’s books with children of diverse backgrounds and abilities. By emphasizing that all students should be treated with equity regardless of their appearance, students learn the value of acceptance and empathy. Additionally, by having a variety of books that exemplify the importance of diversity, including them in everyday curriculums and discussing and reflecting about the characters and their feelings students get to dig deep and begin to understand perspectives of others.

The media is picking up more stories about generosity towards children and adults with disabilities and students are becoming more exposed. For example, in the show *Speechless* on ABC (2016), a main character JJ is a teenager with cerebral palsy. His mother, Maya, is seen making sure her child has the best educational opportunities and has switched schools and homes numerous times in an attempt to find someone to assist JJ in finding his voice. He is wheelchair
bound and uses assistive technology in order to communicate his needs. JJ communicates by using a laser pointer attached to his head that points to a board with words and letters. Maya, his mother is seen advocating for full inclusion for her son at all times. This series, sponsored by the Cerebral Palsy Foundation, shows the very real challenges that families face in trying to make sure their children are given the best educational opportunities. Geared towards adults, the show gives us a glimpse of a day in the life of a family who will stop at nothing to make sure their son (and brother) can succeed and be happily included in a school community.

There are also a variety of news stories and videos of children who have special needs (for example, a child being given a gift of appreciation by peers who used to bully him, or a child with cerebral palsy determined to finish a race). As I researched this topic, I learned that there are triathlons for children specifically with motor disabilities, and inclusive sports teams. According to Russell (2007) guidelines on how to best communicate with and raise awareness of what barriers may be present for people with a range of disabilities are now included in physical education teacher preparation. In the following section I will be presenting a selection of children’s literature to support and extend classroom resources in the early grades.
II. Literature Review
II. Literature Review

A. Children’s literature with themes of physical disability.

As childhood educators, we are responsible for the social-emotional wellbeing and growth of each individual student. According to Bucholz (2009), when teaching in an inclusive classroom, teachers must encourage emotional wellbeing in order to create a positive atmosphere for both learning and emotional development for their students. The unfortunate reality is that there is a limited amount of literature, which accurately portrays children with disabilities to help guide this. Dyches (2008) mentions how books make the unfamiliar known; books provide opportunities for readers to grow and develop in many ways. An effective inclusive classroom will include a wide range of literature, which includes characters with disabilities. Miller (2012) notes that inclusion literature can help develop awareness and empathy by providing a genuine connection to the lives of individuals with special needs. As teachers we must choose books for our classrooms that promote empathy and portray the characters realistically so students can have an accurate source to learn from. In early childhood in particular as we build classroom communities with children of diverse backgrounds both culturally and in terms of physical and learning needs, it is important to explore literature that accurately depicts children with variations. By showing literature that accurately portrays individuals with disabilities, students become more open-minded and it promotes awareness and an open dialogue for any questions students may have surrounding the topic.
When connecting with children in the classroom:

According to Dyches (2006), the book character’s disability should be portrayed accurately to that of the individual’s, as children use books to make authentic connections in their personal world. In addition, as Henney (2012) mentions, if the character has similar needs to those in the reader’s life, the story will not feel as abstract. In the past, characters with physical disabilities were drawn as being pushed in a wheelchair by somebody, whereas now characters with physical disabilities are illustrated riding motorized scooters or using braces and walkers independently. It is imperative as educators to show the changes over time in adaptations to help children with disabilities and to of course show accurate representations. According to Kitterman (2002) there is still a lack of literature that promotes inclusion in an adequate way. He recommends that teachers independently alter stories to include those with disabilities.

As Yu (2012) mentions, “reading and discussing children’s books about disabilities, arranging inclusive cooperative learning group activities, or assisting parents in the promotion of children’s positive attitude development can help children understand and accept their classmates with disabilities (e.g., Cooper, 2003; Favazza & Odom, 1996; Piercy, Wilton, & Townsend, 2002). Young children often impersonate the behaviors of their teachers; by communicating and demonstrating the importance of acceptance and incorporating the language of inclusion and community in your classroom everyday, students will catch on. Yu (2012) strongly states successful inclusion is an educational goal for all children. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009), the outcomes of inclusion for children with and without disabilities should include a sense of belonging and membership, positive social relationships and friendships, and development and learning so all children reach their full potential. As educators we want to foster our students love of school, and by incorporating
positive language into our everyday curricula, literature in particular, students become well-rounded individuals. Here are several books that meet the criteria of addressing these important issues in elementary education.

