

Disability is Not Destiny

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INTRODUCTION

“Everybody is a Star.” The title of a classic song by Sly and the Family Stone explains an essential truth that many in the educational field have yet to realize. The special education students—my students—not only face challenges daily in the classroom environment but also outside of that setting. In addition to coping with academic frustrations, many students harbor issues of low self-esteem and alienation from the larger school culture and from society as a whole. These feelings often result in negative and inappropriate behaviors that only serve to exacerbate the students’ current difficulties.

Through the study of literature utilizing a multitude of venues, a healing for those feeling estrangement at any level can begin to occur. The students can begin to identify with and become part of that story, novel, poem, play, or song if that particular medium speaks specifically to them. How to accomplish this task is certainly not an easy exercise that can simply be done from following the daily lesson plans script. It becomes necessary for the instructor to be totally familiar with and aware of the student audience. Knowing what modality is appropriate in what setting is crucial and may even be the key to success or failure with the unit.

The need to find the appropriate materials that are both relevant to the course requirements as well as to the student is critical. Many students have never experienced an in depth study of any form of literary works. The possibilities that are available to bridge the isolation that must certainly exist in these circumstances are there to be explored and discussed. Failure and the feelings of inadequacy that are often a by-product of their situation, unfortunately becomes a part of their daily existence. Academic deficiencies, in fact, define them since a mandated label must be applied to them in order to quantify their handicap for teaching purposes.

STRATEGIES

The theme of hidden or covert talents in individuals in various forms of literature will be explored. Also, the students will complete exercises involving their experiences with alienation. I am not certain that my students recognize alienation as a problem in society or for themselves. If that way of life is all they have ever known, I feel they should be aware of options that do exist. They do not have to constantly be an outsider, unless they chose to. I don’t want them to view alienation as an avoidable sentence.

I have chosen literary pieces that I feel will be both of interest to the student as well as being on a reading level that would not intimidate their limited reading skills. This unit is structured to be a lesson that will be viewed by the students as both meaningful and practical. The material I

have chosen is varied in form and in style. These works include poems, a play, a film, songs, and a short story. The emphasis will be on the content and the message that is meant to be sent.

The themes of all the material have a common thread of individuals being on the outside of what society views as the normative culture. By examining the role of the outsider” and the methodologies that are used for personal validation, one can perhaps introspectively view his own situation more objectively. The intent is for students not to feel isolated in their feelings of alienation that most certainly must exist on some level for them. The realization that individuals can be perceived as outsiders for various reasons will also be explored. By going beyond the comfort zone that has been established by these students, a larger view of the meaning of alienation can be raised. This is the main reason I chose a variety of works that include characters and settings that are not homogeneous. By viewing unlike characters in their situations the student will be forced to dig deeper into their psyche and push themselves more. This is after all one of the main reasons for education.

Raisin in the Sun

The main text studied will be *Raisin in the Sun*. This play by Lorraine Hansberry examines the difficulties of a young African-American man who wishes to rise above his so-called station in life. He has dreams which he feels no can comprehend, not even his own mother. His desire to succeed despite adverse circumstances leads him to make a disastrous decision that nearly costs him his family and perhaps more important, his soul. The character of Walter Lee Younger is not permanently grounded in the segregated world of 1950’s Chicago. Everyone, regardless of circumstances, hungers to succeed, but there are wise and unwise ways to achieve one’s dream. It can be said that perhaps the individual’s dream itself is flawed. This point also can be studied and debated by the students.

One reason this play was my choice centers on a character I feel most of my students can relate to. The special education student I serve is primarily an African American male who reads between the second and fifth grade level. The challenge daily is to find age appropriate material that does not cause frustration to the reader. A play is always best absorbed by being read aloud. This will also help to ensure the entire class does at least experience the play at least on an auditory level.

I feel this play cannot and should not be studied in isolation since there exists other literary expressions that address similar themes. Also included in the unit is the movie “Shine” which tells of a young Australian pianist, David Helfgott, who is dominated unmercifully by the father who wishes him become the very best. The son’s return from

a devastating mental breakdown highlights his eventual healing. This sentiment is shared by Roger Ebert’s review of that movie. “...I gather, for us to marvel at the way the human spirit can try to heal itself.” (Chicago Sun Times, 11/11/96). I selected two very different literary expressions because the problems often faced in this domain are universal, not unique to one

gender or culture. In understanding this essential point, hopefully the student can begin to encounter an authentic point of view of life. In addition to the play and film, short stories, poems and songs in this genre will be examined.

