DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 366 003 CS 214 184

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TITLE Teaching Human Diversity in the Middle School.
PUB DATE Nov 93
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (83rd, Pittsburgh, PA, November 17-22, 1993). For related papers, see CS 214 183-186.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; Cooperative Learning; *Cultural Differences; *Disabilities; Elementary School Students; Enrichment Activities; Grade 6; Intermediate Grades; *Middle Schools; Public Schools; Urban Education; *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS *Collaborative Writing; Education for All Handicapped Children Act; Kids on the Block Puppets; *Middle School Students; New York (Buffalo); Piaget (Jean)

ABSTRACT

Focusing on the culture of students with disabilities allows teachers to add another real-world dimension to the multi-cultural atmosphere of their classrooms. While Public Law 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act) legislates what opportunities must exist for the differently able, volunteer program such as "Kids on the Block" encourage acceptance of those with disabilities. Using the Banraku style of puppetry, "Kids on the Block" brings four-foot-high puppets into the classroom and creates a climate that allows children to be more open about disability. After the introductory lesson presented by this volunteer group, sixth-graders at School #74 in Buffalo, New York, read and then wrote about the campers with disabilities depicted in Ron Jones's book "The Acorn People." Students read, took notes, and composed their summary of the book as a group. Addressing the issue of understanding persons with disabilities is not part of the English Curriculum per se, but it provides productive opportunities for group writing and for appreciation of diversity. (SAM)

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We all have diverse classrooms. There is a current trend to move away from grouping our students according to ability, gender, race, or culture, in an attempt to create a multi-cultural atmosphere more like the 'real' world. My presentation will address an aspect of classroom diversity that educators sometimes neglect; that is the culture of students with disabilities. At School #74 we tried to teach to a better understanding and appreciation of this culture through one of our writing projects. To establish a context for how this worked, I will first make some comments regarding Public Law 94-142, and a volunteer program called Kids on the Block.

It has been almost twenty years since Public Law 94-142 was legislated as part of the rehabilitation act, to mainstream students with disabilities. Although educators continue to debate exactly how to accomplish this, at the most basic level we need to teach children to appreciate people who are different. The key word is appreciate. It isn't enough to teach our students to accept, or be tolerant of people with differences, because these words somehow smack of prejudice in themselves. We should be able to teach our students that they are fortunate to be given the opportunity to have someone with a difference in their classroom.

How is this done? Jean Piaget writes how children need to be brought to the "teachable moment." To the moment where their defenses are down, to where they are feeling open to new information, and not threatened by it. This is what a program called Kids On The Block seeks to accomplish. Using the Banraku style of puppetry, these four foot

high puppets come into the classroom and create a climate that allows children to be more open about disability. In a 45 minute program, the puppets perform several scripts that clarify misunderstandings, and allow questions to be asked to the puppets about the variety of disabilities presented.

Mark Riley is a character puppet with cerebral palsy. He sits in a wheelchair, and is often asked after his script, "Why do you talk funny?" and "What games do you play?" He is also asked, "How do you sleep at night? In a regular bed, or does your mom just throw a blanket over you in that wheelchair?" A lot of students seem to think that people with disabilities are literally confined to their wheelchairs. They hear this all the time on the television and in the newspaper, and believe that somehow or another, they cannot get out of that chair.

Intellectually the students know that the foam and velour puppet is not real, but emotionally they are able to believe in that character. The puppets build a bridge between the world of disability, and the world of non-disabled people. This bridge is non-threatening. The puppets have a sense of openness and whimsy, that allows students who feel threatened to talk about these things a vehicle for sharing. They provide practice for the child in the classroom to ask some very difficult questions to the character, so that they can then establish a relationship with a real person. Children begin to see a person with a disability as a person first, with a disability secondary to that person.

The need to bring our students to this "teachable moment" persists because they need to be taught to accept and appreciate differences. In many instances they are taught just the opposite. Parents, the child's

first educator, are often fearful themselves about persons with disabilities and can inadvertently transmit that fear to their children. Imagine the confusion a child must feel when she is scolded for her curiosity when "caught" looking at a person with a disability. When we say to our children, "Don't stare, don't look, and don't ask questions," we make an assumption that in a child's mind the person with the difference is neutral to them.