**B. Annotated bibliography:**


Sharon Draper is an author whose work has a variety of awards including the New York Times and the Coretta Scott King Award. In her book, Draper talks about a child Melody, who grows up without the ability to walk or talk; she is a child with Cerebral Palsy. Although she does not have the ability to speak, she has a memory like a sponge, and she would do anything to be able to communicate with her neurotypical peers. The story speaks about the first time she was introduced to inclusion classrooms, her very own communication device, and Melody (the main character) was able to show her peers the amount of knowledge she had proving their multiple assumptions about her were in fact wrong. The paraprofessional Melody is fortunate enough to have advocates for her and she receives a communication device allowing her to shine academically and gain confidence in her cognitive abilities.


Many people are familiar with the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears, however in this story one of the bears has a physical disability. Throughout the adventure, Goldilocks gets to know the baby bear whose home has a wheelchair ramp, and she becomes familiar with the type of physical therapy he does while even trying to use the wheelchair herself. This story is empathetic and useful for children to become familiar with disabilities. The author does a great job of showing that people with disabilities do not need our help, nor do they need to be babied, but often want to do things independently and Baby Bear, who does not always allow Goldilocks to move his wheelchair with her assistance, showed this.


This book shows school-aged children with varying disabilities perform activities like their neurotypical peers. This book focuses on the child as an individual first, and a disability second and what these children are in fact capable of. The pictures show five children living normal lives with their families and physical therapists. Students who are unaware of disabilities or struggle to understand why their peers may need assistance walking would benefit from this story. Many students are able to connect with the students in the photos. Additionally at the end of the story, there are child friendly definitions about each of the disabilities mentioned in the text.

This children’s book is well written and addresses the challenges that Nathan, a young boy who suffers from Cerebral Palsy, faces. He empathizes with another main character in the story, his neighbor’s owl that has an injured wing. Nathan feels he can connect with the injured animal due to his lack of mobility, as he is confined to his wheelchair or walker. The story has a happy ending where Nathan is able to help both the owl and his neighbor, Miss Sandy with chores around her animal clinic. The overall themes are to never give up and how ambition can help you push forward and overcome goals and dreams, which both Nathan and the owl share. The colors and visuals are realistic and the book is geared towards an audience of early elementary aged students. This book is a wonderful representation of inclusion with a story that proves that everybody is capable.

All of these titles share narrative themes of acceptance and stressing how protagonists do not want to be pitied or may feel limited by a physical challenge they may have – but rather strengths and commonalities. Children with motor challenges are capable of being great friends, and participating in activities to the best of their ability. These books also emphasize the importance of focusing on children’s identity beyond a disability label. Additionally, the books show how the main characters want to be as independent as possible to fully express themselves.

As an educator I was struck by these overarching values. Having grown up with students and adults with a variety of disabilities throughout my childhood and adult life, I felt that these books evoked emotions and experiences that are important to discuss. The theme of wanting to be independently successful was reoccurring. When creating my own book for the children’s literature course taught by Sal Vascellaro (2016) I knew I wanted to create a character that was given that opportunity. These books show curiosity from other children and adults and empathy and it reinforces the idea that all people deserve love, friendships, education and acceptance.
To build a character who has a physical disability - with peers and teachers who wanted to support him in any way - I drew upon my own experiences with physical diversity including the opportunity to be part of a group called *Unified Sports*. Through this after-school program, I had the opportunity to play team sports with peers who had with a variety of disabilities. Here is a excerpt from their campaign mission statement:

Those engaged will make a meaningful difference by aiding in the fight to end critical problems in the world - inactivity, intolerance and injustice - and by helping to shape the world into one in which respect, tolerance and equality prevail. We want to inspire attitudes that lead to activity WITH our athletes rather than an approach of doing things FOR our athletes.” (Synott, 2016).

I loved being a member of this wonderful program and I would urge other schools to participate with their local Special Olympics. If it were not for this program in particular, I wouldn’t have met Peter, the child who was the main influence behind my story - *Brace yourself*.

