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Re-Seeing The Mighty: Critically Examining One Film's Representations of Disability in the English Classroom

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Re-Seeing The Mighty: Critically Examining One Film's Representations of Disability in the English Classroom

Abstract

Films portraying characters with disabilities are often shown in the English classroom. Films such as "Of Mice and Men," "Simon Birch," "To Kill a Mockingbird," "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," "The Glass Menagerie," "Moby Dick," "Gattaca," and "A Beautiful Mind" often show simplistic and stereotypical representations of characters and their disabilities. Although students are frequently encouraged to think critically about a film's structure, themes, or symbolic elements, the authors argue that they should also learn to examine critically the representations of disability in these films. If stereotypical representations of characters with disabilities are not identified and challenged, another generation of people may hold on to outdated and unhealthy assumptions about real people with disabilities. In this article, the authors show what an active reading of "The Mighty," a commonly used film by English teachers adapted from Rodman Philbrick's novel "Freak the Mighty," might look like. "The Mighty" is valuable in that it positively portrays friendships between disabled and nondisabled characters, but the damaging and limited representations of disability that this film offers may perpetuate prevailing stereotypes of disability so that students maintain a stigmatizing viewpoint of persons with disability labels. The authors provide a synopsis of "The Mighty" and then describe an analytical tool--Martin Norden's stereotypic roles--that they think is useful in challenging negative constructions of characters with disabilities in the film. They present Norden's roles and their own critical reading of "The Mighty" as a model for other English teachers to use when "reading" disability in both film and literature. The authors end with recommendations for teachers on how to approach using film in ways that are respectful of people with disabilities and that are accepting of difference in classrooms.

Disciplines

Education

Comments

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Re-Seeing *The Mighty*: Critically Examining One Film's Representations of Disability in the English Classroom

Students learn to recognize and challenge stereotypical representations of disability in film. They also learn to celebrate difference, and they have an opportunity to make their community more welcoming to people with disabilities.

Films portraying characters with disabilities are often shown in the English classroom. Lenny Small, in *Of Mice and Men*, is presented as “slow” mentally and being of overly large stature. Other characters misunderstand his intentions, focusing on his size and misinterpreting his “simple-mindedness.” Simon from *Simon Birch* is physically small and believes he was sent by God to do something wonderful. Simon performs his miracle: he saves a school bus full of young students when the bus slides off an icy road and plunges into a lake. These two films, along with others that English teachers show, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Moby Dick*, *Gattaca*, and *A Beautiful Mind*, often show simplistic and stereotypical representations of characters and their disabilities. Although students are frequently encouraged to think critically about a film’s structure, themes, or symbolic elements, we argue that they should also learn to examine critically the representations of disability in these films.¹

If stereotypical representations of characters with disabilities are not identified and challenged, another generation of people may hold on to outdated and unhealthy assumptions about real people with disabilities. How and why students watch films in class, therefore, is important to examine. In her article in *Learning, Media and Technology*, Renee Hobbs summarizes her survey of elementary and secondary teachers’ use of media and technology in the classroom. From six years of observational and

interview data, she generated a typology of non-optimal use of video in the classroom, which included the following seven instructional practices: using video with no clearly identified instructional purpose; not using pause, rewind, or review; large-group viewing experiences giving teachers a “break”; teachers mentally disengaging during viewing; using TV viewing as a reward; using media only as an attentional hook; and using video to control student behavior (41–44). She also found that one half of teachers using film adaptations of literary works “included references to the word ‘fun,’ suggesting that video is a treat or reward after the ‘heavy’ work of reading literature” (45). As such, viewings with little analysis or reflection may have unintended consequences, sending the message that inaccurate or exaggerated stereotypes about disability are accurate and acceptable (Chervenak 12; Norden 11). Uninformed readings of film may reinforce negative and inaccurate beliefs and stereotypes about disability and may perpetuate stigma status of people with disabilities.

However, teachers can foster engagement and empathy toward differently-abled persons through careful choices and active reading of films (Considine and Baker 25). The Standards for the English Language Arts published jointly by NCTE and IRA support the use of a broad range of texts that include film as students “need opportunities to compare the ways in which ideas and information are presented in different media—for example the ways in which a narrative differs when read, heard, or viewed on

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Stereotypic representations of individuals with disabilities in film include those that revolve around pity, innocence, and adventure, often culminating in heroic status.

film” (NCTE 11). Yet, it is not merely enough to make comparisons between different media; we must challenge students to analyze critically the texts they view (11). Critical analyses of disability characterizations and the functions they serve in film are necessary to open students’ minds to how they think about disability. Learning to read movies with an emphasis on how disability is constructed is an important task for students, given both the increasing visibility of people with disabilities in American society and the increased educational focus of providing access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities.

