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About the Journal

Founded in 2013, the Journal of Teacher Action Research (ISSN: 2332-2233) is a peer-reviewed online journal indexed with EBSCO that seeks practical research that can be implemented in Pre-Kindergarten through Post-Secondary classrooms. The primary function of this journal is to provide classroom teachers and researchers a means for sharing classroom practices.

The journal accepts articles for peer-review that describe classroom practice which positively impacts student learning. We define teacher action research as teachers (at all levels) studying their practice and/or their students' learning in a methodical way in order to inform classroom practice. Articles submitted to the journal should demonstrate an action research focus with intent to improve the author's practice.

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SOCIAL IMAGINATION PROJECT: FOSTERING EMPATHY IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS BY READING CHILDREN'S BOOKS FEATURING CHARACTERS WHO HAVE DISABILITIES

Shelly Furuness
Butler University

Kelli J. Esteves
Butler University

Abstract This teacher research case study investigated the impact of using children's books featuring school-aged characters with disabilities on the development of social imagination in pre-service teachers. The Social Imagination Project provides evidence for ways empathy is fostered. Themes that emerged include (a) perspective taking, (b) complex view of human development, (c) examination of assumptions leading to the development of professional identity, and (d) advocacy. These findings help teacher educators to support pre-service teachers in examining their own beliefs and biases while also examining educational and social inclusion. The study supports the view that social imagination and empathy building are at the heart of widening people's personal and professional frame of reference.

Keywords: teacher action research, empathy building, inclusive education, disabilities in literature

Introduction

Skills development and knowledge acquisition are necessary components for the education of competent teachers, but they are not sufficient—not if our goal is to prepare all those who teach for the complex demands of the educational arena. Those in teacher education have known for a long time what Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1996) explained, that "Becoming a teacher involves more than transposing teaching skills onto an already-established personal identity" (p. 65). As instructors in a teacher preparation program situated within a liberal arts university in the Midwest United States that was founded on the principles of diversity, equality, innovation, and access, we are committed to preparing teachers to examine their beliefs about educational and social inclusion.

Peter Johnston (2012) reminded us that "[S]ocial imagination is the foundation of civil society" (p. 72). We continue to regard the development of a strong sense of identity, of social

imagination, and of personal transformation as a means to a larger end—the empowerment of others (Freire, 1971). An important goal in our teacher preparation program is to develop the personal and professional identity and social imagination of teachers beyond what they may have previously imagined themselves or their roles to be, and in doing so we seek to expand how teachers may view their students. We believe, as Johnston (2012) stated, that "[T]eachers whose social imagination is well developed are likely to beget students with well-developed social imaginations" (p. 79). Social imagination and empathy building are at the heart of widening people's personal frame of reference. We explicitly seek to create a learning community that opens space for personal, individual transformation and empowerment while simultaneously inviting students to develop the capacity to do the same thing with their future students. As participants in such a community we engage in scholarship that supports teaching as inquiry, and we strive to model within our university classroom ways to connect theory with practice.

The Social Imagination Project is an examination of disability and ability primarily through the use of literary fiction. Students read a novel that features a protagonist with an exceptionality. They also read nonfiction accounts written by parents and caregivers who are raising children who have disabilities. The idea for the project came from our own teacher researcher questions and a commitment to a core value of our program for the appreciation of diversity and similarity. We wondered how a course in our teacher education program focused on learning theories and development for both typical and atypical learners, taken by every student in our college of education regardless of their teaching focus, and cotaught by a general education and special education faculty member, might be a place to examine the sociological principles of disabilities. We had noticed how people with disabilities were often held up as models of inspiration by our students. We wondered about the implications of this "good" intention versus the impact of that intention for teaching learners with disabilities. In making this an explicit part of the course, we sought to examine our assumptions together and to build a space where social imagination could be expanded without the fear of judgment. The Social Imagination Project was our vehicle for this exploration and evidence gathering. It helped us to discover whether reading books featuring school-aged characters with disabilities would foster social imagination and empathy and what evidence of that might look like for our pre-service teachers who are first beginning this work. As such, it led us to seek answers to the broad research question: Does reading books featuring school-aged characters with disabilities foster social imagination? And if so, what does evidence of social imagination look like for our pre-service teachers and how can the social imagination project be used to examine the sociological principles of disabilities in a foundational education course?

