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# WOW Stories: Connections from the Classroom

## “We Want to Tell the World”: One Teacher’s Experience with the Power of *Petey*

By Susanna M. Steeg

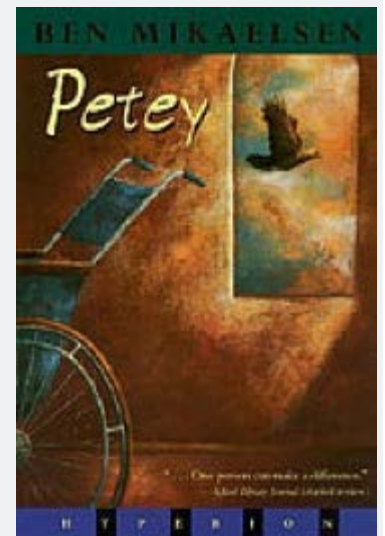
*“That one’s Petey Corbin. He’s an idiot retard, but a friendly one—you know, laughs and smiles a lot. Sometimes you swear he’s thinking, but it’s just conditioning. They used to get him up every day and put him in a wheelchair. Lucky for us, they stopped that.”*

(Mikaelsen, 1998, p. 113)

I steal a glance up from the page of the book I am reading aloud to take stock of my fourth-graders’ reactions. They sit just below where I am curled on the couch. The lights are off, except for a single reading lamp. This is our daily read-aloud ritual; a time of togetherness that quietly opens the door to great possibilities. Many are hugging their knees and staring into the middle distance, thoughtful. Some are slightly agape; all are solemn. “Why am I reading those words, ‘idiot’ and ‘retard’?” I ask. “What does it suggest to you about what people thought of Petey?”

No one answers for a moment before Alison (pseudonyms used for all students) raises her hand. “Miss Steeg, they thought he wasn’t smart. They didn’t know he was normal just like us.” In a quick flash, I watch understanding dash across David’s face as he comments, “They only saw what was on the outside.” His peers nod and murmur. It is a thrilling statement from a boy who leans toward bullying behaviors, covering his own insecurities with aggressions towards others.

Ben Mikaelsen’s (1998) *Petey* is a moving story about the life of a man born with cerebral palsy (CP) in the early 1900’s. Mikaelsen skillfully reveals glimpses of Petey’s intelligence and caring personality to the reader while blinding the characters around Petey to his abilities. I purposefully chose this book to read aloud to my fourth-grade students, because I was dissatisfied with what I was observing about my classroom community; students were not demonstrating sensitivity to issues of difference in one another. Some exploited weaker students on the playground or ignored those who were not their friends during classroom interactions. Classroom discussions



around literature were stilted and short-sighted, as students offered flippant comments, laughed inappropriately, or scorned others' ideas in subtle but nevertheless hurtful ways. Students gave common "school" answers, concentrating on the plot-based details of a text, rather than the richer themes or critical conversations which held the potential for meaningful change. We were falling far short of my ideal "classroom culture of caring" (Levine, 2003; Watson, Kendzior, Dasho, Rutherford, & Solomon, 1998).

In light of these shortcomings, I worked to address these issues through a literature unit highlighting issues of difference and change. With the help of an involved classroom mentor, Jeanne Fain, we planned literature engagements designed to move my students toward greater sensitivity to issues of social justice, to uncover the stereotypes we hold about differences in others. I kept notes on what was happening in my classroom, reflecting both orally and in writing to get to the root of these issues and to help me think about my practice. I wanted to help my students develop an inner awareness of what matters in terms of their relationships with people, believing that fostering a greater sensitivity to these issues would support and safeguard them in taking meaningful learning risks.

Many authors advocate for the power of children's literature to increase student awareness of social issues and help them develop more caring ways of being (Christensen, 2000; Fain, 2008; Fain & Horn, 2006; Foss, 2002; Jennings, 2002; Knowles, Knowles, & Smith, 2007).