Regardless of the accuracy of its portrayal of disability, film functions as a major information source on the nature of disabilities (Safran, “The First” 477). Film “reflects and affects our social worldview” (Pavlidis 52), including students’ perceptions of people with disabilities. While movies entertain, they simultaneously “provide viewers with information about disabilities, and . . . project representations of how individuals fit into a nation’s social and political landscape” (Safran, “Movie” 223). These limited conceptualizations are the outcome of attitudes and beliefs that include a fear of disability and pity for people with disabilities.

Our purpose in this article is to show what an active reading of *The Mighty*, a commonly used film by English teachers adapted from Rodman Philbrick’s novel *Freak the Mighty*, might look like. *The Mighty* is valuable in that it positively portrays friendships between disabled and nondisabled characters, but the damaging and limited representations of disability that this film offers may perpetuate prevailing stereotypes of disability so that students maintain a stigmatizing viewpoint of persons with disability labels. Drawing from second and third authors’ previous work about disability represented in film (Arndt, White, and Chervenak), we extend a critical analysis of *The Mighty*. In what follows, we provide a synopsis of *The Mighty* and then describe an analytical tool—Martin Norden’s stereo-

typic roles—that we think is useful in challenging negative constructions of characters with disabilities in the film. We present Norden’s roles and our own critical reading of *The Mighty* as a model for other English teachers to use when “reading” disability in both film and literature. We end with recommendations for teachers on how to approach using film in ways that are respectful of people with disabilities and that are accepting of difference in classrooms.

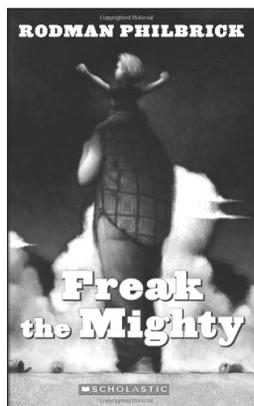
The Mighty Synopsis

Set in Cincinnati, *The Mighty* is the story of middle school students Max Kane and Kevin Dillon. Max, whose father murdered his mother in front of him, lives with his grandparents and is shy. Physically large for his age, he lumbers through school and is frequently taunted for his difficulty with reading. Kevin is academically gifted and has a physical disability; he uses braces and crutches to walk; he is small for his age and is often ill. At school Kevin is assigned to be Max’s peer reading tutor, and the two become friends as Kevin introduces Max to reading about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. They also stand up to the local middle school gang, the Doghouse Boys. Ultimately, Max’s father, recently released from prison, kidnaps Max and Kevin rescues him. The film ends with Kevin’s death, which is due in part to the stress of the rescue.

Norden’s Stereotypic Roles

Stereotypic representations of individuals with disabilities in film include those that revolve around pity, innocence, and adventure, often culminating in heroic status. Norden grounds film critique about disability in his analyses of common representations, including four stereotypic roles that we explore here: the “sweet innocent” (33), “comic misadventurer” (20), the “civilian superstar” or “supercrip” (28), and the “tragic victim” (26).

Norden’s “sweet innocent” is a character who inspires pity, like Dickens’s Tiny Tim. This character is the one who stumbles through social interactions, misinterprets social cues, and is childlike, even if the role is an adult one.



This “sweet innocent” is far more “reactive than proactive and seem[s] to bring out the protectiveness of every good-hearted able-bodied person who [comes] his or her way” (Norden 33). The second role a character with a disability is often forced into is the “comic misadventurer” (20), a common male role. This role includes providing comic relief and longing for a romantic partner but rarely finding a girlfriend. The third character is the “civilian superstar,” or “supercrip,” and is the “heroic disabled person” (28) who overcomes his or her disability to accomplish amazing feats or save nondisabled characters. The term “supercrip” is an extension of the term “crip”: Eli Clare notes that “I know where *crip* comes from in disability communities—the long histories of folks who have had *cripple* used against us. We have taken the word into our own mouths, rolled it around, shortened it, spoken it with fondness, humor, irony, recognition” (“Thinking”). Moving beyond “crip” to “supercrip” involves a portrayal of a person with a disability as noted above, as a superstar—therefore becoming a “supercrip.”

