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Adding a Disability Perspective When Reading Adolescent Literature: Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

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[(essay date winter 2009) *In the following essay, Crandall revisits how adolescent literature is taught to minorities and students with disabilities in the wake of reading about the experiences of Arnold, a hydrocephalic Native student, in Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.*]

For ten years I was an 11th- and 12th-grade English teacher at a K-12, fully inclusive, public school. Our mission was to respect the individuality of every student, to promote each child as capable and unique, and to hold all students accountable for their personal best. Classrooms were integrated with mixed-abilities from several cultural backgrounds because we felt a diverse learning environment was the best learning environment. Teachers and students were expected to be flexible, creative, self-disciplined and hard working. Maybe this is why I feel silly. It only occurred to me recently to teach students the importance of questioning how adolescent literature portrays what it means to be "able" and "normal" in any given society. Although my students represented a wide spectrum of abilities, talents, limitations and struggles, I failed to coach them to probe books for how they construct what it means to be normal. My epiphany to this perspective arrived after reading Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*.

Almost all literature occupies some sort of binary between able and disabled bodies, yet I didn't facilitate my students to think about exploring books in this way. Reading Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, however, made me wonder how teachers might encourage adolescent readers to challenge and/or applaud the status quo of normal schooling. Yes, Alexie's text is controversial for several reasons, but it fosters a great deal of progressive thinking, too.

Arnold Spirit's Story

Alexie's style, voice and originality are always entertaining, and I agree with Bruce Barcott (2007) that if it appears that an Alexie line "has an unexpected poetry to it, that's because it was written by a poet." Each chapter in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is written lyrically. In addition, illustrations crafted by Ellen Forney make the reading experience unique. Her artwork, used as a part of Arnold Spirit's on-going diary, delivers amusing layers to Alexie's story and promotes an alternative way of communicating the narration. Forney's drawings can be used to initiate further interpretations and conversations about how students perceive others who are not like them, especially individuals with disabilities.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian won the 2007 National Book Award for excellence. The story is about Arnold Spirit, Jr., Spokane Indian student, who makes his way off the Indian reservation and into a neighboring, white-community school. Arnold was born with hydrocephalus, which causes him to be a student with learning disabilities. These disabilities are secondary to his success, however, and a part of who he is--an athlete, a promising Spokane student, and an American teenager.

Alexie writes from a Spokane Indian heritage. Many of his short stories, poems, and novels come from the juncture where one character tries to fuse an understanding of their Native American traditions with the hegemonic discourses of a dominant, American society. In *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Alexie uses Arnold's heritage, as well as his disabilities, to take issue with how educational divisions often partition American schools.

Arnold has a self-deprecating wit with which he uses to poke fun at himself, his reservation, the dominant culture and the discussion of what it means to be a success story in the United States. He writes in his diary, "I wish I were magical, but I am really just a poor-ass-reservation kid living with his poor-ass Spokane family on the poor-ass Spokane Indian Reservation" (7). On being educated on this reservation, Arnold writes, "But, we reservation Indians don't get to realize our dreams. We don't get those chances. Or choices. We're just poor. That's all we are" (14). Lacking upward mobility on the reservation appears to be Alexie's criticism.

Arnold describes his reservation school as "some kind of prison work farm for our liberal, white, vegetarian do-gooders and conservative, white missionary saviors" who are there to teach (30). His teachers don't represent the tribal community; instead, they are from the outside, majority-dominant American culture. At the reservation school Arnold discovers his geometry textbook is thirty years old and is the same one his mother used when she was a student. This angers Arnold, and he throws the book across the room where it hits his math teacher in the nose. The teacher responds, "When I first started teaching here, that's what we did to the rowdy ones, you know? We beat them. That's how we were taught to teach you. We were supposed to kill the Indian to save the child" (35). The teacher then continues, "I don't want you to fail. I don't want you to fade away. You deserve better" (40) and offers, "The only thing you kids are being taught is how to give up" (42). He advises Arnold to leave the reservation school and attend a school on the outside.

Arnold's school experience in a marginalized reservation school parallels how some special education students are placed in marginalized classrooms. Arnold Spirit is denied an equal, regular and equitable education until he accesses it off the reservation. Arnold's reservation school might be a metaphor for those who are not offered a fair chance at education because they are secluded from accessing better schools and classes.

Arnold Spirit's Disability

Hydrocephalus, the condition Arnold had as a newborn, occurs when brain fluid is not reabsorbed into the circulatory system. In "normal" children, cerebrospinal fluid provides a layer of protection where the brain and spinal chord float, but in children born with hydrocephalus, the extra fluid causes an expansion of the head. This fluid pressure forces the brain against the bones of the skull and, in return, can destroy brain tissue. Eye coordination, motor skills, muscles, memory, social behavior, learning, judgment, and personality can be affected, depending on the location of the swelling fluid.