Literature Review

Power of Literacy Fiction. The idea that stories can have a profound impact on how people understand one another is not new. Decades of research have shown that stories change how we see the world (Chiaet, 2013; Morrison & Rude, 2002; Nikolajeva, 2013), and this is true when attempting to understand aspects of human diversity. In a series of five studies, Kidd and Castano (2013) gave participants excerpts from popular fiction, literary fiction, nonfiction, or

nothing to read and then administered a test to gauge the ability to infer another person's thoughts and emotions. Literary fiction was described as stories that focused on the psychology of characters and their relationships. Results showed that reading literary fiction, more so than not reading or the other genres included in the study, increased the ability to understand another's thoughts and emotions. In fact, "readers form relationships with fictional others through the use of social imagination as a part of the meaning-making process" (Lysaker & Tonge, 2013, p. 634). Lysaker described social imagination, as the term is used here, as the ability to infer the inner life of another person (Purdue News Service, 2016).

Practicing Empathy. A similar study showed that reading literary fiction provides training for the practicing of empathy in real-life situations along with the development of theory of mind, the understanding that others have perspectives that differ from one's own (Nikolajeva, 2013). This idea also was supported by Lysaker, who in a 2016 interview with Purdue News Service said that "empathy and social imagination feed into the larger idea that we have a human capacity for understanding each other and we ought to be developing that as a central part of our educational system" (Purdue News Service, para. #7). Nikolajeva pointed out that the development of empathy is gradual and can be intentionally developed by reading literary fiction.

Because empathy is a fundamental skill for educators, honing that skill in teacher education programs is time well spent. Morrison and Rude (2002) contended that reading literary fiction that portrays characters with disabilities is a more effective means of preparing educators to teach individuals with special needs than the use of textbooks alone. They explained that "literary accounts of children with disabilities have provided readers with a more complete view of the world in which a child lives and has allowed readers to experience the world of the child" (Morrison & Rude, 2002, p. 116). When exploring complex topics such as disability and ability, how families respond to those complexities, and the identification of assumptions, students might feel vulnerable. However, as Lysaker pointed out in the 2016 interview, "There's no consequence if you mess up." She went on to explain that "It's a safe place to have a reaction that you might not be proud of having in a real circumstance, and you can catch yourself, take a look at your own feelings and discuss them with others—especially if you have a great teacher and a great classroom" (Purdue News Service, para. 10). Peter Johnston (2012) linked social imagination to moral development and empathy and contended that "Perspective taking—mentally walking in another's mind—is a very effective way of reducing prejudice, because we can see more of ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves" (p. 86).

Replicating Lived Experience. Pre-service teachers benefit from understanding a child's life outside the classroom, including the complexities of peer and familial relationships. There is a direct relationship between this understanding and the Council for Exceptional Children's teacher preparation standards, which convey the importance of understanding how exceptionality, or disability, can interact with overall development and learning (Council for Exceptional Children, 2012). The examination of lived experiences such as these is difficult to convey through textbook readings. Reading literary fiction that includes a protagonist who is exceptional in some way, whether through an identified disability or another exceptionality,

affirmatively responds to the widely held belief that educators are more effective when they know their students. A way to know students is to attempt to understand their experiences.

While researchers prefer the term "exceptionality," we use "disability" throughout the article for the sake of clarity.

What Is the Social Imagination Project? In this project, education students are asked to read a novel that features a school-age protagonist with a disability. Students also read nonfiction book chapters written by parents or caregivers that address a child's family, culture, and other contextual factors. Students are then asked to reflect on their understanding of disability in a variety of ways. The curricular objective tied specifically to this project is for students to describe their understanding of development and individual differences to respond to the needs of individuals with disabilities. Students' attention is also drawn to the college's core value: "[Students] are challenged to examine their assumptions about other people, how children from diverse experiences learn, and reflect about the responsibilities of innovative educators."