Sometimes “civilian superstars” become “tragic victims,” whose deaths are mired in the heroism of their actions, and viewers are led to believe that their deaths are necessary; as a result, while audiences may weep for the victim, they understand that the disabled character could not possibly remain in the world (Hayes and Black 124–25).

All these conceptualizations function to present disability as a narrative device to advance the plot of a film or to have characters with disabilities serve as saviors of nondisabled characters. This is certainly the case in *The Mighty*.

Critically Reading *The Mighty*

In *The Mighty*, Kevin is constructed as different by those around him. He wants opportunities that he and others in the films believe are afforded only to people without disability. However, the responsibility of seeking out these opportunities is left to him. *The Mighty* provides no critique of prevailing stereotypes about disability; in fact, negative attitudes about difference are reified. For example, at the be-



ginning of the film, Max is teased as having no brain and his coach refers to him as a Neanderthal, while one kid says to his group as Kevin walks into the gym, “Hey, check out the March of Dimes.” Without appropriate guidance, students might take this comment as funny, instead of understanding that this is a negative comment that perpetuates a limiting stereotype about people with disabilities as pitiable.

The Mighty reinforces the idea that disability is pitiable and an undesired state of being in statements by Kevin and his mother. In one scene, Kevin is assigned to be Max’s reading tutor, and Max states that he will not be able to read text from *King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable* that is assigned to him by Kevin. Kevin, becoming increasingly emotional, states, “You can’t? Oh, you will! Or, you might end up in one of those special schools, with kids who can’t even say their own names!” In an exchange with the school principal, Kevin’s mother asserts that while Kevin lives in a “world of books and words and ideas,” he would “trade it all to be normal!” In both of these exchanges, Kevin and his mother reinforce the idea that having a disability is pitiful and negative, creating a fear of disability and presenting a belief that “normal” is preferable to a diverse experience of physical or cognitive disability.

Comic Misadventurers and Sweet Innocents

Inherent in the roles of the “comic misadventurer” and “sweet innocent” are portrayals of characters as comic relief and as asexual innocents. Both of these stereotypic roles are present in *The Mighty*, and while episodes related to this provide comedic release, these scenes are generally viewed with little critique. In this film, the boys with outsider status bond and become best friends. Kevin and Max become “Freak, the Mighty” when Kevin, recognizing that “you need a brain and I need legs,” rides on Max’s shoulders, becoming, in essence, a knight and Max his steed: two “deficient” boys becoming one “whole” boy. During the beginning and middle of the film, “Freak, the Mighty” roams the seedier



Kevin and Max become "Freak the Mighty" when Kevin rides on Max's shoulders. From *The Mighty*. Dir. Peter Chelsom. Walt Disney, 1998.

streets of Cincinnati doing good deeds, such as breaking up domestic squabbles in diners and returning lost purses.

At some points in the film, the roles of "comic misadventurer" and "sweet innocent" converge. In one scene in *The Mighty*, Kevin is in the lunchroom entertaining the group by playing with his food, putting spaghetti on his eyebrows and head, pretending to be Groucho Marx, Marlon Brando, and a coy girl. An implication is that he cannot possibly

expect to get a girlfriend, so he will be the class clown. As the group laughs and responds, he continues, getting uproarious laughter from his peers. As he becomes more and more animated, he starts to cough and choke, and Max carries him to the nurse. He ends up being hospitalized, the innocent who cannot exceed the limits of his frail body. The scene sends several messages: the boy with the disability is entertaining, his humor serves as a substitute for sexuality, and he is fragile. It is revealed that Kevin has Morquio syndrome. This scene clarifies for the audience that

Kevin is different—not tuned to the same chronology as his peers, with an urgency born of his awareness that he may not live into adulthood. This is a bleak representation of Morquio syndrome. The National Mucopolysaccharidoses (MPS) Society states that "Disease severity varies significantly for individuals with MPS IV, and it is not possible to predict the expected life span for a given individual.

Those on the more slowly progressing end of the disease spectrum may have a reasonably normal lifespan. However, the availability of new and ever-improving treatments as well as other surgical procedures provides hope for better future outcomes for individuals affected by MPS IV" (22). It is possible that Kevin's genetic disorder may have been exaggerated to provide a dramatic turn in the film and to foreshadow his transition from supercrip to tragic hero. Yet, that misinformation has an effect on students' worldviews about people with disabilities and creates erroneous assumptions that must be challenged or corrected by teachers.