In order to understand hydrocephalus, medically, one relies upon the hard work, research, exploration, and expertise of doctors, nurses, and pharmacists who add knowledge to the field. Their work saves lives, relieves pain, and makes improvements for individuals who have impairments. Under traditional medical models of education, however, disabilities are seen as deficits that need to be altered, fixed, or corrected by institutions, teachers and experts. Medical models treat the disability and not the individual, pushing the disabled individual toward a perception of normal.

Not all children born with hydrocephalus experience the educational opportunities Alexie's fictional character, Arnold, receives. Arnold refers to his hydrocephalus as having too much "brain grease" (3), but for him the condition isn't cause for mental setback. Arnold explains his hydrocephalus gives him a "lopsided view" (3) of the world from Indian Health Service-prescribed glasses, but his disability is never a handicap. Instead, Alexie empowers the protagonist with a strong sense of humor: "My feet were a size eleven in third grade! With my big feet and pencil body, I looked like a capital L walking down the road. And my skull was enormous" (3). Arnold's seizures, suffered twice a week, are described as *damaging old damage* (3). With a "st-st-st-stutter and a lissssssssthhthththp" (4), Arnold confesses, "And if you're fourteen years old, like me, and you're still stuttering and lisping, then you become the biggest retard in the world" (4). He is aware of his differences (and the labels that come with them), but celebrates who he is with a fight and, eventually, with a flight to another school. He doesn't allow his disability to hinder his success.

Arnold's hydrocephalus is not as central to the story, or as controversial, as his decision to leave the Spokane reservation school. Yet, when giving this decision a disabled reading, it progressively promotes access to the most inclusive, challenging classrooms available. Drawing parallels between Arnold's disability and his reservation experience demonstrates the double minority status of Arnold Spirit, Jr. as a disabled Spokane boy who is kept away from "regular" society until another school opens its doors to him.

Toward a Disability Interpretation of Arnold's Departure

Disability becomes synonymous with second-class citizenship when teachers and schools use such labels to exclude individuals with disabilities. The manner in which disabilities are constructed needs to be questioned (Danforth & Gabel, 4). Deconstructing able and disabled bodies is at the heart of offering adolescent literature a disabled reading. A disabled reading, for instance, of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, challenges assumptions made about minority students--including Native Americans and students with disabilities--which, in return, politicizes the way students from minority communities are given access to education within their schools. Alexie brings Arnold's double-minority status to the forefront and makes readers wonder whether or not it is acceptable for him to leave his reservation in order to gain access to a better education. In the days of No Child Left Behind, the story pushes an agenda for non-traditional students, who have traditionally been left behind, to have better access.

The reservation teacher's advice offers words to Arnold that mirror differences between medical models for disabilities and socially constructed models that question the true intentions of "special" education. Within a medical model, individuals are diagnosed, labeled, prescribed, controlled, institutionalized, medicated, studied, probed, beaten, shackled, contained, restricted, denied, and oppressed (Shapiro, Chapter 4). In contrast, the socially constructed model requires rethinking diagnosis, labels, prescriptions, and restrictions. The similarities between Arnold's experience in *The Absolutely True Autobiography of a Part-Time Indian* and the way individuals with disabilities have traditionally been treated in American schools are obvious. Whereas the geometry teacher admits educators were supposed to "kill the Indian to save the child," the medical model, he also admits, "I don't want you to fail. I don't want you to fade away. You deserve better," a socially constructed model that advocates for student success. Blaming the individual for a disability (in Arnold's case, being an Indian with hydrocephalus) and mandating they adapt to normal society (in this case, American society) is different than blaming society for how an individual with a disability or who is from a particular culture is accepted. Under a socially constructed model, society is challenged for the way it treats its marginalized populations. The socially constructed model should be important to individuals who teach adolescent literature because many of our students arrive from marginal populations and homes. As educators, we should be asking ourselves how our curriculum disables the students we teach.

Disabilities are not to be viewed as conditions needing to be cured or healed, but rather as differences to be accommodated and accepted (Taylor, xx). The argument against a medical model is that its language, psychological measurements, and behavioral

science "formulate a clinical discourse that casts perceived biological or cultural differences as educational illness requiring proper diagnosis, quarantine, and treatment by scientific professionals" (Danforth, 84). Labels placed on class, race, ability, and gender positions, should not become determinants of one's identity (Rice, 21), unless someone is claiming it for them. Yet, the longstanding, exclusionary practices in U.S. public schools are known (Kozol, 2005; Ferri & Connor, 2006).