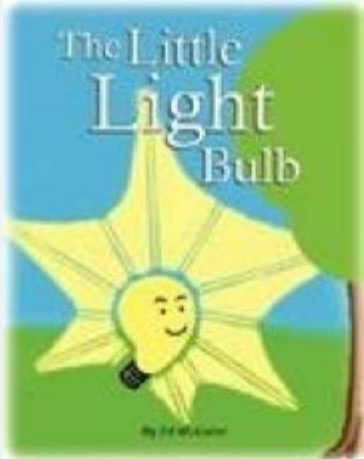
Conversations about children's literature can "disrupt the familiar," by telling honest stories that challenge social injustices while offering a call for social action (Bargiel, Beck, Koblitz, Pierce, & Wolf, 1997). In conceptualizing what I might do, I appreciated Foss's (2002) discussion about the difficulties in engaging her privileged, middle-class students in critical conversations around literature, wherein they problematize the very social constructs that personally benefit them. My students and I were members of that same population. Our efforts at these critical conversations took time, but I identified with Foss's desire to "create an environment and curriculum that challenges students to look at themselves and the world in a new way" (p. 402). For our class, *Petey* was a way in to this discussion.

As Jeanne and I dialogued about my dissatisfaction with our classroom community, we brainstormed learning opportunities using quality literature to help students value and affirm diversity. This overall unit focusing on diversity and change constituted a unifying theme over much of the school year, proving to be a journey of combining children's literature with real-life experiences to prompt awareness and social action. *Paint the Wind* (Ryan, 2009), *Through My Eyes* (Bridges, 1999) and *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* (Mitchell & Ransome, 1998) were just a few of the titles I read aloud and used as conversation and reflection points (see Appendix A). *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane* (DiCamillo, 2006) was another significant part of the unit. Students formed choice book groups, read and discussed the text together in supported ways, and chose final response projects culminating in a celebration day. Students also chose picture books with critical themes and held written conversations with family members to invite family

perspectives and extend the talk (Short, 1996). *Petey*, however, was our most powerful read-aloud, and the subsequent learning opportunities impacted my students significantly.

We read *Petey* towards the beginning of this unit, over the course of six weeks, during which there was a noticeable progression in student talk and understanding about the book. Early on in the story, students' conversations about the read-aloud were animated, yet revealed their biases and misperceptions. What *Petey* "could not do" dominated their initial observations and conversations; students' words seemed to use *Petey*'s differences to characterize him as "less than," in keeping with the classroom community issues I had been noticing.

A few weeks after reading *Petey*, friends introduced me to Ed, a man who had struggled with CP from birth. I enjoyed meeting him and his beautiful dog, Margo, who assisted Ed with basic tasks. I asked if he might come to my classroom to talk with students about his life with CP and he agreed. When I told the students, they were elated at the idea of meeting someone like *Petey*. I could tell we had a long way to go with challenging stereotypes when they were astounded at the news that Ed went to school, drove a truck, played soccer, and both authored and illustrated children's books. In their minds, Ed and *Petey* were one and the same. *Petey* couldn't write books, so they were surprised that Ed did. Although reading and discussing *Petey* had brought students along in their thinking, they were not yet transferring a value or appreciation for diversity into their own interactions with others.



As we brainstormed ways to share something with Ed as a thank-you, students decided to write a summary text of *Petey* to give to Ed. We also read Ed's book *The Little Light Bulb*, which set the stage for an impromptu classroom discussion on its deep themes and truths. Its straightforward text reads, "There once was a Little Light Bulb with a very special light. The problem was the other bulbs did not glow in this bright light....[they] thought it was not right that such a light should shine so very, very bright."

I was gratified to see my students' response to this simple, yet powerful book. On the day I read it aloud, they asked, "Miss Steeg, can we get into a circle and have a dinner table conversation about this?" When I agreed, students immediately shifted themselves into a circle so everyone could see one another and the conversation began, proceeding without raised hands or questions from me. Although we had been working on this conversational strategy, borrowed from Mills, O'Keefe & Jennings (2004), I saw a good deal of hard work pay off in that day's grand conversation (Eeds & Peterson, 2007). Students demonstrated that they knew how to "speak into the silence" and pay attention to others' comments so that they could piggy-back their own comments. They evidenced growth in their ability to let others go first, sustain attention to others' thoughts, and contribute meaningfully.

That day's conversation, and others that followed it, helped us prepare for Ed's visit, which was a highlight of our year. In preparation, Jeanne and I helped the students push back all the furniture to accommodate Ed's wheelchair. Students settled themselves on the floor and waited impatiently as I walked out to meet Ed at the school's entrance. Ed's enthusiastic greeting and Margo's obedient presence thrilled the students. Ed showed us video footage of his soccer team and demonstrated the bumper guards for his wheelchair. He fielded questions and the students interpreted for one another when communication broke down.