The character of Walter Lee in *Raisin in the Sun* brings to the table all the hopes and dreams of a downtrodden and desperate figure in need of accomplishing something positive to even survive. His job as a chauffeur only serves to reinforce in him the commonality of his profession. His life in a two-bedroom apartment with a community bath also pushes the point home of the futility of his life. Finally, living with his mother and sister, as well as his wife and son who sleeps on the living room sofa, completes the seemingly hopelessness of his dismal situation.

Walter Lee has dreams, big dreams to own his own business, a liquor store, despite the obvious objections of his deeply religious mother. What ensues is an unwise course of action by Walter Lee to bring that dream to fruition. He tries unsuccessfully to explain to his wife his plight.

WALTER: Man says: I got to change my life, I'm choking to death, baby! And his woman say—(*in utter anguish as he brings his fists down on his thighs*)—your eggs are getting cold. . . See, I'm trying to talk to you 'bout myself--(*shaking his head with the repetition*)--and all you can say is eat them eggs and go to work....Nobody in this house is ever going to understand me.

These statements show that Walter Lee's feelings are nearing those of desperation. He feels that his wife is not hearing him which is a hallmark of one beginning to feel alienated. At this point, the students would be actively discussing times when they felt no one was really hearing what they are saying. It would also be an appropriate time for them to list their goals and dreams in life and what it is they think would be an obstacle for them to achieve them.

A series of events, an unplanned pregnancy and the arrival of Walter Lee's late father's insurance check, sets the stage for a heart wrenching drama that threatens to destroy the very core of the Younger family. The mother, Lena, is angered by her son's indifference to the abortion that may soon occur because of the financial and living situation of the family and sets out to make things right. Lena uses a portion of the \$10,000 insurance check to put a down-payment on a house in a white neighborhood with the hope of salvaging the family threatened to be torn apart because of her daughter-in-law's impending abortion and her son's growing discontent.

The mother, Lena, senses the desperation in her son and tries to help him regain his feeling of worth.

Walter: A job (*looks at her*) Mama, a job? I open and close car doors all day long. I drive a man around in his limousine and I say, "Yes, sir; no, sir; very good, sir; shall I take the Drive, sir?" Mama that ain't no kind of job...that ain't nothing at all. (*Very*

quietly) Mama, I don't know if I can make you understand.

The mother, Lena, entrusts Walter with the balance of the insurance money to put in a bank in his own name. Some of the money is for his sister's tuition for medical school, and the rest is to begin a savings account for the family. She believes if he has this to do and money to be responsible for, he will begin to regain his self-esteem. Walter, on the other hand, has other ideas. Walter lets his wife know he still has dreams to fulfill.

WALTER: I been out talking with people who understand me. People who care about the things I got on my mind.

Walter makes a disastrous decision involving the balance of the insurance money. He decides to "invest" in the proposed liquor store with his partners. One partner, Willy Harris, absconds with the money leaving Walter both shattered and humiliated. The healing that Walter goes through comes from within. He realizes how foolish he's been, and his nadir, when he is ready to grovel in front of the white neighbor wanting to buy them out not to move, is classic. He rises from the abyss to utilize his inner strength to go on as a proud black man. His talent that he never trusted to believe in was his inner strength. He literally rises from his knees to face the world and the consequences of his actions. This is a stark contrast to his earlier actions.

WALTER: . . . I'm going to look The Man in the eyes and say—*(He falters.)* "All right Mr. Lindner—*(He falters even more)*—that your neighborhood, you got the right to keep it like you want. You got the right to have it like you want. Just write the check and—the house is yours." And, and I am going and you won't have to live next to this bunch of—*(He straightens up and moves away from his mother, walking around the room.)* Maybe—maybe I'll just get down on my black knees...*(He does so; Ruth and Bennie and Mama watch him frozen in horror.)* Captain, Mistuh, Bossman. *(He starts crying.)* A-Hee-hee-he! *(Wringing his hands in profoundly anguished imitation.)* Yassssuh! Great White Father, just gi' uses de money, of god's sake and we's ain't gwine come out deh and dirty up yo' white folks neighborhood . . . *(He breaks down completely, then gets up and goes into the bedroom.)*

Walter goes through a metamorphosis of sorts as he realizes just how low he has sunk. He eventually realizes that he does possess the inner strength he thought he never really had. He sees himself for the man he truly is, not a stepping stone or a bad husband or an inadequate son. He is capable of taking care of his family, and he eventually proves it by turning down the buyout offer and moves with his family to their new beginning. The feelings that Walter Lee embraces as he moves to a positive outcome that is noteworthy and hopefully inspirational to the student.