To contextualize the Social Imagination Project, we begin by reminding students of the essential questions of the course: (a) How, when, and where do people learn? (b) How can we prepare every learner to thrive in a diverse and interdependent world? (c) What is the role of an educator, and how do history and politics affect the educational landscape(s)? And (d) What does professional behavior look like in a professional learning community?
Instructors then explain the content, process, and product related to the Social Imagination Project, which simultaneously models opportunities for differentiation. Excerpts from the assignment description are as follows:

- Content—What materials will you be using for the assignment?
    - As an exercise in both introspection and "social imagination," you will read fiction and nonfiction surrounding the topic of similarities and differences. Listening to/reading stories of exceptionality from multiple perspectives can help us gain insight into the human condition. As you read, try to "share the space" with the characters as an opportunity to empathize instead of sympathize.
- Process—How will you go about making sense of what you are learning?
    - Reflect on the stories you read, listened to, and viewed in your response journal. Use the guiding questions to frame your response: What did the readings teach you about students with exceptionalities? What did they teach you about the role(s)/perspectives of peers, families, and educators? What connections did you make between the reading and information discussed in class? Use your response journal to document your questions, connections, and thoughts on the reading. The format of your journal is left to your discretion. You will be reviewing your journal entries with your instructors and peers at various points throughout the course, and journal entries should be integrated into your artifact.
- Product—How will you demonstrate what you learned to your professors and peers?

- You will create an artifact that highlights lessons learned from the exercise in social imagination. Options include a collage, video, poem, song, playlist, Prezi presentation, poster, role play—or something else entirely. The project will culminate in a showcase of the artifacts. You will explain your artifact in a written narrative that will be available to your peers and professors during the gallery walk. The final product will be evaluated on both the artifact and written explanation.

The complete assignment description is provided to students in written format and explained in class.

The Text Set. The project is launched after the assignment is described with a series of book talks on each of the literary fiction books and the nonfiction chapters. Middle-grade and young-adult books are chosen in favor of books geared for an adult audience because they are high quality but tend to be more condensed, and they might be books students choose to read with their own students in the future. When selecting the books and nonfiction chapters for the text set, the following guiding questions were considered:

- Does the book not only feature a school-age protagonist with an exceptionality, but also examine peer and familial relationships?
- Is the protagonist portrayed realistically and respectfully?
- Did the book foster compassion and empathy in me when I read it?
- Does the story go beyond a cliched portrayal of the exceptionality?

Instructors also review the websites Disability in Kid Lit: https://disabilityinkidlit.com/ and Schneider Family Book Awards from the American Library Association (http://www.ala.org/awardsgrants/schneider-family-book-award) . In this way, we continually take into account books that provide thoughtful portrayal of characters with disabilities. Instructors take turns offering an overview of the plot of the fiction texts, sharing impressions the readings made on us and what others have shared with us about the book. A few examples of texts offered for student consideration include Sharon Draper's *Out of My Mind*, CeCe Bell's *El Deafo*, and R.J. Palacio's *Wonder*. After all fiction titles have been introduced, students are given time to discuss their preferences with classmates prior to checking out the books. Along with the literary fiction text, students are asked to read two chapters from nonfiction books that tell a caregiver's perspective of raising a child with a disability. Not all book chapters address specific disabilities, but students are asked to consider selecting a set of readings that represent diverse perspectives.

Students are given three weeks to read the selected fiction book and nonfiction chapters. During this time period, students are encouraged to check out a different book if their first choice does not resonate with them. Informal questioning before and after class and during breaks leads to casual discussion and also subtle reminders to complete the assignment.
Individual Reflections and Group Discussions of the Readings. Students are asked to reflect individually and through group discussion. They document their thoughts on the following prompts in written format in their response journals prior to the class discussion:

- What fiction book did you read? What nonfiction chapters did you read? What did the readings teach you about students with exceptionalities?
- What did the books teach you about the role(s)/perspectives of peers, families, and educators?
- What terminology was used for the exceptionality (if any)?
- In what ways did the stories emphasize similarities rather than differences among characters with and without exceptionalities?
- How are aspects of culture portrayed? Consider how financial conditions, social settings, race, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity may have affected the character.
- Was the plot believable? Explain.

In class, students are intentionally grouped first with students who read the same fiction book and then with students who read different books in order to share the stories with one another and discuss broad themes. The benefit of multiple readings and discussions of those readings is that it reinforces that the perspective of disability is that of the writer; it is grounded in his or her observations and understandings of disability. Small-group discussions are followed up with a whole class discussion that highlights insights that came out of the conversations.

The Artifact and Gallery Walk. Students are asked to create an artifact that highlights the lessons they learned from the readings, individual reflections, and class discussions. Examples of products include visual art, poetry, performance art, multimedia projects, or any other form of creative expression. A written explanation accompanies the artifact, as one may find in a museum or gallery. Instructors transform the classroom space into a gallery, and artifacts are showcased. Students walk around the gallery to view their peers' work. They are invited to leave feedback on sticky notes next to the artifacts. In a separate task, toward the end of the semester, students are also asked to reflect on their understanding of the related course objectives.