In summary, the themes of these stories and that of my own, reinforce the idea that teaching acceptance and understanding are important values for children to be exposed to early on, and that it only takes one person to say, “want to play?”, “want to read with me?”, “let’s do this together!” to influence other children’s kindness and compassion. Teachers play a critical role in modeling empathy. I wanted the main character in my story to feel successful and to prove that regardless of his disability, he was still able to accomplish his goal independently.
III: “Brace yourself” – Field-based perspectives
III. Brace Yourself- Field Based Perspectives

A. Setting and school community

The Haverim Tovim School [pseudonym] is an independent Jewish day school (K-8) located in New York City. The school has 220 children, 59 staff members, and draws on a diverse range of families coming from lower Manhattan and all over Brooklyn. The curriculum is based on Common Core New York State Standards and is a progressive dual language school (English and Hebrew). Teachers use Singapore Math Curriculum and Teachers’ College Reading and Writing Project within a shared philosophy of whole-child and experiential approach to teaching.

The Haverim Tovim School is made up of families with varying degrees of Jewish practice and observance, and faculty whom are made up mostly of the Jewish faith, many authentic Hebrew speakers coming from Israel. Families are drawn to the school because of the progressive dual English and Hebrew education. Children also come from homes where other languages are spoken including: Russian, Hebrew, French, Hungarian and Spanish. The dual language component provides the opportunity for children to gain basic fluency in modern Hebrew as well as prayer. According to its mission statement, school goals include: Seeking meaning from traditions of Jewish inquiry and secular scholarship in order to build critical thinking and academic skills; building community with strong commitment to global citizenship and social responsibility; and a joyful approach to Jewish learning and life (excerpt and paraphrase, JB).

Teaching role:

I am currently an Associate Kindergarten teacher and the coordinator of the early morning program at the school. I teach all subjects Math, English, Science, Social Studies and work with my cooperating teacher on planning and discussing each lesson’s objective. Primarily,
I teach Science and lead other subjects as needed, but spend most of the time working one on one with the students who require extra assistance during assignments, whether they are English as a second language learners or need some reinforcement of the material and directions. The classroom I read the book with is made up of children ages 6-7. There are 31 children with a variety of different reading and literacy levels and four who are predominantly Hebrew speakers. There are four teachers on the team, two who teach Hebrew and Judaica and two who teach general studies. The typical schedule of the day includes: a morning meeting and tefillah (prayer), reading, writing, math, and some weekly blocks with science, social studies and specials (music, art, P.E). Each group I read to was made up of fifteen students with varying learning and language backgrounds including Russian and Hebrew. I discussed with students that I would be reading the book and that afterwards they would be answering questions for me. In sharing my plans with the lower school director, she noted a strong link between the project and school values of chesed (kindness), hatmadah (perseverance) and elu v’elu (openness) and generously offered several strategies, which I then incorporated into the lesson (Appendix B).

Teachers refer to the three values above throughout the day; mostly through literacy, and by having the opportunity to read Brace Yourself - I was able to put into practice my own commitment to inclusion in context of the school’s mission and value set.

B. Classroom share and documentation

Story recap: “Brace yourself” tells the story of a young boy Ryan with cerebral palsy. It is told through the eyes of his best friend Charlie who is his classmate. Ryan wants to participate in the class’s one-mile race and his gym teacher asks him how he can help him during the race to be the most successful. Ryan runs in the race with five other students who become eliminated during
the race. After four children have been eliminated the coach gives Ryan a five-minute break so he can rest his legs. When he last friend decides he cannot finish the race without a sip of water, Ryan becomes the winner and receives a medal from Mr. Sweetland. He celebrates his victory by going for ice cream and having a sleepover with his friend Charlie that night! (Bober, 2016)

**Preparation:** Each session took up a 40-minute English language arts block. I did a read aloud in which students participated in a dialogue, and after the reading the students answered three simple open-ended questions, which can be seen below. Before I read the story, I discussed that I was the author of the story, who the illustrator was and I wanted to give the students insight into what Cerebral Palsy is. I explained it as a condition where somebody’s brain struggles to send messages to their muscles and because of this, some people with Cerebral Palsy have trouble moving on their own without the help of braces, walkers and sometimes wheelchairs. I read the book and was fortunate to have the teacher’s audio record the session and make a written dialogue. I decided before the read aloud to have the students think about the following questions as I read:

1) Do you know anybody that has a difference like the child in the story?