Hierarchical ranking (Gallagher, 71) has historically aligned itself with importance of bloodlines and ancestry, and these eugenic concerns have resulted in many practices of socialization (evident through both Indian reservations and schooling institutions). Immigrants to the United States, in fact, often experienced an educational system which forced dominant cultural values onto them while devaluing the experience of their diverse, home cultures. The definitions for "normal" came from privileged people (Kliwer, 95). Individuals who didn't fit the acceptable categories designed by such people were placed in "special education" (Solis & Connor, 107). Therefore, the disabled body has historically been defined as deficient.

The argument can be made that a medical model for treating disability as abnormal is similar to creating Indian reservations designed to keep Native Americans from the rest of society. Families and students with disabilities who want inclusive education should be supported and encouraged. Comparably, students seeking academic instruction different from what they receive at their regular school, like Arnold, should be allowed to do so. The best education should be available to all.

The new school Arnold attends in Reardan, Washington, represents regular education. With a medical model perspective, Arnold's reservation school exists only because Native Americans have been deemed not normal; they need to be kept away, reserved, from regular society. This thinking creates inequity and holds abnormal individuals accountable for their own abnormality, and not the other way around. Because of labels, a separate treatment, facility, and placement occurs, and this is why thinking about education from a traditional, medical model falls short; it discriminates against minority populations.

Gordy, the nerdy white boy at Reardon who also feels outside the norm of his peers, tells Arnold:

Well, life is a constant struggle between being an individual and being a member of the community ... in the early days of humans, the community was our only protection against predators, and against starvation. We survived because we trusted one another ... So, back in the day, weird people threatened the strength of the tribe. If you weren't good at making food, shelter, or babies, then you were tossed out on your own ... weird people still get banished.(132)

Disabled and abnormal individuals have historically received positions of alienation. A minority status has always been placed in opposition of a prescribed, majority-based notion of what it means to be able. If one is perceived as unable, he or she is pulled out of the community and kept away.

A socially constructed model for full inclusion promotes individuality and the acceptance of all individuals. In inclusive classrooms students are treated with dignity, and belonging comes to the forefront. Kunc (1992) explains that efforts of kindness, support, respect, dignity and belonging are extremely important for any individual to self-actualize (<http://normemma.com/armaslow.htm>); therefore, assisting students toward a place of self-actualization should be the goal for all educators, within all classrooms.

Behind a socially constructed model for inclusion are questions about basic human rights. In developing countries, individuals with disabilities see survival as a first priority and education as a luxury (Peters, 314). Survival, it can be argued, is the case of Arnold when he goes to school on the reservation, until he leaves to take advantage of the luxury allowed at Reardon. Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006) writes that students must experience academic success while maintaining their own cultural awareness and competence. Arnold develops critical consciousness while challenging the status quo (that of his new school) and his culture (that of his reservation school) to make sense of his own identity and individuality. At Reardan, his academic success is allowed to flourish; however, his awareness of Spokane traditions is not necessarily promoted.

Arnold's act of choosing the school he wishes to attend is central to the issue of educational equity because, at the heart of it all, he has the right to make a decision for himself. Reardon is a wealthy, white farm town, and Arnold notes, "I was the only kid, white or Indian, who knew that Charles Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities*. And let me tell you, we Indians were the worst of times and those Reardon kids were the best of times" (50). Arnold assesses Reardon as offering students more opportunities, and he chooses to walk the twenty-mile journey to leave his "worst of times" behind.

At his new school, Arnold finds himself in challenging classes with success-driven peers. The challenging classes and encouragement are a part of the socially constructed model for disabilities instruction. In inclusive schools, educators have the responsibility and power to shape the curriculum and to design the expectations for meeting the needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities. These schools place the responsibility of curricular-adaptation on themselves, instead of ostracizing individuals with disabilities for their limitations (Finders & Hynds, 95). Arnold Spirit experiences such design and addresses it as follows:

I suppose it had something to do with confidence. I mean, I'd always been the lowest Indian on the reservation totem pole- I wasn't expected to be good so I wasn't. But in Reardon, my coach and other players wanted me to be good. They needed me to be good. They expected me to be. And so I became good. I wanted to live up to expectations. I guess that's what it comes down to. The power of expectations.(180)

Within the social construction model, eccentricities and differences are encouraged and supported because a solid, student-centered education exists for all students. Individual achievement is the goal, and classrooms become supportive environments to meet the needs of multiple learners.