Shine

The film "Shine" takes its title from when the young David Helfgott performs so well at the piano that he can do nothing but shine. Once again I would utilize this film because it's

message of healing is clear, and no student will feel left out since the presentation requires only the viewer's visual and auditory attention. I feel students should not be deprived of literary experiences because of limited vocabulary and comprehension skills. This film has many of the attributes I feel that correspond with the theme of talents. Davis Helfgott is a brilliant pianist since childhood. In this scenario, his talent is obvious. He is a masterful piano player. However, his domineering father almost destroys him emotionally and professionally in an attempt to relive his life through his son. The father can be viewed as being as a tragic figure as his son. A survivor of the Holocaust he wears this fact like a shield. Family to him is first and foremost, the only thing that really matters to him. He pushes his son to master musical arrangements beyond his expertise. They are a poor family and that point is never lost in this film. Like Walter Lee in *Raisin in the Sun*, their homes are simple and cramped with too many people for the living arrangement. As a child, David always walks behind his father almost viewing him as a deity. He dutifully repeats his father's admonition when prompted. "I am a very, very lucky boy."

The family fabric begins to unravel when he is offered a chance to study in America. His tutor helps in the effort to raise money for the trip to the States. The father finally vetoes the idea, and David is left crushed. One scene exhibits the deterioration of his self-worth. He stays in the bathtub too long, and his father goes to check on him only to discover he has defecated in the tub. The father's rage is uncontrolled as he beats him with a wet towel and humiliates him even further by his insults.

David seemingly recovers and remembers that he is indeed a very, very lucky boy. The final blow comes when David is offered a musical scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London. Once again, the father expresses his disapproval and again vetoes the idea of David deserting the family. However, this time David decides to take the scholarship and leave the only home he has ever known. David's father rage is explosive. He threatens to disown his son and forbids him to enter their home again. This is customary of an old Jewish custom where one's clothes are shredded as the unworthy individual is ostracized and written off for good.

Seemingly David is progressing well under the tutorship of an older music professor. He is determined to play the very difficult and poignant Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No.3 in a school contest. The emotions and the difficulty of the music finally take their disastrous toll on David. During that fateful concert, as he is playing superbly, he snaps.

In the film "Shine" the moment of complete collapse is public and requires David to be hospitalized. His figure fails at the mission that he feels will validate his *raison d'être*. He, like Walter Lee falls, and they both fall hard. The relationship of David and Peter Helfgott is almost inevitable, since the relationship of father and son in this instance parallels the destructive relationship David's father had with his father. A question would then be posed: Was this consequence inevitable? Since the father's father had destroyed his son's dream, would it not be expected for the same pattern to repeat itself?

The larger question would then be raised to the students: Is disability destiny? This is the central issue of the unit. Will the handicapping conditions with which the students

have been labeled with, serve as the predictor of their future? The film and the play provide answers that are not necessarily simple or without consequence. Although resolution does occur, a price has been paid. For those who would assume that life has dealt them an insurmountable disadvantage, these works prove otherwise. Obstacles exist in living for everyone. The means to overcome and succeed despite adversity also exists.

Poetry

Several poems would also be read. They correspond to both the film “Shine” and the play *Raisin in the Sun*. The first poem “Harlem” by Langston Hughes is where the play gained its name.

WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED?

DOES IT DRY UP
LIKE A RAISIN IN THE SUN?
OR FESTER LIKE A SORE--

AND THEN RUN?
DOES IT STINK LIKE ROTTEN MEAT?
OR CRUST AND SUGAR OVER--
LIKE A SYRUPY SWEET?

MAYBE IT JUST SAGS
LIKE A HEAVY LOAD.

OR DOES IT EXPLODE? (“Harlem,” 1-11)

“What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” This poem explores the frustrations of those not able to fulfill hopes and desires. The title of the poem gives the vision of numerous brownstones in Harlem filled with occupants who feel the pain of unfulfillment. The last line of the poem “or does it explode” portrays an ominous warning of a basic tenet of psychology. Frustration leads to aggression. Is the explosion internal or external? Is the explosion inevitable? There are several possibilities for interpretation. The next poem “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks is subtitled “Seven at the Golden Shovel”. Visions of a pool hall or a street corner may emerge as one reads the choppy nominative lines.