2) How would you feel if you were Ryan?

3) How did the other students treat Ryan?

In addition the lower school director provided suggestions for guiding questions and prompts. The collaboration was helpful as part of lesson preparation. See Appendix B)

**Activity description:**

Throughout the read aloud the students seemed engaged and particularly liked the illustrations. Students sat with calm bodies and leaned forward while I read, at some points
giggling and smiling sympathetically. I was pleasantly surprised at the connections students made with the main character. Students had the opportunity to turn and talk to their learning buddies next to them and discuss predictions as well as share out with the class.

One remark in particular that struck me was “Is Cerebral Palsy sort of like Autism, I have a friend with Autism and he has trouble with some things too?” With a background in special education, I was able to give an appropriate response to such a thoughtful and mature connection. The students were asked to make connections and comments about his best friend Charlie, the narrator, in addition to the Coach. One child suggested that he did not think that Ryan would be able to finish the race and that he thought the gym teacher would in fact encourage him to quit. Another suggested that I should change part of the story so that all of the students finish the race with Ryan, but stop just short of the finish line so Ryan could win.

All of the children seemed to enjoy the illustrations in particular and the illustrations helped the students to understand his disability more. They asked about how other people with Cerebral Palsy walk around and if I had any braces for them to try on. The students also asked what Ryan could and could not do because of his disability and made connections to people they know who had to wear a cast or children and relatives in wheelchairs.

Although none of the children have physical disabilities in the school, many students found ways to relate to him. They said the situation reminded them of the story *Tortoise and the Hare*. The reading responses gave me supplementary feedback, and the responses showed the truly empathetic and thoughtful student body in the school. Some students could relate to someone they know with a disability or difference, while others struggled to make connections. A few students asked if a large birthmark, lactose intolerance and breaking a bone was similar and I
simply encouraged students to answer the question to the best of their ability. Although not everyone could relate directly, all of the responses were sympathetic.

Overall the students were engaged throughout the story and respectful in their contributions to their read aloud and reflection. Many students still had questions about Cerebral Palsy, specifically if it is something people are born with, if it can go away or if they could do something to help someone with it. The students were insightful and were able to connect to other books they have read with children in wheelchairs or with braces, many stating that they had broken bones and had to wear a cast while they healed. In written responses (see appendix A) the most meaningful feedback was specific to their feelings about the way the coach and Charlie encouraged Ryan in the story.

One child wrote: “I have a friend named Braden who comes to our class evry Thresday he’s really diffrent but he’s fun to see to. If I were Ryan before the race I would be exited I would also be nervos. I really like how the children chered Ryan on it would make me feel really good. The other students treted Ryan really nicely and they also helped him dering the race.” Another student response that struck me was a response to question 3, which was, “ They were nice and made him feel good but everyone is not like that.” For a young child to make this connection I felt showed extreme empathy and understanding. Most responses were similar in the way that students responded to Ryan probably feeling proud at the end of the race for not giving up and excitement for the opportunity to run with his peers. One student verbally responded to question number 2 and said, “I would feel different because not a lot of people have braces and I would also feel good because people were respecting me.” A final answer I felt was empathetic was a response in which the student tried to make a personal connection and wrote how she is small
but doesn’t want to stop doing gymnastics because of it, followed by an answer in which she said if she were Ryan she would feel excited and that he was worthy of receiving a medal.

C. Implications for practice

Based on the children’s feedback, I gained insights in my work as a reflective practitioner, especially in areas of social-emotional learning and differentiation. I was presented to the class as a “mystery guest” to the 2nd grade class. The group of students is familiar with me because I run the early morning program at school (which a majority of them attend) and they were in the 1st grade classroom adjacent to mine last year. They sat in disbelief that I could be both a teacher and “an author” and seemed excited with the idea that their responses could be part of my project (which I prefaced). I would love to have time to take this conversation to the next level and incorporate the other children’s books included in the annotated bibliography to have larger discussions connected to each of our school values. I had not previously spent time in this classroom discussing emotionally charged topics such as having a disability and the reaction from each of the children was warm and understanding. I think that this type of book would be a wonderful book to read at the beginning of the school year to encourage community building.