Superstars and Tragic Victims

This film includes in its plot development a quest, a building tension around a problem, and the resolution of the problem through Kevin's sacrificing his health, his well-being, and ultimately his life to save someone else. Throughout the film, Kevin recognizes that his life is essentially a quest, which suggests that people with disabilities cannot just be ordinary people living typical lives, but are extraordinary supercrips. Kevin demonstrates this through his obsession with King Arthur and the Knights of the Roundtable. This obsession foreshadows the climax of the film in which he rescues Max from his abusive father.

Kevin and Max, as the symbiotic "Freak, the Mighty," engage in knightly deeds, which culminate in the central quest of the story: Max is kidnapped by his murderer-father and Kevin, stealing a van and driving it with his crutch, searches for and rescues Max. Kevin is acknowledged as a hero, but his heroism has a price. Kevin, in an unrealistic representation of Morquio syndrome, dies shortly after the rescue of Max because "his heart just got too big for his body." Through Max's friendship with Kevin, Max was also saved. His life was literally saved, and Max became "cured" of his reading disability through his and Kevin's friendship and Kevin's guidance.

The resulting message to students is that the character with a disability only has value insofar as he rescues and redeems the normate characters—Kevin saves Max. Kevin is a "supercrip," who then becomes a tragic victim whose utility ends when his companion is saved—and when that utility ends, he literally dies. In their consideration of disability as a cultural sign, Michael Hayes and Rhonda

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Black propose a “reconciliation of confinement,” in which institutionalization or other forms of confinement are considered benevolent and protective environments (124). In these films, the reconciliation is even more confining than institutionalization: Kevin dies. The reconciliation from the constraints of his lived experience is one the viewer recognizes and applauds as Kevin is freed from the confinement of his disability through his death.

Reframing Stereotypic Representations

Norden’s stereotypic roles serve as a tool for students to critique representations of characters with disabilities and their portrayal in film. Students can be guided to recognize the stereotypic and damaging ways that disability is articulated. In this way, the power that these representations have over students is diminished. Films can then be understood in a deeper context, read as the literature they are meant to reinforce. It is essential that we approach films in ways that allow students to be collectively involved in the active construction of knowledge: to read not only the word or images but also read the world through examining and questioning issues of power and equity in the texts and coming to understand the possibilities for change inherent in this interrogation (Freire).

For example, *The Mighty* uses disability as a major—or even sole—facet of Kevin; it is his disability that drives the plot and informs his role as an innocent and superstar, then, finally, a tragic victim. His death at the end of the movie is almost satisfying when we consider the role of the tragic victim. Viewers are essentially told that Kevin’s death is inevitable and necessary. If students are not encouraged to critically explore this narrative, they may feel pity and satisfaction that Kevin redeems his friend, serves his purpose, and then gallantly passes on to a better world. Interrogating this film may allow students to deeply explore the representations of disability in the film.

Another example that can get lost in the film if not critiqued with a critical eye is how Kevin is confined by his physicality and the expectations of others in *The Mighty*. This is confirmed by his mother pleading with the principal to allow him to participate in physical education and by his comments about being mostly alone and finding a refuge in books. He is stymied by his physical limits and is

often cautioned by his anxious mother not to overdo. He hopes for rehabilitation in the form of a cure for his syndrome. This is cleverly portrayed through the construction of the “brave sick boy.” At one point in the film, Kevin shows Max a “research center,” which Max later discovers is an industrial laundry facility. Kevin harbors a secret hope that a cure will be found and he will live to adulthood, a convenient yet inaccurate representation of Morquio syndrome. He is denied this hope, and because he rescues Max, his purpose has been served, and the viewer is satisfied with the resolution: Kevin saves Max, Max emerges from his basement bedroom into full personhood, and Kevin can fade from the film and from life. These representations of disability and the messages about the utility and purpose of people with disabilities in these films can be challenged, and films can provide avenues for teachers to engage their students.

Stephen Safran recommends that teachers use films that accurately portray disability and, ideally, films that feature performers with disabilities who are full members of their communities and who are not portrayed in stereotypical ways.

Recommendations for Using Films That Include People with Disabilities

For teachers to be successful in reframing students’ attitudes toward outcomes for characters with disabilities, two elements are necessary; Kyle Chellew notes: “the appropriate selection of films with sympathetic and accurate depictions of characters and situations; and an ongoing examination of the potential consequences of negative imagery on public attitudes” (28). Similarly, Stephen Safran recommends that teachers use films that accurately portray disability and, ideally, films that feature performers with disabilities who are full members of their communities and who are not portrayed in stereotypical ways (“Using Movies” 45). *The Mighty* meets some of these criteria, but this film also articulates the stereotypes of disability representations often perpetuated in Hollywood film.