Methodology

Teacher research was defined by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) as "systematic, intentional inquiry by teachers, [which] makes accessible some of the expertise of teachers and provides both the university and school communities with unique perspectives on teaching and learning" (p. 1). Historically, teacher research as a methodology (re)positions teachers as both insider and expert. We, the researchers, use this methodology in our cotaught course as an intentional model for pre-service teachers to recognize the broader methodology of teacher research as a powerful tool for generating new knowledge about their practice within their own classroom. This case study, bounded in the study of this singular assignment over time across multiple iterations and sections of our shared cotaught course, was an intensive inquiry into our teaching practices in our natural context from both the etic and emic perspective, because as co-teachers and participants we were examining our own practice as well as each other's. We began with an assumption that the assignment could be a helpful, safe, and intentional scaffold for examining underlying assumptions about difference and shifting perspective from

sympathetic to empathic in regard to the differences examined. Institutional review board approval was obtained for us to study achieved data collected across multiple years of our course. Consistent with the overall framework of our teacher preparation program's beliefs in learning as an inquiry process and a social construction of knowledge, this project reflects an interpretivist view with the purpose of description and explanation (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010).

Data Sources, Collection, and Analysis. Purposeful sampling was used, as we examined only the work of participants in our cotaught course sections. The primary data collection instrument was the researcher(s) who were also the teachers of the course. Interpretational analysis of case study data was based on principles consistent with teacher research methodology and grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), which involve coding into categories and continuing until saturation. Data was collected over five academic years, starting in January 2015 and ending in May 2019. A variety of data points were used to compare and contrast information from a multitude of sources and perspectives (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). Evidence from student work was analyzed from the spring semesters in 2015 and 2016. Course evaluations were reviewed from 2015 and 2016. Reflections were made by the co-teachers throughout the month of May 2019 regarding programs and projects that were related to the research in the time frame of January 2015 to May 2019. Archival records were reviewed, and field note observations were recorded from our coteaching semesters. Researchers also consulted with a former student who had taken a previous version of the course but who had not done the Social Imagination Project. This former student was consulted due to her perspective as a graduate of our program, her rating as a highly effective practitioner, and graduate coursework in the development of social imagination. All data sources were analyzed for emergent themes and patterns within student responses and articulated thought processes. We found themes in the data, developed a set of categories, and then used these categories to construct a theory that we applied to the broad research question: Does this project foster social imagination? Credibility and trustworthiness of these themes were arrived at through the constant comparison of the five years of data in the field, member checking, and triangulation (Creswell, 2003; MacLean & Mohr, 1999; Shagoury-Hubbard & Power, 2003). Applicability of findings provide a thick description of the case to help readers make their own judgments about transferability.

Results

Analysis of the data began with the review of student work. Specifically, we looked at the Social Imagination Project narratives that were submitted along with the conceptual artifacts. Next, we reviewed responses in students' journals, narrowing our focus to a question related to a theme that began to emerge from the initial review. To build familiarity and make further connections with the data, we reflected on the two semesters of courses together and documented our observations, recalling student behaviors and contextualizing them with the direction those students ended up taking in their educational and career paths. Throughout this process, four themes emerged from the data. We also reviewed course evaluations to see if comments were reflective of the themes that emerged. Based on our coteaching reflections, we identified relevant observations of student behaviors as well as "curricular ripples," which

we defined as projects and programming that arose during the time period of study that related to the Social Imagination Project.

Identified Themes. Four themes emerged: (a) Perspective Taking, (b) Complex View of Human Development, (c) Examination of Assumptions Leading to the Development of Professional Identity, and (d) Advocacy. Given that one of these themes related to the examination of assumptions and the development professional identity, we reviewed student responses to the following question in their journals: When you can identify within yourself a bias against a person or a particular group of people, what is your professional responsibility to ensure that all individuals thrive?

Many quotes from student work were cross-coded for Perspective Taking and Complex View of Human Development. Additionally, there was cross-coding between Examination of Assumptions Leading to the Development of Professional Identity and Advocacy.

Discussion

Perspective Taking. The ability to take another's perspective, or as Johnston (2012) puts it, "mentally walking in another's mind . . . see[ing] more of ourselves in the other and the other in ourselves" (p. 86), is a key aspect to the development of one's social imagination. A review of social imagination project narratives showed a solid theme of perspective taking. Students noted how the storytelling format was immersive and enabled them to gain a more nuanced understanding of ability and disability.