One child “Max” (pseudonym) is having a very difficult year, and often needs to spend time in the principal’s office. He is a child with oppositional defiance disorder and his teachers offered to have him leave the room during the read aloud, but I asked if he could stay. Throughout the reading he made insightful comments and displayed real social-emotional strength (his teachers were in disbelief). Some students were confused about the implications that cerebral palsy can have on children and adults, but after my explanation “Max” decided that he wanted to confirm
what he had heard before listening to the story. He said, “So you mean it is something that happens in the brain that affects the way peoples body parts and muscles move?” I confirmed what I had meant before starting the read aloud. Throughout the story Max was able to highlight Ryan’s strengths, encouraging his peers to discuss these capabilities, and pointing out how Ryan was strong and determined. Towards the end of the story Max said, “I wasn’t sure that he could finish the race and complete it but I’m glad the coach gave him the option of stopping in the middle. Charlie was such an awesome friend, I would have done the same thing!”

Max also mentioned how Ryan’s peers in the story were all so friendly and encouraged him throughout the race without bullying him. These insightful comments kept the dialogue throughout the read-aloud open and honest, and as I finished the book he mentioned wishing he could go to a school where they have students like that so he could run and do sports with them as well. This comment struck me, especially due to his typical outbursts and behavior challenges in the classroom, and reinforced my idea to use this book to discuss inclusion, respect and diversity in schools. After this experience of the read aloud I am now able to see ways to build on children’s ideas and questions in order to develop further lesson plans and related activities - including health and positive body image, creative writing, science and social studies projects.
IV. Reflection
IV. Reflection

The process of writing *Brace Yourself* was inspired by a former student with physical challenges who was the main influence on my interest in studying children with motor disabilities (specifically cerebral palsy). Creating a story featuring a child with cerebral palsy who overcomes the way others perceive his limitations became my way of honoring Kyle as well as discovering new dimensions of my own work as a teacher in special and general early childhood settings. By contributing to classroom resources about children with disabilities—students and families gain knowledge and insight into the child from a positive perspective.

The illustrations (not included in this study) were designed to provide a realistic example of leg braces (a peer drew the illustrations with my guidance) so that children would have accurate portrayal of what it’s like to wear braces, and recognize that despite these limitations, Ryan was able to complete the task (mostly) independently. Additionally, I was able to convey a message and value set that with determination, support and a positive attitude anything is possible.

For children with disabilities and physical limitations, as well as neurotypical peers with a lack of knowledge or perhaps students who are not exposed to inclusion or mainstreaming of any sort, reading literature like this can be effective, eye-opening and community building. Creating the story enabled me to share all I learned from Kyle, who was non-verbal, with a feeding tube and confined to a wheel chair. He came to camp with a smile on his face each day happy to go swimming with my support and to do art projects. Programs that include children with variations give them an opportunity to experience camp with their peers, and I was fortunate to work with this child who taught me the true meaning of happiness. In this program there were children with a range of abilities including autism, Down’s Syndrome as well as neurotypical
Brace yourself: Motor disabilities in children’s literature by Jillian Bober

children. The environment created by the staff was warm, welcoming and inclusive and the campers were visibly excited to return each day. Working for a program like this reinforced the fact that I was fulfilling a passion of mine each day and how as a teacher I’m a life long learner, continuing to learn from each child I interact with. Through teaching and coursework, I’ve been able to fortify my values and commitment to inclusion by encouraging students to be the best they can be. In my classroom, I work to assure a trusting community where each student can obtain their maximum education and potential regardless of physical or learning variations (Tomlinson, 1999). Through compelling narratives, teachers can create opportunities for meaningful dialogue, increasing acceptance of people with exceptionalities as part of community-building (at Haverim Tovim we begin the first week of school with the book Have You Filled a Bucket Today by Carol McLoud (2006). Students make buckets and gradually fill them with notes of appreciation for kind words or actions throughout the year. Using this book – and others like it - is a resource for promoting kindness, and the qualities of being a good friend).

