ENGAGING CHILDREN IN DISCUSSIONS OF DISFIGUREMENT AND DISABILITY:
THE WONDER OF PALACIO'S WONDER

Abstract

This study examined children's engagement with Wonder by RJ Palacio and explored the ways in which the children's literature could be used to promote critical, reflective and broad discussions of complex themes, such as disfigurement and disability, among young children. Eight middle school and elementary school students were assigned the reading of Wonder. They participated in an individual interview followed by a focus group. Results indicated that children differentially engage with Wonder: four were engaged with both the novel and discussion, two were engaged with only the novel, one was engaged with only the discussion, and one was engaged with neither. Children are capable of using Wonder to inform their own real-life experiences of and encounters with bullying, disfigurement and disability as well as discuss these social issues beyond the scope of the novel. Furthermore, children are not only capable of discussing Wonder through critical lenses such as disfigurement and disability studies, but doing so adds crucial nuance to their simplistic initial interpretations of the novel and its themes.

Engaging Children in Discussions of Disfigurement and Disability: The Wonder of Pa*lacio's Wonder*

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When given the choice between being right on being kind, choose kind.
—R.J. Palacio, *Wonder*

Since the release of *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio in 2012, readers all over the world have resolved to "choose kind." *Wonder* is a children's novel written primarily from the perspective of August Pullman, or Auggie, a ten-year-old boy with a disability. He was born with a rare and severe craniofacial difference, presumably Treacher-Collins Syndrome, which makes his appearance jarring and frightening to look at. *Wonder* follows Auggie as he attends school for the first time after being home-schooled due to his frequent surgeries and medical problems. His journey through the fifth grade is exceedingly emotional and inspiring. Therefore, it is no surprise that *Wonder* topped the *New York Times* bestseller list and has sold millions of copies worldwide. Auggie faces many challenges throughout the book such as bullying and social anxiety, but he ultimately achieves self-acceptance and friendship.

Wonder may be a stand-alone achievement for first-time author R.J. Palacio, but it also represents a greater shift in the past decade towards protagonists with disabilities in American children's literature. In 2004, the American Library Association (ALA) established the Schneider Family Book Award, which honors "a book that embodies an artistic expression of the disability experience for child and adolescent audiences" (Wheeler, 2013). Seven out of the ten recipients of this award have a preteen narrator with a disability. Furthermore, these novels address the diverse and widely misunderstood spectrum of disability from dyslexia to cancer with equally diverse portrayals. *Wonder* has won many awards, including the ALA Notable Children's Book and the Christopher Award, but it did not win the Schneider Family Book Award. *Wonder*, however, is the only novel within its genre to gain such popularity (Wheeler, 2013).

The *New York Times* reviewer of children's books, Maria Russo, "sobbed several times during *Wonder*" and shared this experience with her "9-year-old daughter — who loved the book and has been pressing it on her friends." Wonder was also positively reviewed by *The Guardian, NPR, Parents Magazine,* and sixty-four children on *Common Sense Media*. Schools

around the world have incorporated the book into their curriculum. At Stevensville School in Fort Erie, Ontario, third-graders and fourth-graders wrote a song inspired by *Wonder* and performed it at several assemblies (Ferguson, 2013). Capitalizing on this, Random House launched a Tumblr site for readers to pledge to "Choose Kind" that has collected over 34,000 signatures so far. Why, then, did Wonder not win the Schneider Family Book Award?

Wonder does not seem groundbreaking, especially not from the lens of disability studies. After all, the book's popularity stems at least partially from its cliché and problematic representation of the individual with a disability as an inspiration. This representation may not depict people with disabilities as monsters, but it is still harmful because it places responsibility on the person with a disability to be exceptional in order to overcome exclusion rather than on able-bodied individuals to be accepting and collectively enact social change. The individual with a disability is also still seen as "other," one-dimensional and synonymous with his or her disability, ignoring the humanity and variety in the experiences and character of people with disabilities.

Nevertheless, *Wonder* does attempt to go beyond this stereotype in several ways. First, by creating an idealistic and inclusive school environment in which Auggie is able to thrive, Palacio demonstrates how societal attitudes are more disabling than the disfigurement itself. Second, Palacio utilizes multiple narrators quite innovatively, dedicating most of the chapters to Auggie's voice and some chapters to the other young people in Auggie's life. These include the chapters of his sister, Via, and his best friend, Jack. Thus, readers are called to understand not only how Auggie is impacted by the attitudes and behaviors of others but also why these other characters react the way they do. Readers are given a richly layered understanding of Auggie and his disfigurement and are ultimately called to love and accept him.