Lawrence Kohlberg, in his discussion about the hierarchy of values, argues that a child's perception of difference does not remain neutral, but that children learn to discriminate both in a positive and negative way. Adults must teach children that people with differences are positive, valuable people. Children will assume that by us not teaching them the positive, the negative must be true.

Kids On The Block is introductory in nature, and works mostly to set the tone. We can intensify this experience by inviting a person with a disability to come in and talk to the class. We can also incorporate literature that has persons with a disability as protagonists. The latter is what we did in the School #74 project.

At School #74, the UB instructors approached the topic of human diversity by introducing the students to campers with disabilities in Ron Jones's book The Acorn People. Although the book is short, 79 pages in total, we decided to concentrate on a three page excerpt (which you will find in the handout). Despite the abbreviated length, the selected passage was filled with vivid description of the campers' physical and mental conflict. This, coupled with the subject matter, provided the instructor and students with a wealth of material to discuss and write about.

We introduced the assignment to the class as a mystery, because we wanted the students to draw inferences from what they read. Next, the class broke up into small groups of four or five, each led by an instructor. Because the reading was advanced for the age group, the instructor read the passage aloud within the group while the students followed in their own copy of the text.

During my reading I paused many times. At points the students asked literal questions to clarify information: "Why are they climbing a mountain using seats and wheels? Are they riding bikes?" and "How come some of the campers are being carried?" At other times I asked the students interpretive questions to check for understanding: "What words does the author use to tell us about the trail? Do you think you would want to climb this mountain?" "Why do you suppose Thomas didn't want to be carried?" and "Based on his actions, what can you tell me about Spider's personality?" Working together with the students, I tried to create a climate whereby questions were expected and encouraged.

On the surface level, we realized that the story was about a group of campers, self-dubbed the "Acorn People," who were in the final stage of climbing a mountain. Our job was to determine what else was happening. Based on what we read, what clues did the author provide to tell us more about these campers? What character traits did they possess that made them unique? What dilemmas did they face, and how did the campers overcome them? Did each of the campers react differently to the same problem? Why?

Because of the difficulty of the reading, I decided to increase the time working as a group. We used the first day to read, take notes about the characters' personality, and ask questions. This synergy

allowed us to work with each others' ideas when we discussed the work and made inferences. It was crucial that we write good, intelligent notes, I explained, as it would help us when it came time to compose cur story summary.

At our second meeting we were prepared to write. To start the session, I asked my group to tell me in their own words what happened in the story. Referring to their notes, the students successfully summarized what we had previously discussed, occasionally adding bits of personal commentary. Comments included, "It seems scary to me" and "They climbed the mountain to show they can do things just like we can." After a short discussion about the central theme and some specific points, it was time to organize our ideas and write.

I told my group at the onset of the lesson that we would work together writing one story summary. By engaging each of the students in the process of using notes to write, I hoped they would learn how to properly organize a paper. This collaborative approach, or writing partnership, offered the students insight into how to effectively transfer the thoughts and ideas in their minds into an intelligent paper.

Beginning a paper is tough to do, for good writers and poor writers alike. I modeled the first sentence for the group by saying, "Let's start the paper by telling the title of the book, and name of the author." Then I wrote the first sentence. Next I asked the question, "Where did the story take place?" The students answered, "On a mountain..." "On Lookout Mountain..." "In the Santa Cruz Mountains..." From the students' responses, we formulated the second sentence by consolidating the information and the writing and conferencing continued from there.

In their previous writing assignments in the project the students often wrote short, partial responses. It was during this class I realized the students did not have difficulty originating thought, but they struggled when it came time to write their ideas into a structured form. For example, many times ideas were offered to include in the summary that were not necessarily pertinent to the paragraph being worked on. These ideas were noted, however, so that we could go back and possibly use them later. This was helpful because when we hit a writer's block we simply returned to our notes and gained new direction. The students learned that note taking was a useful tool because it made writing easier.

Writing partnership allowed the student to make sense of a story that at first seemed an insurmountable reading task. In addition, the nature of the reading called for the application of the students' interpretive skills, allowing for personal ownership. This collaborative effort worked well, because the students were willing, gregarious participants.