*WE REAL COOL. WE
LEFT SCHOOL. WE*

*LURK LATE. WE
STRIKE STRAIGHT. WE*

*SING SIN. WE
THIN GIN. WE*

*JAZZ JUNE. WE
DIE SOON. ("We Real Cool" 1-8)*

This poem, like the prior one, ends on a sad and hopeless note. Frustration once again dominates the venue. Realization of being different is highlighted as “we” in one poem is read over and over. The word them is never mentioned but “we” becomes synonymous with being in another group, a group probably on the outside since the behaviors mentioned are considered unorthodox in the larger society. Finally, it also exploits the fact that being “cool” is very overrated.

The last poem, “Flashcards”, by Rita Dove coincides closely with the movie “Shine.” It is a short discourse about a young child being pushed too hard, too soon, and too fast. The last line of the poem, “I am only ten” echoes the silent pain of David Helfgott that eventually resulted in his nervous breakdown.

IN MATH I WAS THE WHIZ KID, KEEPER
OF ORANGES AND APPLES. WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND
MASTER. MY FATHER SAID; THE FASTER
I ANSWERED, THE FASTER THEY CAME

I COULD SEE ONE BUD ON THE TEACHER'S GERANIUM,
ONE CLEAR BEE SPUTTERING AT THE WET PANE.

SO I TUCKED MY HEAD AS MY BOOTS SLAPPED HOME.
MY FATHER PUT UP HIS FEET AFTER WORK
AND RELAXED WITH A HIGHBALL AND THE LIFE OF LINCOLN.
AFTER SUPPER WE DRILLED AND I CLIMBED THE DARK

BEFORE SLEEP, BEFORE A THIN VOICE HISSED
NUMBERS AS I SPUN ON A WHEEL. I HAD TO GUESS.
TEN, I KEPT SAYING, I'M ONLY TEN. (“Flashcards”, 1-14)

Once again the poem ends on a note of sadness and frustration. Like the young David in “Shine” the child is pushed to perfection by a father who in all probability is reliving himself through that adolescent. This poem lends itself to be a catalyst for discussion as well as activities for the student to pursue to delve further into what outcomes are possible for the melancholy figure in “Flashcards.”

The Initiation

“The Initiation” a short story by Sylvia Plath will also be read. The main character, Millicent, is

striving to be accepted by her peer group – her sorority sisters. She goes through a metamorphosis also as she realizes what joining the sorority is really going to end up costing her. She will lose her best friend, and she will become a carbon copy of the other snobbish girls. The climax of the story comes after a bus ride, where as part of her hazing, she is ordered to ask all the passengers what they had for breakfast. The last person she asks about breakfast is an eccentric character resembling a leprechaun who speaks of eating heather bird eyebrows. He explains to Millicent...

“Heather birds live on the mythological moors and fly about all day long, singing wild and sweet in the sun...”

Her mood lightens after talking to him, and when she leaves the bus to continue her questioning of strangers, she discovers a life-changing truth.

So many people were shut up tight inside themselves like boxes, yet they would open up, unfolding quite wonderfully, if only you were interested in them. And really, you didn't have to belong to a club to feel related to other human beings.

As she sits in a dark, rat infested cellar, her hair dripping of egg yolks, she thinks of the heather birds.

Swooping carefree over the moors, they would go singing and crying out across the great spaces of air, dipping and darting, strong and proud in their freedom and their sometime loneliness.

She then came to her decision on what to do. Even though she had gone through all the initiation rituals, she decided on reflection, the sorority was not for her. She gained the recognition that her dreams of belonging to the in crowd and what kudos it would bring was only an adolescent illusion.

Music/Songs

I would also use two songs to reinforce the theme of being adequate. “Everybody Is A Star” by Sly and the Family Stone and “Unpretty” by TLC both celebrate a person's individuality. Adolescents relate to songs more easily and more intimately than written literature or films. Music is available to them on a daily basis. Although “Everybody Is Star” may be considered “old school music” by the students, the lyrics can still be analyzed. The song makes the point that everyone has potential and is valuable in their own right.

Everybody is a star
who could reign and chase the dust away
Everybody wants to **shine**
who will come out on a cloudy day?

Everybody is a star
I can feel it when you **shine** on me.
I love you for who you are
Not the one you feel you need to be.