Literacy as Survival

In his essay "**Superman and Me**" Sherman Alexie discusses his home as a print-rich environment. Alexie (1997) writes about being a reader:

A little Indian boy teaches himself to read at an early age and advances quickly. He reads "Grapes of Wrath" in kindergarten when other children are struggling through "Dick and Jane." If he'd been anything but an Indian boy living on the reservation, he might have been called a prodigy. But he is an Indian boy living on the reservation and is simply an oddity. He grows into a man who often speaks of his childhood in the third-person, as if it will somehow dull the pain and make him sound more modest about his talents.(3-6)

Marlinda White-Kaulaity (2007), a researcher who explores Native American literacy practices, recalled how she, too, was an oddity because of her literacy practices. Her culture didn't value print-text; instead, the spoken word carried greater importance. She wrote, "Because the written word was often used to discredit Native American culture or rob us of our rights, writing and reading are considered by some to be 'white man's' activities" (561). Any one classroom creates a hegemonic structure. For many students, this structure immediately denies access to equity because students may "distrust" the school-work--in this case the literacy valued by the dominant culture.

Challenging how texts are constructed opens the door for new voices to be heard. Who makes the decisions that some students receive a particular type of education while others receive another? Why are some students allowed access to materials, like advanced placement, while others aren't even mainstreamed in classrooms with their peers? Which students are conditioned to join the cultural ranks of those already in power, and which students are denied access to such conditioning? Should literacy matter for all students?

In an interview with Rita Williams-Garcia, Alexie admits, "I suppose Arnold would think that literacy is a form of self-defense. If one reads enough books one has a fighting chance. Or better, one's chances of survival increase with each book one reads" (http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2007_ypl_alexie_interv.html). Acknowledging that *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is autobiographical, Alexie promotes literacy as a means for survival. He does not allow the labels placed on Arnold as "different" to overpower Arnold's literacy practices and success in school.

There is a tragic sadness, though, in Alexie's adolescent novel that arrives with Arnold's success. When Arnold attends Reardan, he enters a world that many on his reservation don't know. Attending Reardan allows him privilege and acceptance into the society that has historically created institutions and reservations designed to oppress. Arnold notes, "... Indians have forgotten that reservations were meant to be death camps" (217). He understands that his new place in society sets him up for opposition with his old place. Arnold's best friend on the reservation, Rowdy, operates as a reminder of where he comes from, and stirs within Arnold what is important about Spokane culture. Arnold's story is one of negotiating boundaries between two worlds. He recognizes a nomadic ancestry (229), but also that his people had better adaptation skills before the white man and their institutions arrived.

Arnold's decision to leave the reservation comes at a cost of how he is perceived by those on the reservation. His place on Reardon's basketball team is a symbolic "court" for cultural identity. Although Reardan and the reservation basketball teams find themselves in battle twice, Arnold and Rowdy play the final game, one on one, without keeping score (230).

Implications for Teachers of Adolescent Literature

Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is accessible for educators who work with adolescent readers. The story has the potential to promote discussions among a wide variety of students: those with disabilities, those who are seen as able, those from majority-dominant backgrounds, and those from minority cultures. The text asks its readers to think about how individuals who are not normal are treated by schools. Examining Arnold's experience on and off the reservation through a perspective that questions socially constructed roles for marginalized individuals allows for an original way of interpreting literature.

Multiple lines of vision need to exist when exploring any classroom text and a disability reading offers a new way of seeing how our culture promotes and demotes particular populations. All students need to read. All students need to be challenged. All students need to write. But most importantly, all students need to belong. Offering students an opportunity to question how a piece of adolescent literature constructs definitions of an able or disabled character, provides an additional platform for how power structures are defined in our society. Teachers of adolescent literature should ask disability questions of the books they teach.

Although only *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* is read from a disability lens here, issues of able and disabled labels can be found in most literature. Drawing on a few adolescent texts my students read--*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, *Monster*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*--it is easily noted that disability issues have always existed in my classroom, although I didn't pay enough attention to them. In addition, several classics--*Of Mice and Men*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Color Purple*, *Cry The Beloved Country*--are worthy of disabled readings, too. Literature provides a window into how cultures create power dynamics and roles for its people--roles deserving challenging questions and rethinking.

I encourage disabled readings and interpretations of adolescent literature because I recognize the potential for creating democratic classrooms through the art of questioning. During my 10 years in an inclusive educational environment, our school held that that difference and diversity should act as bridges rather than barriers to communication, and I believe a similar approach should exist in understanding how literature is constructed and interpreted. Asking teachers to question how we promote, or challenge, the construction of able and disabled individuals can only be good for the diverse student populations we teach.

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