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Rethinking "We Are All Special": Anti-Ableism Curricula in Early Childhood Classrooms

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It is 8:45 a.m. in Ms. Lopez' Pre-K classroom, and children have found their spots of choice for morning circle. Matt and Carrie are seated in bean bag chairs, Amir is sitting in his wheelchair, Nadia chooses to stand, and the rest of the students are sitting around the rug. The morning circle ritual begins with the children greeting each other. They say "good morning," "how are you feeling," and several other phrases in a variety of languages (Spanish, Arabic, American Sign Language [ASL], Mandarin, and Hindi), as well as through various communication modalities (including a pictorial board and an iPad Communication Application), reflecting the diversity in Ms. Lopez's class. The teacher then invites the children to sing one of the class songs that they have learned so far this year, "Under One Sky." They sing the song in English, but many words are simultaneously signed in ASL.

Next, Ms. Lopez invites Meena, "the child of the day," to share something that pertains to this month's theme, which is "My family." Meena has brought a diya to show her peers and explains how her family lights this oil-lamp every year during the festival of Diwali. Her friends ask her many questions and take turns holding the diya, while Meena explains what she loves best about this holiday. The morning circle ends by Ms. Lopez reading from the book "Families" (Kuklin, 2010) which depicts the wide range of diversity among families, with regard to ethnicity, culture, structure, or disability.

Introduction: Diversity, Democracy, and Inclusivity

We live in a society characterized by the coexistence of individuals with a wide range of intersecting group identities (e.g., gender, race, disability, social class, etc.). In such a society, it is important that educational settings mirror the diversity within which they exist, and actively prepare children for citizenship in a pluralistic democracy through meaningful and sustained opportunities to engage with each other across differences. Today, there is increasing global awareness of the value of educating children inclusively in heterogeneous classrooms with regard to race, gender, social class, religion, disability, or other identity markers. The Salamanca Statement on Special Needs Education (UNESCO, 1994), an international declaration adopted by 92 governments, outlines a commitment to inclusive education

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as an educational imperative and as the most effective way to combat discrimination and build acceptance in communities. Booth, Ainscow, and Kingston (2004) developed the *Index for Inclusion for Early Childhood Environments*, in which they emphasize the need for “Minimizing *all* barriers to play, learning and participation for *all* children. . . [which] involves a deep recognition of both the differences and similarities between all children and young people” (p. 3). To these ends, early childhood classrooms should be spaces that reflect the full range of human differences, and in which all dimensions of human variations are valued.

Mirroring these ideals, the Division for Early Childhood of the Council for Exceptional Children (DEC) recommends that practitioners provide supports and services in natural and inclusive environments (DEC, 2014). However, U.S. Department of Education data from 2012 cites that fewer than half of 3- to 5-year-old children with disabilities are educated in general education settings, and the field in general has made little progress over decades toward inclusion (Barton & Smith, 2015). Consequently, many nondisabled children may not have sufficient opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with those with disabilities, and vice-versa. It should be noted here that our usage of the term *nondisabled children*, rather than *typically developing children*, reflects a disability studies in education (DSE) perspective which questions constructed notions of normalcy and views disability as a positive identity marker. Ironically, even when young children with disabilities are physically present in general education classrooms, they are likely to remain on the social periphery and, when compared with nondisabled students, are at greater risk for social isolation and bullying (Rossetti, 2014).

> “Even within social justice curricula aimed at anti-bias education, disability often remains unmentioned”

Although these findings are troubling, they should not come as a surprise; in the context of a society in which disability continues to be stigmatized and devalued, merely placing children with disabilities in classrooms with their nondisabled peers is unlikely to achieve the envisioned outcome of acceptance and social integration. As Allport (1979) explicated in his seminal studies on intergroup prejudice, physical proximity, alone, is not enough to reduce bias; rather, prejudice reduction is most likely to occur when members of different groups are positioned as having equal status, and institutionally supported to collaborate in pursuit of common goals. One can draw from Allport’s work that, to position members of diverse groups as having equal status, their group identities should be named, and their differences valued. Perhaps then the problem is that, although disability is a form of human diversity, in early childhood education and early childhood special education (EC/ECSE) for children ages 3 to 8, it is generally not acknowledged as such; indeed, even within social justice curricula aimed at anti-bias education, disability often remains unmentioned (Lalvani, 2015).