> The style of writing really did a lot for me as a reader to become one with [the character] and to empathize with her struggles as well as her triumphs. I feel as though I have awakened a new depth of understanding with students on the Autism spectrum. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

> Not only did this book allow me to see INTO his life, it allowed me to see FROM his life; from his perspective. I got to see the world through [the character's] eyes, and realize that no matter how different people's cultures are, people all have one thing in common: we are all people. Just people, trying to make a life for ourselves and our families and trying to do our best. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

If we are to use literary fiction to provide training for the practicing of empathy in real-life situations along with the development of theory of mind (Nikolajeva, 2013), then we need to give pre-service teachers the opportunity to practice empathy.

Complex View of Human Development. Pre-service teachers need to develop knowledge about a child's family, culture, and other significant contextual factors and how they interact with that individual's unique strengths and challenges (Council for Exceptional Children, 2012). This complex understanding of development is enhanced by perspective taking. Students documented the storytelling format as an effective means for conveying this complexity.

> The novel showed how it feels to have a sibling with a disability and how it impacts their life as they grow up. It also taught me about the role of peers and how great of an impact people's reactions have on a person. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

> Reading and hearing the perspectives of parents of exceptional students opened my mind to the challenges families face and the joy that they are able to find despite adversity. It has also shown me that educators not only accommodate and support their exceptional students, but serve as a role model to other students in accepting and uplifting special students as well. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

The latter student comment reflects a key shift in the pre-service teachers' identity development. The comment reflects not only that new knowledge was gained from the reading of the story, but that knowledge is an impetus for active agency in being a "role model . . . in accepting and uplifting special students." This mirrors the message Peter Johnston expressed in *Opening Minds* (2012), which is a required text for the course. He stated that "As with most other aspects of apprenticeships, modeling productive social behavior is useful, but it is most effective when accompanied by our logic, and it is particularly effective when that logic emphasizes the effects on other people" (p. 87).
We also noted that students saw complexities of disability and ability in themselves. At least one student sought out disability services during the course. Other students commented on how they had not realized that they, or a family member, had a disability.

> I have always had the perception that I was different from people with "disabilities" and I never explored the idea that I too had something that disabled me. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

This examination of the complexity of human development enabled us to have class conversations about "othering" and the ways in which we use language that separates people into "us and them" categories. We noticed some undertones of "othering" language in some students' written work and class conversations, although not enough to label it as a theme. And while the "othering" language was troubling to see in hindsight, it was also important to remember that this was only an introduction to the process of deeply examining these questions. Bringing deeply held assumptions to the surface and wrestling with the "right" language is an important part of transformative learning, as we saw in the next theme.

Examination of Assumptions Leading to the Development of Professional Identity. Students can empathize with characters in the book and understand the complexity of human development as it pertains to disability, but what does that mean for them as educators? Students commented on how this project led them to examine their assumptions and how that has led to further development of their professional identity.

> My previous assumptions about the lives and abilities of students with exceptionalities were challenged directly by what I read in these novels. I learned that a disability does not limit the potential of a child, rather the environment and people around them do. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

> I know of several times where I jumped to conclusions about someone or made a hasty judgment and ended up regretting it as soon as I got to know the person and their story. These accounts have also helped me see the possibility in every situation, and rather than gravitate towards the sweet cuddly kids that anyone can teach, I've enjoyed seeing how I can help the ones with different kinds of exceptionalities and see if we can take on their life as an exciting challenge, rather than an ordeal we have to struggle through. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

> Before coming to [this university] I didn't really take into account the opinion of others, I would listen but wouldn't really consider where they were coming from. The college of education here at [this university] tries to have students realize this quote "[Students] are challenged to examine their assumptions about other people, how children from diverse experiences learn, and reflect on the responsibilities of innovative educators." After reading these books, I found it really interesting that I was finally seeing things through the eyes of other people. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

After this theme began to emerge, we were interested in student journal entries, specifically pertaining to one question: When you can identify within yourself a bias against a person or a particular group of people, what is your professional responsibility to ensure that all individuals thrive? Students were asked to write this journal entry at the end of the semester, about eight weeks after the completion of the Social Imagination Project.