Then Ed climbed out of his wheelchair onto the floor. "I'm going to show you about CP the best way I know. Take off your socks," he said. My fourth-graders gleefully ripped off their socks and shoes, waiting for the next instruction.

"Put the socks on your hands." Once students were ready, Ed gave the next direction, "Now, try to tie your shoes."

Students all over the room exclaimed to one another as they struggled with the task, nodding with understanding as Ed explained that tasks for a person with CP were actually much tougher and that CP meant a life of constant struggle. "But you can make a difference, just like the little light bulb."

Knowing the students were curious about how he drove, Ed invited us to watch him use his wheelchair lift to get into his huge truck and waved good-bye as he roared out of the parking lot. My normally boisterous students were quiet as we walked back to our classroom. I could tell they were contemplating the difficulties of life created by CP. Some, like me, marveled at Ed's positive attitude despite the unromantic realities of this disease. A fellow teacher who had joined us for Ed's visit exhorted them, "You need to tell the world about what you learned today."

As we sat down together to debrief, students took turns processing the experience. I think Melanie described it best when she said, "Meeting Ed was an experience of a lifetime....we have to share it with others." In the next few days, students peppered me with ideas. "Can we visit other classrooms and tell other students about our visit with Ed? We want to make them put their socks their hands, too. They need to understand that people who look different from everyone else are really the same." Although I mentally cringed at this generalization, I understood the sentiment; they were learning to honor and affirm differences instead of fearing or rejecting them. And they wanted others to do the same. Jeanne and I engaged the students in conversations about the practicality of sending them all over the school and telling other students to take their socks off. When Jeanne suggested creating an iMovie that we could air on the school news network, students enthusiastically took up that idea. They wrote scripts for plays and recorded dinner table conversations, giving up their recess time to practice, act, and film the mini-dramas.

As I spliced the movie together, I reflected on the changes I had witnessed. One student, Josephina, who had previously lingered on the margins of our classroom community, had voiced a striking comment to the class during one whole-group conversation, “Have you guys thought about how everyone is disabled in some way? Some people can do some things that others can’t do. So we’re all actually disabled!” Her insight became an oft-quoted statement in our room: “We’re all disabled in some way!” I was amazed to see students take this up—adopting disability as a way of identifying with everyone, taking on an attitude of humility that tempered the “ultra-cool attitudes” that fourth-graders often develop.

Another student, William, revealed a shift in thinking during an interview for the iMovie, “I’ve learned how important it is not to point or stare at people who look different. It’s kinda mean.” I edited the movie to open with William’s quote, followed by a collage of still pictures and silent video of students’ dinner table conversations, backgrounded by music. I interspersed snippets of students’ conversations with a voice-over explaining the crux of our unit and the students’ message. The video moved to Melanie, who gave a verbal summary of *Petey*, before another student, Tyler, read Ed’s book aloud. From there, the iMovie cut to the students’ role-plays of instances of inclusion—a basketball game where the student in the wheelchair gets the ball, and an instance of introductions to our quietest student, who took on the role of Ed. The six-minute video went out on the morning video announcements on two occasions.

Although the iMovie was a culminating event to a full year of work on diversity and change, student comments evidenced small but significant steps forward throughout those final months of the school year. My thirty-one tweens showed increased compassion for others, and began celebrating differences. I saw indications that *Petey* had disrupted familiar ways of being. Students spoke with the special needs students in the hallway instead of simply walking by. They stopped to help others who dropped things, and more readily admitted they were wrong in a dispute. And the day their iMovie debuted for the school, they basked in the glow of knowing they had done something to tell others about their journey that began with *Petey* and found its catalyst in Ed’s visit. The awareness that began with *Petey* found its embodiment in social action through Ed’s visit, as he entered into a space I could not touch, appropriately and gently confronting students’ stereotypes in ways that brought *Petey* alive once again. The students’ passion to tell others about what they experienced renewed my own zeal for children’s literature, and its power to plant seeds of change.

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## **Appendix A: Children's Literature Addressing Issues of Diversity and Change**

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