Our attitudes and biases toward groups take root early in life. Contrary to popular beliefs, young children *do* notice differences. They classify and evaluate people based on categories like race, gender, or physical characteristics, and as early as the preschool years, they begin to recognize social hierarchies based on systems of power and privilege, and internalize cultural stereotypes

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(Boutte, 2008; Derman-Sparks, 2008). The fact that children notice differences, or that they classify, based on it is not, in itself, a problem. Rather, the problem is that, through the responses they receive from adults around them, or through the lack of conversation about their observations, children can learn that some kinds of differences are less desirable, and certain groups less valued. EC/ECSE settings are microcosms of society; they are informed by, and simultaneously perpetuate, hierarchies among groups through language, pedagogies, and hidden curricula (Robinson & Diaz, 2009). With regard to disabilities, EC/ECSE curricula can be further implicated in the production of otherness and the perpetuation of stigmas related to disability, through restrictive messages it imparts to children about the “normal” human body and mind (Connor & Gabel, 2010). These may present obstacles for genuine friendship development among children with and without disabilities.

DEC recommends that practitioners should promote social-emotional development among children by encouraging them to initiate and sustain positive interactions with peers, through a variety of guided supports (DEC, 2014). EC/ECSE educators are in an ideal position to disrupt ideologies about normalcy through the curriculum they teach and through the pedagogies they use (Robinson & Diaz, 2009). Rejecting the notion that children can ever be too young to understand issues such as prejudice, social justice educators make a case for pedagogies in EC/ECSE that address biases in schools and society (Derman-Sparks, 2008; Hyland, 2010; Nieto, 1999). However, there is little attention to the ways that young children begin to construct ideas about people with disabilities, and anti-bias programs in schools have historically neglected the role of *ableism* (Lalvani, 2015).

Ableism refers to the persistent devaluing of disability, or the belief that disability is an inherently negative state of being (Campbell, 2009). Ableist cultural beliefs surround us; young children internalize negative messages about disability as undesirable or pitiable through media, literature, educational practices, and cultural discourses (Baglieri & Shapiro, 2017). DSE is a field of inquiry that attends to ableism. DSE emerged in response to a collective opposition to the labeling, sorting, and segregation of children in schools, and is grounded in a commitment to reducing stigmas attached to disability, undoing the damage caused by ableist discourses and practices in schools, confronting academic and social exclusion, and creating learning environments conducive to the full acceptance and participation of heterogeneous students in schools (Brantlinger, 2009). DSE scholars argue that disrupting ableism can only be achieved if teachers position disability as a valued form of human diversity, create spaces for rethinking the constructs of disability and normalcy, and teach their students to embrace differences without stigmatizing them (Connor & Gabel, 2010; Ferri & Bacon, 2011).

Not only is ableism generally left unaddressed in schools, the *otherness* of individuals with disabilities is often manufactured or reproduced through EC/ECSE curricula. Problematic beliefs about disability as a sad, burdensome, or pitiable state of being, and about people with disabilities as either evil villains,

tragic victims, or as inspirational heroes, proliferate children's literature (Cologon, 2013). Examples of these include the pitiable Tiny Tim in *The Christmas Carol*, the terrifying Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, or the "inspirational" Helen Keller (who is presented, unidimensionally, as a woman who "overcame" her disability). In addition, children are enculturated into the ideologies of "normalcy" through language, texts, songs, expectations, and activities (Connor & Gabel, 2010). They come to understand that certain ways of being are privileged, while others are considered non-normative and undesirable. Those educators who endeavor to address disability at all often end up downplaying human differences through the watered-down message of "we are all special," and children can miss out on the opportunity to learn to appreciate the full range of human diversity and develop an understanding of ableism.

Contrary to popular belief, not only are young children likely to notice differences related to disability, but, when given the opportunity, can be engaged in complex explorations about society's responses to this form of human variation (Lalvani, 2015). Unfortunately, disability is often avoided as a topic of conversation in the classroom, and many educators operate under the assumption that it need not be addressed if children do not openly ask. Sapon-Shevin (2017) critiqued the silences surrounding the topic of disability in schools and recommends curricular approaches that use "teachable moments" to address the existence of difference and diversity. We concur and, using a DSE lens which is explicitly focused on reducing the stigmas attached to disability and confronting ableism in schools, we extend these discussions further, by providing some concrete ways in which teachers can purposefully infuse anti-ableist lessons into the EC/ECSE curriculum.