Although *Wonder* was written by an American author and takes place in Manhattan, the majority of scholarly research surrounding disfigurement, which Palacio relied on extensively in writing Wonder, is produced by British researchers. Many of them come from the Center for Appearance Research (CAR) at the University of the West of England in Bristol and the nonprofit organization Changing Faces. CAR is the world's leading research center on disfigurement, body image and appearance-related studies. Changing Faces, on the other hand, is a London-based charity for people with disfigurement and their families. Its work is twofold: changing lives by providing emotional and practical support to individuals with disfigurement and changing minds by advocating for fair treatment and inclusivity in schools, workplaces, healthcare, media, and policy.

One of its most notable programs is the Changing Faces School

service, which helps children and adolescents with disfigurement in the United Kingdom adjust to school (Rumsey & Harcourt, 2012). The young person is provided with in-person preparation and educational materials on social skills, bullying and self-confidence. The school staff is instructed on visible difference, the issues associated with it, and what an educator can do to have a positive impact on the life of a child with a disfigurement. Furthermore, Changing Faces has also developed educational resource packs for students without disfigurement to be used in the classroom. Evaluations of the Changing Faces School service and the educational resource packs found that they are effective in reducing bullying, improving the self-confidence of children with disfigurement, and improving the staff's and students' understanding and acceptance of visible difference (Rumsey & Harcourt, 2012).

In *Wonder*, Auggie Pullman did not have Changing Faces. As far as readers know, he was not regularly seeing a child psychologist, let alone one who specialized in appearance-related psychological issues. He did not have a support group of other young people with visible differences and their families, exacerbating his feelings of isolation due to his craniofacial syndrome. He was not enrolled in a research-based school entry program designed specifically for youth like him. Rather, Auggie was able to overcome the issues that children with disfigurement face because he was lucky. He had a persistent sense of humor, a loving and supportive family as well as a progressive and proactive school principal, assets which protected him from the psychosocial difficulties associated with having a disfigurement. What of those who do not have these developmental assets? This, in many ways, reflects the need to tackle the root problem: the stigmatization and discrimination of disfigurement.

Research Questions

Wonder by R.J. Palacio has generated awareness of disfigurement among the general public through its sheer popularity. Parents, teachers and librarians praise the book and its potential for promoting the acceptance of difference among children. However, do children actually interact with *Wonder* the way that these adults hope? This study seeks to learn from young readers about how *Wonder* can positively impact young people, those with or without a visible difference. The research questions for this project are the following: What engages middle school students while reading or discussing *Wonder*? How do they interpret *Wonder* and its complex themes? What are the possibilities for children's literature, specifically *Wonder*, to facilitate these conversations about disfigurement?

Research Methods

This study examined how reading and discussing R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* informs middle school students' understanding of selected complex themes: disfigurement, disability, appearance and bullying. It also looked at student engagement with reading the novel and discussing it among peers. Its objective is to offer new, detailed understandings of student perspectives and interpretations of *Wonder*. This is necessary in order to better inform the recommendation of the novel to children and adolescents, the incorporation of it into school curricula and the use of it as a tool to promote inclusion and acceptance. The research project took place over the course of the 2014-2015 academic year. I received Stanford University's Institutional Review Board's (IRB) approval to conduct my study in December.

Population Sample & Selection

I interviewed eight participants (four male and four female) between the ages of nine and twelve from Chino and Chino Hills in San Bernardino County, CA. All participants are native English speakers and identify as Asian-American. None of the participants identified as having a disfigurement.

Data Collection

I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with eight students in Chino Hills, CA. Each student participated in an individual interview and a group discussion with three other students. In both types of interviews, I asked them three sets of ten open-ended questions in order to obtain three types of information: completion and comprehension of *Wonder*, opinions, and personal experiences as they relate to the novel. However, I asked additional questions that are not included in the original thirty.

I recruited participants through the Kumon Math and Reading Center in Chino Hills, CA. I sent the director of the center a participant recruitment letter, which was forwarded to the parents of an estimated twenty enrolled students between the ages of ten and twelve. Once potential participants acknowledged their willingness to participate in my study, I chose eight students. Through the director, I forwarded IRB-approved consent and parental/legally authorized representative (LAR) assent forms. All students informed me of their completion of Wonder the week of the study and provided me with their demographic information.