What student does not feel the need to shine? It is my job as a teacher to educate but also to help them find a way to shine in their own way. What good is one without the other?

The other song, “Unpretty”, was a big hit recently for the hip-hop listeners, and all my students are hip-hop patrons. The lyrics suggest that the artificiality of life – fake hair, nails, nose jobs, and so on – will not change the inside only the exterior. Ultimately, the inside is what matters.

You can buy your hair if it won't grow
You can fix your nose if he says so
You can buy all the make up
That man can make
But if you can't look inside you
Find out who am I too
Be in the position to make me feel
So damn unpretty
I'll make you unpretty too.

With this song, a relationship between physical appearances and self-worth can be studied. The reasons why one would want to change their appearance would be explored. Is the reason for changing due to internal or external factors? Is change being made to make one more acceptable to the dominant culture? In addition, the premise of being “cool”(not a special education student), or being “uncool” (a special education student) will be scrutinized. This must be handled carefully because many students do not want to be reminded of their status. It would, however, provide the opportunity for the students to bring in other songs that they believe may express their feelings, especially their frustrations and successes.

Conclusion

This unit is intended to be a basic outline for the special education teacher to incorporate literary elements into the curriculum that serve academic needs as well as social concerns. I have presented a specific curriculum for a specific category of students. The problem of alienation in adolescence is not unique to the special education student. It is universal in adolescence, but there are few resources that address the unique difficulties special education students face inside and outside of the school environment.

I have provided a framework of lessons and activities that can be refined to accommodate the needs of any classroom. The variety of sources used for the curriculum that concentrate on the same basic theme serves to provide the reinforcement that these students require to succeed

in grasping fully the assignment's objectives. The difficulty of finding literature that is age appropriate, but not overtly elementary, is a constant struggle for the special education teacher. Modifications that can be kept to a minimum give the students a real feeling of accomplishment and success which often is lacking in their other classroom endeavors. Finally, by using this unit, I hope more focus on the needs of the special education student in the English classroom will be addressed and recognized.

LESSON PLANS/ACTIVITIES

I INITIATION

I. OBJECTIVE: To analyze literary style, theme, main idea, and vocabulary of the short story.

ACTIVITIES:

- 1) Students will define the vocabulary words. Quiz will be given on this assignment.
- 2) Discussion on why teenagers feel the need to conform on issues as clothing, drugs, etc.
- 3) List order of events in the story. Story is told in flashback sequences. Students will list events in chronological order.
- 4) "What would you do" exercise. Students will write one page essay on their actions if they were in Millicent's situation.

II POEMS

OBJECTIVE: To analyze poetic elements and the meaning of the poems.

"FLASHCARDS"

ACTIVITIES

- 1) Students will make a chart to list similarities between the father figures in "Shine" and "Flashcards".
- 2) Students will read poems aloud.
- 3) A short story will be written to be presented orally on what would probably happen to the character in the poem.

III RAISIN IN THE SUN

OBJECTIVE: To analyze the play's content and literary elements.

- 1) Students will study the use of simile and metaphor
- 2) An original poem will be written using three instances of simile.
- 3) Students will analyze the character of Walter Lee and his plans to make money. The flaws in his actions will be discussed. Alternative courses of actions will be considered.
- 4) Students will break into small groups and select one scene to act out. Costumes and set designs will be included as part of the assignment.

IV SONGS

OBJECTIVE: To examine song meanings in relation to the theme of alienation.

“EVERY BODY IS A STAR”

“UNPRETTY”

- 1) Discuss meaning of song lyrics.
- 2) Students will analyze one song that is approved by the teacher. This song should be relevant to the student.
- 3) A copy of the lyrics will be supplied to the class. The song will be played aloud for the class to discuss.
- 4) A page long essay on the selected song’s relevance to the student will be presented orally in class.

V SHINE

(This film will be viewed after reading and discussing *Raisin in the Sun*).

OBJECTIVE: To analyze the main character and his struggles.

- 1) Students will view the film. The film will be studied in sections. Discussions will take place after each particular section has been viewed.
- 2) After viewing the movie, the students will break into groups. A comparison of the characters Walter Lee Younger and David Helfgott will be made in written format.
- 3) Students will be asked to suggest other appropriate films that relate to alienation that could be viewed at a later time. The purpose of this exercise is to instill in the students a feeling of ownership and responsibility for their own learning.

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