Because we worked as a group, the final copy showed little variation from student to student. Based on the main ideas and feeling derived from the passage, however, individual titles for the summary were telling of what the students took from the assignment. In the course of the lesson the campers with disabilities became, The Heroic Handicapped Inventors, and All Brave Boys. Some students used longer, active titles like, Everybody Was Trying To Help Everybody, and How Six Courageous Boys Got Up Lookout Mountain. There were some simple, yet creative titles: Don't Rib On Them and Good Morning Mountain Top. Perhaps the students with the following titles thought more of the

capabilities of people with disabilities: Overcoming Adversity, Courage In Action and I Give Them Credit. My favorite title from this section is one I feel encapsulates the theme: On The Inside They Weren't Handicapped.

Addressing the issue of appreciating persons with disabilities is not part of the English curriculum per se, but under Public Law 94-142 it should be. We can legislate all we want. We can legislate ramps, full employment, fair housing treatment, and non-discrimination in jobs, but we cannot legislate attitude change. Not even the president can sign a law that instantaneously turns people who have prejudice and fear about people with differences, into being open and accepting people. The issue of attitude change is something that ought to be taught in the classroom.

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Excerpt form Ron Jones' The acorn People

Read the following paragraphs from The Acorn People by Ron Jones. Tell what you think is happening and describe the people in the story.

After our succession of ceremonious starts and stops, we reached the final grade to the summit. We had covered over two-and-a-half miles. The final half mile looked straight up. More forbidding than the incline, however, was the deterioration of the trail. It simply stopped. The final grade was a hillside of slate rock and loose gravel. There would be no way to pull or push the chairs up this. The wheels simply spun around for lack of traction. Spider called this place "Desperation," but no one laughed. Dominic suggested, "How about us trying to carry everyone?" Thomas nixed the idea, "Not me, I'm not going up there on someone's back." Aaron had a similar plan, "I'll watch." Spider and Benny were talking wildly about a movie they saw in which climbers used ropes and things. During our deliberation Martin had moved several feet up the hill without our noticing. He called down to us, "Hey, you guys, it's easy." Martin was sitting down, facing downhill. By moving his legs under him in a squat position and then pushing back, he edged up the hill in this sitting posture. He looked like he was rowing a boat. Only instead of rowing across water he was literally rowing up the hill on his bottom. Using legs and arms in an accordion fashion, he made steady progress. Benny was delighted, "Martin, you're amazing." Spider added to the compliment, "Make sure that man gets the mountain cross." Thomas and Aaron were still doubtful. Leaving their wheelchairs was not an easy thing to do.

After a long debate, and several demonstrations by Martin, we decided to make the ascent. Dominic sat against the hill and I placed Spider in his lap. Using belt buckles and safety straps from the wheelchairs I tied the two together. Dominic tried a few rows up the hill. It worked. Spider strapped to Dominic's stomach gave both of them the opportunity to look down the hill as they inched upward. It also freed Dominic's legs and arms for the hingelike movement and balance necessary to squeeze up the hill and not slip back. Benny was next in line. He wanted to try it by himself. In a trial effort he worked his way up the hill and right out of his pants. At his insistence we tied a pillow from one of the chairs to his butt. He was ready. With his strength he just might be able to drag his body the distance. Martin and Aaron were next. Martin's confidence helped Aaron. In a sitting position Martin shaped his body and legs into a lap. I gently placed Aaron against Martin and bound them together. Thomas and I were at the end of the ladder. I sat on the ground in front of Thomas and pulled him first out of the chair and onto me. We twisted and rotated until both of us were comfortable. Then tied ourselves together.

Like a caterpillar we edged our way up the slate. The loose rock gave and slipped into pockets that could be used as footholds. Our trail looked like a smooth slide bordered by tractor-like gouges. I thought to myself how a hiker someday would discover our tracks and the Santa Cruz Mountains would have evidence of its very own Bigfoot. Martin's invention was marvelous. Who would have thought of going up hill backward, sitting on our bottoms? We moved in a syncopated rhythm. First the legs pushing against the hill, followed quickly by a push with both hands. We would stop to rest and then continue. (Observing the valley floor below us, we saw the tree line slipping beneath our vision, aware that we could now see valleys moving away from our vantage point like huge green waves.) At two o'clock, according to Spider, we reached the top of Lookout Mountain. He gently gave the mountain one of his necklaces. Not the act of a conqueror, but a friend. We had done it.