Interviews took place at the Kumon Math and Reading Center on February 7 and 8. The students were split into two groups of four and participated in either the Saturday or Sunday session. Each session consisted of four individual interviews followed by a group interview.

Data Organization & Analysis

I transcribed the audio recordings of the interviews verbatim between February and March 2015. I started organizing the data using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The IPA method entails the detailed readings of interview transcripts followed by annotations made by the researcher (Prior & O'Dell, 2009). My initial coding objective was to classify each participant by type of engagement: engagement with the novel and discussion, engagement with only the novel, engagement with only discussion, and engagement with neither the novel nor discussion. With the transcripts of the individual interview, I looked for phrases and sentences that conveyed engagement or lack of engagement with Wonder. With the transcripts of the focus groups, I looked for voluntary participation, interactions between participants and changes in the opinions expressed in the individual interviews. After, I looked for references to the selected themes: disfigurement, disability, appearance and bullying.

Findings

Student Engagement with Wonder

Engagement with both the novel and discussion.
Case study 1: Caterina. Thoughtful and perceptive, Caterina was the most engaged participant in both the individual interview and group interview. She finished *Wonder* two weeks prior to the interview and for the purpose of the study. Even though the novel is not currently being taught in her school, she participated in the study after hearing about *Wonder* from various teachers and classmates. Caterina enjoyed reading the book and felt that it encouraged her "to understand people more." She "got a little teary-eyed" while reading *Wonder* and discussed it with her sister. Caterina was the only participant who suggested *Wonder* as a potential bullying intervention in the classroom: "I think teachers can stop bullying by like letting their kids read books like *Wonder* and the point of view of the person that's being bullied."

Caterina discussed the novel in detail. She mentioned specific moments such as "the plague" and when "Jack said like how if he had his face he would wear a mask with it everyday and if he could change it, he would." She had very strong emotional reactions to these parts and "felt angry and sad for [Auggie] at the same time." She recognized these obvious teaching moments in *Wonder*: "it taught me how like people are being bullied for stuff they didn't do but for how they are" and "I don't think that's fair."

In the focus group, Caterina spoke the most and answered all the questions. She was not afraid to disagree with the other participants, hold an unpopular opinion, or refine her opinions spontaneously. This disposi-

tion was evident when she debated Carlo about the definition of disability. In her individual interview, she thought that even though "he might look disabled," Auggie is not because he "is still able to do stuff that other people can do." When Renée and Carlo expressed this same opinion in the focus group, she initially agreed but she started qualifying her response. She and Carlo argued back and forth about the definition, but Carlo eventually conceded because Caterina was able to support her arguments with references from the novel.

Engagement with only the novel.
Case study 2: Renée. The youngest of all the participants at the age of nine, Renée was also the most soft-spoken. She sometimes whispered her answer and often gave very brief, sometimes one-word, answers. She is not comfortable with talking to new people, but Renée loves reading for pleasure. She read *Wonder* to participate in the study, enjoyed it, and recalled details more quickly and accurately than the other students in her session. She did not talk about *Wonder* with anyone. The novel is not currently being taught in her charter elementary school. However, she thinks that it should be "because it's a really nice book and it's about bullying too so it might make other people think about it more."

Renée has, as many children do, a black-white perspective. She classified the characters in the novel as either "good" or "bad" as well as "nice" or "mean." The "bad" characters did not show any kindness to Auggie in the novel while the "good" characters did. When asked about the themes of the novel, Renée emphasized kindness the most, citing a precept from the novel that stuck with her: "when choosing between right and choosing kind, choose kind." Palacio's juxtaposition of Auggie's kindness and the unkindness of Julian, the bully, highlighted the unfairness of Auggie's situation for Renée. Unlike the other participants, she expressed that children like Julian should be rigorously punished for meanness. She also emphasized equality the most, reiterating the notion that "everybody should be treated equally no matter what they look like."