Not only should teachers avoid choosing films that show inaccurate representations of people with disabilities, they should also resist choosing a narrative that emphasizes overcoming a disability. As Clare

notes, "the dominant story about disability should be about ableism,^[2] not the inspirational supercrip crap, the believe-it-or-not disability story" (2). One way to avoid this "supercrip crap" is for teachers to select films with depictions that educate students about individual abilities and societal barriers, and inform students about issues such as "accessibility, sexuality, and independent living" (Safran, "The First" 467). These broad topics can be infused into units of literature study, and students can be taught to view film critically. David Considine and Frank Baker note that "for learning to occur the focus has to shift from what they watch to how they watch" (26).

With those points in mind, we propose that teachers carefully choose and assess any movie used in the classroom, and if the film is even peripherally related to disability, prepare to provide discussion about and critique of disability and stereotypes within the films. Safran provides several considerations in choos-

ing movies to be shown in classrooms, including that the teacher (1) preview films and verify the accuracy of portrayals of disability; (2) choose films that cast people with disabilities as characters with disabilities, that portray people with disabilities as full participants in their communities and schools, that include characters that are fully developed so that disability is embedded in the plot and is not the primary focus; and (3) avoid films that sensationalize or stereotype people with disabilities ("Using Movies" 45). We adapted Safran's tool (see fig. 1) to evaluate film for teachers to help them make decisions about the appropriateness of their choice of film.

Another use of the adapted tool to evaluate film would be to have students fill out the table as they watch a film depicting characters with disability. It provides a framework for students when watching the film and critiquing representations of disabilities. Attention to positive and negative stereotypes and ac-

FIGURE 1. Evaluating Film Representations of Disability

Directions: Write the name of the film below. Then highlight or circle the representations of disability you saw in the film. Give two examples of positive representations and two examples of negative representations.

Film: _____

Positive Representations of Disability

Which representations did you see? Place a check by each representation and record specific example(s).

The person with a disability . . .

- has a complex personality with a full range of emotions
- interacts as an equal
- is part of a mainstream setting with people without disabilities
- is portrayed as an ordinary person without superhuman abilities
- provides insight into societal barriers
- is shown as capable of having relationships

Negative Representations of Disability

Which representations did you see? Place a check by each representation and record specific example(s).

The person with a disability is portrayed as . . .

- pitiable or pathetic
- subjected to violence
- sinister or evil
- superhuman, overcoming all barriers through personal determination
- laughable
- a burden
- nonsexual
- living separately from mainstream society

Source: Adapted from Safran, Stephen. "Using Movies to Teach Students about Disabilities." *Teaching Exceptional Children* 32.3 (2000): 44-47. Print.

tively reading movies in the context of representations of disability can assist students “in unlearning pervasive stereotypes and acquiring new and different ways to view human difference” (Connor and Bejoian 59).

Activity: A Class Credo

We end with an activity that could be used to move beyond a discussion with students about representations of people with disabilities after viewing *The Mighty*. The goal of this activity is to help students take their growing understanding of limiting narratives about disability and translate that new un-

derstanding into examining and questioning issues of power and equity in their local reality: their classroom and school. It is important that students move beyond awareness and critique of the representations and stereotypes presented in the films they see. We hope that students will take their awareness and move toward social action within their classrooms and school when it comes to people with disabilities.

In this activity, students will create a classroom credo. To do this, they will view *The Credo for Support* (Kunc and Van der Klift). See Figure 2 for a printed version of the credo.

FIGURE 2. A Credo for Support

Throughout history, people with physical and mental disabilities have been abandoned at birth, banished from society, used as court jesters, drowned and burned during the Inquisition, gassed in Nazi Germany, and still continue to be segregated, institutionalized, tortured in the name of behavior management, abused, raped, euthanized, and murdered. Now, for the first time, people with disabilities are taking their rightful place as fully contributing citizens. The danger is that we will respond with remediation and benevolence rather than equity and respect. And so, we offer you a credo for support.

‘Do not see my disability as a problem. Recognize that my disability is an attribute.’

‘Do not see my disability as a deficit. It is you who see me as deviant and helpless.’

‘Do not try to fix me because I am not broken. Support me. I can make my contribution to the community in my way.’

‘Do not see me as your client. I am your fellow citizen. See me as your neighbor. Remember, none of us can be self-sufficient.’