> My professional responsibility is to make sure each of my students have the resources that they need to get to the place that they want to be at in order to accomplish their goals. I believe that by practicing differentiation in my classroom and allowing my students to explore themselves and truly discover who they are and how they learn, all of the individuals in my class will thrive in some way. I know that not every student will have the same goals and not every student will want to learn the same way and that it will be hard, but I believe that my role as a teacher is to ensure that every student has what they need to succeed in their own way and I will do what I think is necessary to accomplish that. (student entry, Response Journal)

> I have had personal experiences as a learner where I have been treated differently than others and it has been a bad experience. Since math was not my favorite subject in middle school my math teacher had me sit with other students that also did not enjoy math. He made us feel as if we were not as important and that we were dumb. This made us be unsuccessful in the class and has made me and many other students that went through the class not enjoy math as a subject in general. As a teacher I will have to

> be careful not to make any student feel as if they are being discriminated against. Each child must feel as if they are equal in every single way. (student entry, Response Journal)
>
> I have a personal bias toward underachieving students. Yes, I want to help them as much as I can, but I think I automatically see them as a burden, rather than people who can add to the class. It is my personal responsibility to ensure that all individuals thrive and I take that very seriously, but I think I naturally enjoy being around smart, self-motivated people. I do not see this as too much of a problem for my future as an educator, but it will be something I will always have to think about when teaching. One day, I would like to get involved with education administration, and this is where I could see this bias being a legitimate problem. When making policies, I would have to be very careful to make sure I was putting them into place so that everyone would benefit, not just my idea of my students. (student entry, Response Journal)

We see the continual examination of bias as a critical aspect of professional identity development, especially in light of the bias the last student comment reveals. Again, however, it was critically important that this deeply held belief and bias be brought to the surface within the context of this introductory course and wrestled with nonjudgmentally, because it allowed us to individualize scaffolds for this student in later coursework, where possible, within his program. The dialogic and relational aspects of the course (and overall program) allowed him to continue to examine his assumptions and "to have a reaction that you might not be proud of having in a real circumstance, and you can catch yourself, take a look at your own feelings and discuss them with others—especially if you have a great teacher and a great classroom" (Lysaker, 2016, para. 9).

Advocacy: Carol Ann Tomlinson and Michael Murphy offered the following definition of empathy: "seeking to both understand a person's condition from their perspective and understand the needs of others, with the aim of acting to make a difference in responding to those needs or building on the positives" (Tomlinson & Murphy, 2018, p. 23). This definition, brought to our attention by our colleague and former student, connects beliefs with action. Many quotes from student work were coded for both Examination of Assumptions Leading to the Development of Professional Identity and Advocacy. The intent to respond to needs based on a new level of understanding was evident in student comments.

> I went into this with the mentality of "Oh, no another project" and to come out of it with a better understanding of not only children with special needs and their families, but also how I want my career as an educator to proceed. I want to be, and will be accepting, accommodating, encouraging, caring, and willing to "wage war . . . even if it gets bloody" for my student's (Brodey, [2007], p. 126) just as Drusilla Belman did for her special needs kid. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)
>
> Unfortunately, I was one of those people that believed that children with special needs wouldn't be a part of my area of expertise. That I would not really need to be concerned. In fact, I have never really seen that part of teaching when I was imagining

> myself as an educator. It was definitely a wake-up call, this class and these books. I don't want to sound melodramatic, but I truly have learned how necessary it is that I take the education of these children with complete seriousness, because they are valued by loving parents and deserve an equal education with general [education] students. It is my job to help all students and that involves accommodating by compromise and varied teaching styles, to not be egocentric and ask "What does the student really need?" My poem was my journey from where I thought I needed to be to where I actually need to be as a teacher. (student reflection, Social Imagination Project)

This connection between themes is reminiscent of Linda Sue Park's TEDx Talk called *Can a Children's Book Change the World?* (2015), where she explains the power of empathy to ignite engagement and how readers who are led to act can change the world. Another example of readers being led to act is a project that a colleague developed based on the Social Imagination Project called Empathy and Inclusivity: Pass it On. The colleague obtained grant money to purchase multiple copies of books from the Social Imagination Project book list and inserted large stickers inside each book. On the insert, readers were prompted to sign their name after they had read the book, share thoughts on how the story affected them, and then pass the book on to another reader to make a contribution to the insert.