On a personal level, Renée experienced heightened sensitivity to how words and actions affect other people: "I think about things more and I think I'm being a little bit nicer. I think about what I say more so that I don't hurt anybody's feelings." Although she spoke very little in the focus group, there were a few moments when she revealed this heightened sensitivity. For example, even though Renée was not sure what autism is, she immediately objected to Carlo's definition of autism as "mental retardation." She insisted that people with autism just "act differently" and she strongly opposed the use of "retardation" or "disability" in describing autism. However, after further discussion of disability, she became more comfortable with the word and later conceded that autism can be considered a disability.

This shift indicates that she was opposed to the stigma surrounding these terms, not the recognition of difference.

Engagement with only the discussion.

Case study 3: Carlo. He sat down silently in front of me with a bored look on his face, his hands hesitating to put away his phone. It quickly became apparent that he was not interested in reading or discussing *Wonder* with me. Carlo did not discuss the novel with anyone after completing the novel and would realistically not recommend it to others. Surprisingly, he was not invested in any of the characters of the novel with the exception of Auggie's dog, Daisy, whose death was the saddest event in the book for him. His answers to the probing questions were brief and apathetic.

In the focus group, however, Carlo disagreed with the other three participants in his session. He primarily clashed with Caterina, especially on whether or not Auggie is not disabled. He was so invested in his stance and so adamantly against hers that he wanted "to go home and go on Wikipedia and search disabled, bring it to school and shove it in (her) face." Though aggressive, this comment demonstrated his involvement in the discussion, willingness to continue the discussion after the study, and desire to learn more.

Carlo did not think that reading *Wonder* had any impact on his worldview: "I mean if I saw a kid like that on the street, I would probably think, 'Whoa! What happened to that kid?' But if he was like at my school, I would—in my class, I try to get to know everybody like I said, so I don't think the book changed anything." However, after discussing this in the focus group, he decided that he "[doesn't] know anymore what (he) would do." He considered the alternative viewpoints of other participants and reconsidered his original answer. While Carlo did not like reading *Wonder* and did not acknowledge that he learned anything from it, discussing the novel with students who disagreed with him encouraged him to develop his ideas.

Engagement with neither the novel nor discussion.

Case study 4: Angelica. Enthusiastic and extremely talkative, Angelica said that she read *Wonder* twice because her family's love of the book. Her teachers also incorporated *Wonder* into her language arts class, social studies class and art class. Thus, she has been exposed to *Wonder* in her home and at school. Despite this, she was not engaged while reading the novel.

It is unclear as to whether or not she actually read the novel. When asked to describe Auggie's facial appearance, she said that "he has one eye and that's like saddening because you don't want to see a person with one

eye." In *Wonder*, Via, Auggie's older sister, describes Auggie's appearance in detail. She mentions his two eyes, which "are about an inch below where they should be on his face, almost halfway down his cheeks" (Palacio, 2012). The illustration on the cover of *Wonder* has a boy with only an eye on his face. Angelica based her description of Auggie's face on this illustration rather than on Via's chapter.

Angelica answered the probing questions generally and broadly without making any references to characters other than Auggie or events that occurred in the novel. For example, according to her, the message of the story is: "If you bully, you're just going to get bullied back." This conclusion is interesting because the primary bully in the novel, Julian, does not experience bullying. It could be that this is genuinely her interpretation, but she could not name a bully in the novel when prompted. She also supported her point with experiences from her own life and did not support it with specific examples from *Wonder*. Her provided evidence was similar in the focus group.

Angelica did not talk as much as the other participants in her focus group: Leo, Michael and Joshua. When she did speak, she did not make any references to events and characters in the *Wonder*. She also did not seem to remember the events that other participants talked about. She was distracted very easily and often stopped talking about *Wonder*: "One of the awesomest things is like 'let it go.' Please don't sing the song." Although she enjoyed talking to me and the other participants, she did not actually discuss *Wonder*.

Although it is dubious that Angelica read or completed the novel, she expressed personal experiences with bullying and disfigurement during her individual interview and focus group. She reflected on the scar on her ankle, which her classmates have noticed and which makes her feel very self-conscious. She concluded that the scar is a type of disfigurement and that a disfigurement "is something that anyone can have." She also opened up about being teased for being short. Thus, while assigning the reading and discussing of *Wonder* may not have been effective for Angelica specifically, broadly talking about its themes gave her new insights on them and informed her personal experiences with them.