Strategies for Anti-Ableist Awareness in Early Childhood Classrooms

Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) described a framework for anti-bias education in EC/ECSE programs as a way to support all young children and families feel affirmed or valued, and to become contributing members of society. Their framework incorporates four goals that promote anti-bias teaching and learning for EC/ECSE classrooms. Based on these four goals, we discuss applications of disability and ableism within EC/ECSE social justice–based multicultural curricula, using a DSE lens, so that young children can explore issues of bias and discrimination across all aspects of diversity with a goal to promote inclusivity. In addition, following each section which specifically addresses one of Derman-Sparks and Edwards's (2010) anti-bias education goals, we provide a table with additional curricular activities aligned with the particular goal. We recommend that when using these curricular ideas, teachers use inclusive approaches (e.g., Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014) to design teaching and learning with multiple entry points so that children with a variety of abilities and preferred modes of communication can participate. We have come to these ideas through our work in teacher

education and through our professional development activities pertaining to anti-ableism work in schools. Although we make recommendations that might be infused across a myriad of EC/ECSE settings, we urge educators to engage with colleagues, families, and children in localized decision making to ensure curriculum is relevant to young children in their particular educational settings.

Goal 1: Each Child Will Demonstrate Self-Awareness, Confidence, Family Pride, and Positive Social Identities

A common interdisciplinary unit in EC/ECSE classrooms pertains to families; having young children explore and take pride in their families, their culture, and their heritage presents immense opportunity to talk about variations across identities. However, as noted earlier, all too often, social justice–based multicultural curricula in EC/ECSE generally ignore disability as an identity category, and the implicit messages that children receive through such silences reinforce deficit perspectives of disability (Sapon-Shevin, 2017). Thus, honoring disability identity, within lessons that aim to instill pride in one's families and culture, is vitally important in an inclusive classroom.

Reading books and sharing images of diverse families (some that include disability) is one way to open dialogue. Perhaps teachers might strategically choose books about families who look different, speak different languages, observe different religions, have two dads or two moms, have non-standard family structures, have family members who use a wheelchair or have an intellectual disability, or represent the intersections of these categories. Teachers can lead discussions about how families may be similar and different from our own, but that all are equally valuable. Then, children can share stories with each other about their own families. This presents an opportunity to invite family members to visit the class to share what makes their family unique; here, teachers can purposefully ensure, to the extent possible, that the full range of diversity in families is represented, including disability. Thus, teachers can normalize all family structures and group identities, and children can develop pride in their own family identity while learning to value others. In attempting to implement such activities, we urge that teachers acknowledge the many obstacles (e.g., differences in culturally understood norms about engagement with schools, language barriers, work schedules, or levels of comfort with professionals) that families may face and should seek ways to create greater levels of comfort when welcoming families into the classroom. To mitigate some barriers, we recommend that teachers explain the purpose of the activity, send information home in native languages, host community events that include siblings, and provide supports needed for a classroom visit.

Another way to support children in developing pride around their identity is to teach them the skills they might need to advocate for themselves and others. Many schools have programs that bring nondisabled children into existing self-contained classrooms to

Table 1
Additional Anti-Ableism Activities Based on Derman-Sparks and Edwards's (2010) Goal 1

Goal 1: Each child will demonstrate self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities
Activities
During morning circle, children can learn phrases in various languages and communication modalities that represent the diversity of students in the classroom, including sign language, assistive technologies (AT), and Braille.
Read from books that represent a wide range of diversity in families, such as *Families* or *We Are Family*.
Learn key phrases of a song in a different language, including sign language.
Participate in mindfulness activities and share their experiences afterward with a peer.
Children can describe to a friend (using a variety of communications modalities) ways they learn best, and then share with the class how their friend learns best.
Create a mural that represents the full range of diversity that exists in each child's family, including family structure, ethnicity, disability, gender identity, and so on.
Choose a family from the book, *A Life Like Mine* (UNICEF, 2006), to further explore cultures or children's experiences around the world, in order to also teach about differences that are not necessarily represented in the classroom.
Using the book, *A Life Like Mine*, explore the idea of multiple identities, which shares the experiences of children across the world with multiple identities and a wide range of life circumstances. For instance, p. 94-95 highlights the experiences of disability in five different countries, focusing on accessibility and discrimination.
Resources
Families by Susan Kuklin (2010)
We Are Family by Patricia Hegarty (2018)
A Life Like Mine: How Children Live Around the World by UNICEF (2006)