‘Do not try to modify my behavior. Be still and listen. What you define as inappropriate may be my attempt to communicate with you in the only way I can.’

‘Do not try to change me, you have no right. Help me learn what I want to know.’

‘Do not hide your uncertainty behind “professional” distance. Be a person who listens and does not take my struggle away from me by trying to make it all better.’

‘Do not use theories and strategies on me. Be with me. And when we struggle with each other, let me give that rise to self-reflection.’

‘Do not try to control me. I have a right to my power as a person. What you call non-compliance or manipulation may actually be the only way I can exert control over my life.’

‘Do not teach me to be obedient, submissive, and polite. I need to feel entitled to say no if I am to protect myself.’

‘Do not be charitable towards me. The last thing the world needs is another Jerry Lewis. Be my ally against those who exploit me for their own gratification.’

‘Do not try to be my friend. Get to know me. We may become friends.’

‘Do not help me even if it does make you feel good. Ask me if I need your help. Let me show you how you can best assist me.’

‘Do not admire me. A desire to live a full life does not warrant adoration. Respect me, for respect presumes equity.’

‘Do not tell, correct and lead. Listen, support and follow.’

‘Do not work on me. Work with me.’

‘Do not work on me. Work with me.’

‘Do not work on me. Work with me.’

Source: Kunc, Norman, and Emma Van der Klift. “A Credo for Support.” *normemma.com*. Broad Reach Training and Resources, n.d. Web. 13 Mar. 2010. <www.normemma.com/videos/credo-slo.htm>. Reprinted with permission.

The Class Credo students create can be about a commitment to inclusive language in the classroom or what types of action the class will take to shift practices that are not supportive to those with disabilities. Not only is this a writing activity that causes students to move from analysis into action, it also serves as an authentic writing project set in a real rhetorical situation.

The Credo for Support is dedicated to Tracy Latimer who was born with cerebral palsy. National attention in Canada surrounded her father as he was charged with second degree murder in her death. He served a relatively brief sentence in prison and was paroled. Her death sparked much debate over the ethics of euthanasia and the rights of people with disabilities. We explain her story to our students before we show them the video. It is a powerful counter-narrative to the representation of Kevin in *The Mighty* as people with disabilities speak out against common assumptions and stereotypes about disability. Introducing this credo provides a springboard for teachers to discuss stereotypical ways in which disabilities are portrayed in the media as well as their own assumptions.

After reviewing the Credo for Support, students should examine the mission statement of their school and district and have a discussion about inclusive language, support for students with disabilities, and commitment to serving all students. Then, students can assess their daily lives in school and identify how the mission aligns or does not align with their lived experience and their beliefs about disability. Sample questions that may guide their discovery include the following:

- What does the mission statement say about students with disabilities?
- What do you see at our school that matches the mission statement?
- What actions or policies that we have at school match this mission?
- What actions or policies that we have at school do not match this mission?
- What barriers or supports for inclusive attitudes and practices might exist?
- What questions or comments do you have for administrators?

After addressing the school district's mission, students can develop their own Class Credo. To help

students with this process, they must begin to understand the ways schools are organized and managed to recognize the underlying sociopolitical issues connected to disability.

The Class Credo students create can be about a commitment to inclusive language in the classroom or what types of action the class will take to shift practices that are not supportive to those with disabilities. Not only is this a writing activity that causes students to move from analysis into action, it also serves as an authentic writing project set in a real rhetorical situation. Writing this credo provides students with an opportunity to write in a real genre to a real audience for a real purpose. A project such as this is directly related to NCTE Standards 4, 7, 9, and 11.

Conclusion

Our hope is that this article helps English teachers consider how disability is presented in film, from narrow and stereotypic representation through more nuanced and complex characterization—if disability is presented at all. Using films in class can expose students to a broader examination of disability representations in popular culture. They can also be read in the context of “social messages” from which students and teachers draw meanings that shape their lives (Bruna 115). We recognize that students can be taught to contest and reexamine the disability stereotypes so prevalent in films used in classrooms. By using film as another text used for analysis, we can facilitate students' reading film in more appropriate ways that affirm and celebrate difference and that challenge the representation of disability. 

Notes

1. The authors would like to acknowledge Susan Groenke for her thoughtful and constructive feedback in our process of writing this article.
2. Thomas Hehir defines *ableism* as “society's pervasive negative attitude about disability” that “often makes the world unwelcoming and inaccessible for people with disabilities” (9).

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