Using Wonder to Critically Consider and Discuss Complex Themes
Appearance: the "inside" versus the "outside." All of the participants except for Michael and Renée used the words inside and outside to discuss appearance: "It just matters what's on the inside, not on the outside." The inside qualities were reflected in "what you do" and capture "what you really are." Outside qualities, on the other hand, are physical qualities and are "what you cannot really change," such as Auggie's craniofacial anomaly. However, the participants had difficulty distinguishing between "who

(Auggie) was" and "who he was inside." For example, Vera thought that Auggie's craniofacial anomaly is "just his appearance, not who he really is." However, Caterina recognized that the disfigurement is also who Auggie is: "He faced the fact that other people couldn't accept him for who he is and yeah." There was tension between the understanding that Auggie is being unfairly judged for who he is, a boy with a disfigurement, and their own discomfort with his "outside." They associated disfigurement with words like "scary," "weird," "creepy," or a "monster." These associations led them to separate Auggie from the disfigurement as opposed to untangling their own biases towards disfigurement.

From simplistic to nuanced conceptions of bullying. All participants agreed that bullying occurs in *Wonder*. Their definitions for bullying were similar and very vague: "treating other like not the way you want to be treated," "being mean to someone," "hurting them like mentally and physically," "picking on other people," and "an act of unkindness or anything negative to another person." Still, they gave diverse reasons for why a student might bully, including low self-esteem, selfishness, broken homes, revenge, fun, power, dominance, weakness, social approval, and human nature. According to each participant, a student gets bullied due to some form of difference. They unanimously identified Julian as the bully and Auggie as the bullied in *Wonder*.

Their informed answers reflect the work of the anti-bullying programs and campaigns that have spread all over the United States. However, their knowledge and understanding of bullying do not reflect their personal experiences. They agreed that bullying is a problem in schools today, citing different news stories. Nevertheless, only two of them, Angelica and Michael, reported experiencing or witnessing bullying firsthand in their own schools. Leo thought that bullying was not a problem in his school, but later in his interview, he mentioned two peers, Steven and Rico. He described his classmate Steven as "kind of crazy" and "bouncing off the walls." Rico, on the other hand, is in a wheelchair and is not a student that he knows personally. The social isolation of Steven and Rico due to their physical or behavioral differences were not seen as bullying by Leo.

These students broadly agreed that bullying is "bad" and that bullies are "bad people," yet their individual responses reveal additional nuance to student sympathy towards perceived bullies. In her individual interview, Angelica told me that students in her school were bullied if they did not read *Wonder*. Laughing, Leo recounted a story to the focus group about another class in his school that was reading Wonder, in which the students "all planned up to go into the book and go beat up Julian and they all said, 'You punch him in the head. I'll sock him in the eye.'" The irony was not lost on Joshua, who suggested that these students should read Ju-

lian's chapter, a story that Palacio wrote after the release of *Wonder*. Julian's chapter showcases his perspective and reveals that he "had nightmares of August's face." This led Leo to reflect on his anecdote, saying that "(Julian) has a reasonable excuse" for what he did. The discussion allowed the participants to question their preconceived notions of who bullies are as well as how and why bullying occurs.

Defining disability and generating debate. I asked the second focus group if they thought that Auggie is disabled. By law, his craniofacial anomaly is considered a disability. Because each participant in the focus confidently answered no in their individual interview, I expected them all to agree that Auggie is not disabled. However, Caterina's exploration of "yes" as an answer sparked a debate between her and Carlo.

> Carlo: No, because disabled means you're not able to do certain things and Auggie can still do everything that regular people do.
> Renée: I think he's not disabled because he's not restricted from doing anything. It's just that his face is different.
> Caterina: I feel like he wasn't but he was disabled for how he ate like he mentioned it like how he eats like messy, like not like how normal eat.
> Carlo: That's not disabled!
> Caterina: Well, it kind of is.
> Carlo: He can still eat.

This exchange led to a long discussion about whether or not the craniofacial anomaly is a disability because of its effects on Auggie's ability to eat. Unknowingly, they discussed the often debated components of disability—timing, normality, and significance. Caterina argued that August is disabled because he had to have surgery and eat through feeding tubes. In response, Carlo thought that because this was no longer the case, August was no longer disabled.

However, Caterina believed that the way August eats is still not "normal" and quoting the novel, she said that "he eats like a turtle." Carlo found it absurd that eating messily could be considered a disability.