play with or help children with disabilities. Rather than setting up such a helper/helpee model, all children could have dedicated sessions or after school opportunities to learn skills for navigating new situations or making friends, thus providing opportunities to discuss differences and identities. This model could replace traditional deficit-oriented curricula often found in schools, which place a burden on individual children with disabilities to adapt to normative ways of knowing, being, and doing, as opposed to creating inclusive communities that recognize and celebrate diversity as a valuable aspect of identity. In these sessions, young children could explore ways to ask for what they need to be successful and how to make their school more inclusive for all (Table 1).



Goal 2: Each Child Will Experience Comfort and Joy With Human Diversity, Have Accurate Language for Human Differences, and Form Deep Caring Human Connections

It is not uncommon for educators to begin the school year with community building activities which allow for children to get to know and appreciate each other, and which highlight both the commonalities and diversity among us. One example of such an activity might be to have students walk (or roll) to the middle of a circle if they identify with a statement, such as "I would like to make friends in class this year" or "I like ice cream." Within such an activity, teachers might intentionally infuse specific aspects of diversity by including statements such as "I celebrate a religious holiday at home" or "I know someone who has a disability." Children in the middle could then turn to a friend and answer a follow-up question, such as "What are some ways you can make friends this year?" "What kind of ice cream is your favorite?" "What holiday do you celebrate?" and "What does disability mean to you?" This activity can be adapted to include children who are nonverbal, or for whom expressive language is developing, by using picture cards or iPad technology. This can lead to a discussion, facilitated by the teacher, or a read-aloud from a book which leads to deeper understanding of any of the topics.

Young children can begin learning to critique normalcy while developing the literacy skills prioritized in many EC/ECSE curricula. Ideologies about normalcy related to the human body begin early in schools; through preschool rhymes, poems (e.g., "Ten little fingers, ten little toes, two little ears and one little nose. . ."; Fox, 2008), stories, and visual representations, children are enculturated to understand that the human body looks and functions a certain way. In contrast, teachers can seize opportunities for students to reconsider and redefine normalcy itself. In the beloved children's book *One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish* (Dr. Seuss, 1960), the author appears to have intuitively endeavored to do just that; the book depicts a society inhabited by many unusual characters with vastly untraditional bodies or ways of being, including one with 11 fingers, all of whom seem to coexist with a sense of wonderment and appreciation of each other. Casting these characters as neither abnormal nor pitiable, but rather as having value to the community, the author invites us to broaden the parameters of expected human variation. Teachers might use this as a springboard, introducing the idea that there is a vast range of human diversity and that "normal" is what we make of it.

Another example of the permeating discourse of normalcy can be found in the popular young children's book *Leo the Late Bloomer* (Kraus & Aruego, 1987), in which the main character, Leo, is unable to read, write, draw, and speak. Nonetheless, his parents have faith that he will eventually "bloom." On the last page of the story, he eventually learns to do all these things, proclaiming, "I made it!" Although the book was undoubtedly

intended to convey a positive message to children about believing in oneself and others, it also communicates a dominant narrative about "overcoming" disability, that is, the notion that even though students may develop at different rates, if they set their minds to it, they will eventually transcend their "challenges" and become like everyone else—*normal*. Instead, EC/ECSE educators might use this story to promote critical thinking, by inviting students to consider different scenarios for Leo's life, or to write, draw, act, or describe different endings to the book. What if Leo remained different from his peers? How could his community learn to value his ways of being, or learn to communicate with him in alternative ways? In what ways might Leo have had other strengths that might enrich his community? Early educators might juxtapose this book with another story, such as *It's OK to Be Different* (Parr, 2009), which highlights the acceptability of differences, and then initiate a discussion about how Leo would still be a valuable member of the community, even if he never learned to be good at reading, writing, speaking, or drawing—because it is also "OK to be different." In these ways, through their questioning of constructed notions of normalcy, children with and without disabilities can come to experience joy and comfort in human differences, and thus begin to develop caring bonds with each other (Table 2).



