

“Ableism” Kindergarten - Lesson Plan Reflection - “Notes to the Teacher”

Susan Laugh’s Book:

<https://readwj.files.wordpress.com/2022/11/susan-laugh-jeanne-willis.pdf>

Lesson Plan Link:

<http://egeorges.opened.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/3572/2023/04/EGEORGES-DIVERSE-CLASSROOMS-SOCIALSTUDIES-Susan-Laugh-Ableism-UNBC.Lesson.2023.docx>

Thompson (2015) defines ableism as :

a form of discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities (mental, emotional, and/or physical). Able-ism maintains an assumption that people with physical and/or mental disabilities are not normal individuals.

The goal of this lesson on ableism is to help “normalize disability” for kindergartner students. People have different ways of living and moving through the world. The key word to focus on “*different*.” I use this term in the lesson to refer to people with special needs, as this terminology is familiar with children, and it highlights that disabled people have different needs. I wish to promote a learning environment that is inclusive of disabled people and want my students to that disabled people often can do the same activities. I wish to have the students think about what kinds of supports a disabled person might need to participate. Building empathy and connecting how we are the same even when we are different is important when building a safe and inclusive environment.

In the story, Susan requires a wheelchair for mobility. We do not know this until the end of the book. When teaching it is important to read the book in its entirety before discussing the topic of ableism. Ask the students, “What things might be hard to do when you have difficulties with moving your legs?” or “What can we do to support people with disabilities?” This is a difficult discussion to have with students who have limited life experience, so it is important to keep the discussion within the frame of the story or life experiences of the class. In doing so, it helps to give concrete examples of how people with disabilities can do many of the same things we can if we give them proper support. For example, Susan swims with *water wings*. This flotation device helps early swimmers to learn how to swim, and for Susan it provides extra support for her arms which is needed due to the difficulty with her legs. Although disabled, we see that she can enjoy swimming, so we should include her in such activities. In primary grades, the idea of being fair is a strong motivator for kids. In addition to discussing shared hobbies and interests, we also bring attention to emotions and how we can all feel happy, sad, worried or angry. This helps to build empathy and understanding.

When discussing similar hobbies and interests, and the various ways which make us feel different emotions, I recommend keeping the language as simple as possible. We should focus primarily on the examples shown in the book. However, we should also allow some time for students to brainstorm beyond these examples based on their interests and life experience. The time needed and the breadth of examples will depend on the class ability levels. For the journal portion of the activity, remember the life experience of a kindergartner

is limited, so students might need concrete examples. In such cases, confirm if they share the same interests. For example, "I like playing video games. Is that something that Susan might like to do? Is that something **you** like to do?"

I recommend focusing on discussing the similarities in hobbies\interests and things that make us feel sad, happy and mad, rather than the differences.

That Susan uses a wheelchair is obvious at the end of the story, but it might come as a surprise to the students because she does many of the same things that able-bodied persons do. Interestingly, during my lesson, one student asked, "What happened to Susan?" For this student, Susan was an able-bodied person who suddenly became disabled at the end of the story. It is only when we explicitly state that Susan was always disabled, and then revisit the story, pointing out the wheel-chair clues in the pictures, that students truly understand that Susan was always disabled and she could always do all the things that able-bodied persons could do when provided support.

At the kindergarten level most of the students are just beginning to read, so having a picture book like Susan Laughs is essential, as it uses simple language, provides detailed visuals to express the emotions and visually demonstrates how Susan can participate in various activities. The story is great for inferring and for building empathy towards disabled persons.

Ableism is complex topic but by focusing on the positive similarities we can more easily put students in the shoes of Susan. Students can understand how despite Susan's disability thanks to receiving support, she can still do

most of the same things as those without disabilities.

***Additional Teaching Notes:*** Kindergartner students have a limited time in which they can sit and discuss something, even when engaged. I recommend keeping the discussion short and providing examples ahead of time with visuals to help keep students engaged. Take pictures from the book or use other age-appropriate visuals along with their associated words (swim, dance, sing, swing, etc). You can also mime actions (swing, swim, etc.) and have the class copy your actions when discussing the examples of things that Susan likes to do. This helps ELL students and reinforces learning of the words for all students.

One potential issue of the final journal activity is that some students might find it hard to draw which can be discouraging. One possible alternative is to have the same actions/hobbies available as *labeled* pictures. Students would choose their favorite hobby/action to cut and paste it into their journals. The pictures should be grayscale or black and white so the students could later them.

**Final note:** Students will need an additional task to do after they finish the journal activity. This should be explained to the class *prior* to starting the journal activity. Here is a possible example:

“When you finish your journal, please do silent reading or work on this bonus worksheet. For this worksheet please, color the different emotions based on the “Spot the Emotion Song.”

”Spot the Emotion Song” Video URL Link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0076ZF4jg3o>



*Susan Laughs Images* - Clues that Susan needs to use a wheelchair.



The final page showing Susan in her wheelchair:



## References

Thompson, Sherwood.(2015). "Able-ism." In *Encyclopedia of Diversity and Social Justice*, edited by Sherwood Thompson. Rowman & Littlefield

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