> Carlo: It depends on whether you think eating and spitting out food at the same time is disabled.
> Interviewer: So what does it mean to be disabled then?
> Caterina: It means you can't do stuff like normally like other people can. You might be able to do it, but you might do it differently than most people would.

Because Carlo was having difficulty articulating his response, I asked, to his relief, "If I can't play basketball as well as normal people and I'm just terrible at basketball, am I disabled?" Caterina responded that the inability to play basketball is not a disability because "that's like on a different stand than like eating and like with autism, socially interacting." She argued that the inability to play basketball would not get in the way of my day-to-day life like a craniofacial anomaly or autism would. Caterina's definition of disability evolved considerably from when she started reading *Wonder*. Reflection and conversation caused her mold her definition until it became the following: a disability must result in having to conduct a major life task (her example was eating) differently from "normal" people and with significantly more difficulty.

Although the participants could not agree on whether or not Auggie's craniofacial anomaly is a disfigurement, they all agreed that his appearance is not.

> Interviewer: Do you guys think that Auggie's appearance is a dis
> ability?
> Caterina: No. It affects how people look at him but it's not
> how it changes him.
> Renée: I think it was just incredibly bad luck.
> Vera: He says he's kind of like a medical wonder.
> Carlo: No, because it's only affecting his face, not his brain, how
> his body works or anything.

They all agreed on disability as difference, but the nature and the extent to which that difference becomes disability was a point of contention and necessitated further discussion.

Understanding disfigurement: the importance of terminology. The participants with the exception of Renée, who insists that Auggie "just looks different," agreed that Auggie's disfigurement is "a significant problem" or is "something wrong with him." However, they did not possess the language to describe what exactly was different about Auggie's face or to explain why people felt so negatively towards it, even after reading *Wonder*. For obvious reasons, this made it difficult to discuss disfigurement:

> Angelica: So like, I was telling her that if you guys have the same
> - if Julian didn't know that Auggie had those disformations, so like
> how he got them or like how he feels about them so that's why he's
> judging him. But if Julian had the same disformations - the same
> formations - then Auggie would have nightmares of Julian too.
> Michael: Can I just say something? It's called mutations. I just

thought you should know.

"Disformation" is not a real word and mutations can result in disfigurements but are not disfigurements. Reading the novel was helpful for the students in understanding the potential emotionality of disfigurement, but it was far less helpful in talking about and understanding the concept of disfigurement.

Falling into the stereotyping trap. While reading *Wonder,* the participants learned about Auggie and formed their own opinions of him. They described him as "inspirational," "funny," "self-conscious," "nice," and "brave." His story gave them "the feels" and showed them that he is "someone that has been through a lot." The participants clearly admired Auggie and were acutely aware of the unfairness of Auggie's situation. However, they tended to believe that Auggie and his experience are representative of all individuals with disfigurement, their personalities and their experiences. Their responses during their individual interviews revealed many assumptions that they have about people with disfigurement and disabilities as a result of reading *Wonder*. These assumptions, though seemingly harmless, resulted in the participants separating themselves from people with disfigurement and feeling "really bad for them" rather than feeling empathy.

After reading *Wonder*, the participants believed that people with disfigurements in general are restricted socially: "They don't get to make friends like other people can" and "they don't get to meet people normally because other people will judge them by their appearance at first." They also experience many "hardships" and "challenges" because "it's kind of hard to live with a mutation." These challenges have only made them "stronger," "nice" and "brave." According to the participants, people with disfigurements "feel kind of bad about themselves," and are "afraid of themselves." They need to be treated differently: "I feel like I would treat them a little bit more since people don't treat them as they're normal. More by like I would be a little bit more friendly than I would towards like people." Thus, the participants extrapolated generalizations about people with disfigurements from *Wonder*.

Implications

What Can Reading and Discussing Wonder Do for Children?

Wonder alone can engage some children, but not all. Although the majority of the participants enjoyed the experience of reading *Wonder* and read it closely, two did not. While this population sample is certainly not representative of all middle schoolers, it is clear that *Wonder*, despite its

acclaim and saccharine charm, will not be appealing, interesting or engaging to every middle schooler. Assigning *Wonder* to promote values such as kindness, resilience and acceptance in children is creative, but the extent to which it is effective depends on the level and type of engagement that the child has with the text, which will vary widely.