As I reflect on the experience of writing and sharing “Brace yourself” I could not help but think of the positive changes this type of curriculum could have on schools. As educators it is important for us to focus on inclusion and by integrating books like the ones above, we open lines of communication with students and educate them about diverse student backgrounds. It is imperative while teaching social emotional curriculum to emphasize the importance of empathy towards others. In the field of early childhood education, there are now many books that can support these values but the lack of children’s literature accurately depicting children with disabilities needs to be addressed. As we come to acknowledge the importance of inclusion and diversity it is imperative that authors, educators and library specialists provide a variety of narratives and role models to accurately portray that everyone deserves equal opportunity.
V. Bibliography
V. Bibliography

A. References


Dwight, L. (1997). We can do it! New York: Star Bright Books


B. Additional resources:


*Cerebral Palsy Foundation*. See: http://yourcpf.org/
V. Appendices
V. Appendices

A. Student writing

Do you know anybody who has a difference like the child in the story?

I'm sort of EXSG.

How would you feel if you were Ryan?

Excited and wrote one of a metal.

How did the other students treat Ryan?

They cheered him well.
How would you feel if you were Ryan?

I would feel sad that I was different. And happy in a way.

How did the other students treat Ryan?

They were nice and made him feel good. But everyone is not like that.
Do you know anybody who has a difference like the child in the story?

Yes. There is a child named Braden who comes to our class every Thursday. He's really different. But he's fun to see.

How would you feel if you were Ryan?

If I were Ryan before the race I would be exited. I would also be nervous. I really like how the children cheered for Ryan on. It would make me feel really good.

How did the other students treat Ryan?

The other students treated Ryan really nicely. And they also helped him during the race.
B. Guiding questions & values glossary:

Here are prompts suggested by Lower School Director on engaging children for read-aloud:

Preview: “As I read the book think to yourself: “What am I learning about Ryan from the story?”
   1) What word/words would you do use to describe Ryan-why?
   2) What can we learn about Coach Sweetland from the story?
   3) What kind of friend is Joey? Would you want Joey as your friend? Why or why not?
   4) How would you feel that night if you were Ryan?
   5) What lesson does Ryan teach us?
   6) People have different disabilities/ limitations, how can we help them?
   7) Have you ever had to try really hard to achieve something?
   8) How would you feel if you were Ryan?
   9) Do you know anybody that has a difference like the child in the story?
  10) How did the other students treat Ryan?

Values glossary:

As a Jewish day school, Haverim Tovim uses terms drawn from modern Hebrew as well as sources from the rabbinic tradition. The terms noted as school values are therefore written in English transliteration, and pronounced as follows:

- chesed – KHEH – sed (kindness)
- hatmadah- hath- mah - DAH (Perseverance)
- Elu v’Elu –AY-lu veh AY-lu openness)

[additional information on Jewish values can be found on the Association of Jewish Libraries site: http://jewishlibraries.org/content.php?page=Jewish_Values_Finder_Selection_Criteria].
C. Special Olympics

Since 1968, Special Olympics has been providing opportunities for thousands of people with disabilities to compete and succeed in sports. Through this program people with intellectual disabilities are given the opportunity to participate in athletics and discover new strengths through collaborative games including group activities such as swimming, basketball and other activities, which lead to a feeling of accomplishment and victory. Worldwide there are over 500,000 participants in Special Olympics and the aim is for people to become educated about the stereotypes of people with disabilities; this is accomplished by forming teams of people both with and without intellectual disabilities. According to the organization website:

Special Olympics works to spread compassion and acceptance in a way that can unite the world. Our goal is to awaken everyone -- and every community -- to each person’s common humanity. This vision of inclusion starts at the local level. It is expanding on a global scale.

There is also a branch of Special Olympics for children under age eight, which focuses on activities with an emphasis on motor skills and general physical growth. This program benefits children’s social skills due to the team component. Special Olympics is now the “world’s largest public health organization for people with intellectual disabilities.” The overarching goal is to raise awareness about inclusion and that everyone can become healthier together.

Unified Sports

Unified Sports is a program of the Special Olympics. The program, which has reached upwards of 1.2 million people, gives students with a variety of special needs who are in elementary, middle and high school the opportunity to participate in activities and team sports with their peers throughout all four seasons. The teams are made up of members with and without intellectual disabilities - organized to be competitive and based on skill abilities. Because of this program, common biases or a lack of knowledge about inclusion and skill sets turn into beautiful bonding and formed friendships. Unified sports is now a part of “Special Olympics Unified Strategy for Schools”, which was founded in 2008 through the U.S. Department of Education.