In our coteaching reflections, we noted that comparing student comments from their first or second year in their teacher preparation program to their development as graduating seniors was quite remarkable. For example, the student who noted the bias against low-achieving students during this introductory course took seriously our challenge to get curious about why a student might be underachieving. The student graduated with multiple job offers, including opportunities to work in highly selective schools with high-achieving students, but chose, instead, to work with "struggling" middle-grade students taking remedial courses. Another student noted that a subsequent course focusing on special education and using storytelling to help pre-service teachers understand the rights of students with special needs ignited a passion for advocacy. The student noted in a capstone project that "This class would make me a lifelong advocate for all students and their rights to get a fair education in an unrestrictive environment" (Student Capstone Presentation).

Implications

Ripple Effects: More Reading, Related Projects, and Programming. During our coteaching reflections, we noted that some students in each semester read well beyond the required reading list. It was clear that they had developed a passion for reading books in this subgenre by the number of books they checked out from our class library. Noting this interest, one of the researchers developed a related assignment in a children's literature course that asked students to identify a passion area and create a text set related to the interest. The other researcher, for a course focused on developmentally appropriate instructional practices, developed an assignment utilizing young adult fiction set within a school context to practice observation protocols for case study research.

In 2016, a course was developed by one of the researchers aimed at the use of art and relationship building to redefine disability. In this course, students across the university create art in an inclusive environment at a community-based nonprofit organization. The course builds on themes of perspective taking, a complex view of human development, and personal identity development by exploring what it means to be exceptional.

Our intention when developing this project was to build the social imagination of pre-service teachers so they would better be able to understand and meet the complex needs of students with disabilities. Nearly five years later, we set out to discover whether the project does, indeed, do just that. Based on our analysis of data, comparing emergent themes to the research question, we have found that pre-service teachers have grown in their ability to empathize and have a more fully developed social imagination.

Conclusion

In concluding our inquiry on this particular assignment, we are hopeful and optimistic. The development of social imagination is a worthwhile endeavor. We have found that using children's books featuring characters with disabilities does foster social imagination. The Social Imagination Project, we believe, may deploy the lens of disability and ability as a cognitive tool: when we learn to intentionally interrupt beliefs and assumptions in one area, we build the skills and capacity to do that in other areas too. This inquiry has influenced our own work, expanding our view of framing new assignments in other classes and also influencing students to develop professional growth goals beyond curriculum requirements, as this assignment allows an easy entry point to expand social imagination to other areas like cultural responsiveness as well.

The Social Imagination Project supports students in their ability to take perspective, to understand the complexity of human development, to examine assumptions and deeply held beliefs—even ones you might not be proud of in retrospect—in a productive way, and to shift sympathetic views of the "other" to more empathetic views. Ultimately, the goal is to move that empathy to action.

As we researched and discussed this project with students and colleagues, it became apparent that firsthand accounts and nonfiction written by school-age children would be a valuable addition to the text set requirements. Adults with disabilities who write or talk about their childhood would help us reach the objectives of the project. The researchers plan to build a list of readings and other media to supplement the existing texts.

In closing, we remain committed to our goal of developing the personal and professional identity and social imagination of teachers beyond what they may have previously imagined themselves or their roles to be. We remain committed to preparing teachers to examine their beliefs about educational and social inclusion and to expanding how teachers may view their students. We continue to regard a strong sense of identity and social imagination as a means of agency and personal transformation. We know that social imagination and empathy building are at the heart of widening people's personal frame of reference. We see empathy as the

ability to sit with another person despite your own discomfort. We know that we cannot have an empathic, inclusive classroom if we are not in community, and we cannot build that community if we exclude those with differences or if we exclude from the conversation those who haven't yet had the opportunity to widen their personal frames of reference.

About the Authors

Shelly Furuness, Ph.D.is an Associate Professor of Education for the College of Education at Butler University and a former middle school ELA teacher. She teaches courses related to learning theory, adolescent literature, content-specific methods for middle-secondary classrooms, and curriculum design. Her research focuses on investigating curricular dilemmas and problems of practice, developmentally appropriate pedagogy, teacher socialization, and dialogic and relationship-oriented pedagogy. She can be reached by email at sfurunes@butler.edu or on Twitter @ShellyFuruness

Kelli Esteves, Ed.D. is a professor of special education for the College of Education at Butler University. She teaches courses on topics related to special education, developmental theory, and children's literature. Her research focuses on inclusive practices within K-12 educational settings and multi-tiered systems of support for students. Prior to her career in higher education, she worked as a public school special education teacher. Email: kesteves@butler.edu

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