Wonder **can spark dialogue and debate among children on its complex themes.** Children are more than capable of going beyond identifying the themes of the novel. Children can contextualize these themes within their own lives and their society as well as use the novel to inform their personal experiences with these themes. Furthermore, they can use the novel to share these intimate thoughts and experiences with others. In group discussions, children deconstruct and develop their personal interpretations of these themes as well as challenge and consider the interpretations of their peers. They support their ideas with references to the novel, personal experiences and acquired knowledge on these topics from the adults in their lives. Through debate and dialogue, children realize the complexity of the themes. When using *Wonder* as a teaching tool, educators and parents need not underestimate the ability of children to understand these themes and discuss them deeply with adults and with each other.

Wonder **can be discussed through critical lenses with children**. Children are capable of examining *Wonder* and its themes from various critical lenses in literary theory. These criticisms can arise organically and unintentionally from discussing the themes of *Wonder*. One crucial lens that connects the themes of bullying, disfigurement and appearance is the disability studies lens. From this lens, children can come to different conclusions on the nature of Auggie's disability, if he is disabled at all. Participants also briefly alluded to power, class, and gender dynamics when discussing the theme of appearance. This demonstrates that children can extract new meanings and critical questions from the novel through discussion.

What Should We Do Now?

Wonder **must be discussed through critical lenses with children.** For children, reading *Wonder* can simplify the novel's themes while discussing it can complicate them. *Wonder* is certainly compelling from a storytelling perspective and children grasp the intense emotionality of it. The novel attempts to be nuanced in its representation of disability, but children do not always detect these nuances. Children's inability to grasp these complex themes can lead to shallow interpretations of the novel's themes and messages such as "everyone is equal" and "we should all just be

nice to each other." These notions conveniently bypass the need for greater understanding of the meaning, nature and consequences of disability. Furthermore, *Wonder*s is one of the few or the only representations that children are exposed to. As a result, children can stereotype people with disabilities as heroic and inspirational as opposed to normal, uniformly kind and resilient as opposed to diverse and more than just their disabilities. Although this seems positive, children are in actuality still otherizing and separating themselves from the disabled person with a wall of pity and "special treatment." Teachers and parents who assign *Wonder* to children must take care to encourage children to challenge these notions through critical lenses, especially the lens of disability studies, in order to truly promote empathy and understanding.

The wonder of *Wonder* **is still, for the most part, unclear.**

Limitations. The small population sample of this study does not account for differences by race or class in student engagement and interpretation while reading and discussing *Wonder*. Furthermore, participants are students enrolled in an after-school math and reading program. Thus, these students come from households that value education, reading and learning. Due to time constraints, I did not conduct interviews before assigning *Wonder*, which limited my ability to gauge participant understanding of bullying, appearance, disfigurement and disability prior to reading the novel and resulted in my reliance on self-reporting of reading engagement. Another limitation is that this study took place over the course of one weekend. Thus, it can only offer a glimpse of student engagement and discussion at a single time-point.

Future directions. Future studies can address the following questions: How might interpretation and engagement differ among different populations? These can include readers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, readers of different social classes, readers of different sexualities, children and adults with a disability, and adolescent readers and adult readers. How do conversations on *Wonder* evolve over a longer period of time? Do middle schoolers experience quantifiable changes in attitude towards bullying, disfigurement and disability before and after reading or discussing *Wonder*? How do these different attitudes translate into interactions with people with disfigurement and disability? How does student engagement and interpretation differ with other texts that deal with the same subject matter as *Wonder*?

Conclusion

Wonder by R.J. Palacio is an important step towards the inclusion of people with disabilities, but it is still not sufficient to end the stigma

associates with individuals possessing disabilities. Just as telling children to "be nice to everyone" is not the comprehensive solution to the teasing and bullying experienced by children with disfigurement and disability, the compulsory reading of *Wonder* is not the comprehensive solution to the stigma against and misunderstanding of disfigurement and disability. This study showed that students will not necessarily be engaged with reading or discussing *Wonder* and can, without discussion, be prone to feelings of pity rather than empathy, shallow understandings of *Wonder*'s themes, as well as the stereotyping and generalizing of people with disfigurement and disabilities. Why then bring *Wonder* into the classroom? This study demonstrated the capability of children to go beyond the passive admiration of the emotional and inspirational nature of *Wonder* and its charming characters to the active critique of the novel and collaborative discussion of the complicated social issues that it touches upon. These critical discussions are where we will find the wonder of Palacio's *Wonder*.

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