Goal 3: Each Child Will Increasingly Recognize Unfairness, Have Language to Describe Unfairness, and Understand That Unfairness Hurts

Critical pedagogy can serve as a framework for young children to interrogate issues of unfairness, including ableism. Allen (2013) explained that by posing critical questions in relation to the texts or information that children encounter, teachers can allow students to explore power dynamics and inequities in society. Some of the questions promoted by Sweeney (as cited in Allen, 2013) are as follows: "Is this fair?; Is this right?; Does this hurt anyone?; Is this the whole story?; Who benefits and who suffers?; Why is it like this?; How could it be different, more just?" (p. 8). This approach can include querying about whose viewpoint and interests are presented, and whose are omitted, and encouraging students to develop their own questions (Allen, 2013).

It is imperative that teachers raise the issue of *fairness versus equality* in their classrooms to promote an understanding of inclusivity, or to answer children's questions about why some children receive more help or have different

Table 2
Additional Anti-Ableism Activities based on Derman-Sparks and Edwards's (2010) Goal 2

Goal 2: Each child will experience comfort and joy with human diversity, have accurate language for human differences, and form deep caring human connections.
Activities
Use video clips of dances associated with different cultures or different bodies dancing, and then create and perform a new dance in the spirit of inclusivity, such as the *National Dance Institute Dream Project*.
View artwork created by people with disabilities.
View models with disabilities and create artwork incorporating non-traditional body types in addition to able-bodied images.
Use books that celebrate a variety of body types and define beauty broadly, such as *Beautiful*.
Choose class songs that embody the message of community, such as *Under One Sky*.
Introduce music and movement incorporating multiple languages, sign language, and assistive technology.
Use Sesame Street's new character, Julia, to teach about sensory differences and autism.
Brainstorm and generate ideas for supporting friends with sensory differences or for adapting the classroom for someone with a mobility or sensory difference (for example, ask children to consider how might the lighting, furniture, or visual displays need to be adapted or changed).
Engage in a craft activity where children create their own sensory tools or fidget toys (for example, stuffing colorful socks with beans or making slime). Stock a classroom bin filled with these sensory aids for all students to use as needed.
Resources
National Dance Institute Dream Project
Under One Sky by Pelham (2003)
Sesame Street and Autism (2018)
Beautiful by Stacy McAnulty (2016)

assignments or assessments. To explain, a teacher might ask, for example, "If one child in the class is hurt and needs a Band-Aid, would it be useful to give *all* the children a Band-Aid, even though that would be 'equal'?" A more concrete way to process this concept is to have children engage in a hands-on task involving dolls of various heights, each of whom needs help peeking over a wall to see some animals on the other side. Children can be provided with blocks that the dolls could "stand" on, and they can use as many blocks as needed, so that each of the dolls would be able to view the animals (as the dolls are of vastly different heights, they will each require a different number of stacked blocks to be able to view beyond the wall). After their problem solving is done, children can be asked, "It would be *equal* to give each of the dolls the same number of blocks, but would it be *fair*, and *who* would benefit most from that equality?" Teachers can then connect this to a classroom, in which everyone learns differently, and needs different levels

Table 3
Additional Anti-Ableism Activities Based on Derman-Sparks and Edwards's (2010) Goal 3

Goal 3: Each child will increasingly recognize unfairness, have language to describe unfairness, and understand that unfairness hurts.
Activities
In order to help children understand that language can be empowering or hurtful, teachers can start by inviting children to share how they would describe themselves and their families.
Have a discussion about words that hurt, including the word "retard" (r-word)—a frequently used playground pejorative.
For early elementary students, watch a video clip about the hurtful impact of the "r-word" from a sibling's perspective made by the Treasure Valley Down Syndrome Association or from https://Rword.org.
Invite a guest speaker to share their experiences of hurt/unfairness related to disability.
Use a social story or puppets to introduce the idea that there are different ways people talk about themselves and their disabilities.
For early elementary students within a social studies curriculum, introduce children to the history of disability rights. Teachers can do this by using the children's book about *Ed Roberts* who was a pioneer of the disability rights movement.
Introduce children to the concept of accessibility through learning about the accommodations mandated by the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA).
Create a display of accessibility tools that children can explore and use, and brainstorm ideas for how tools can help all of us to participate in learning and playing.
Resources
Treasure Valley Down Syndrome Association (2012)
The Rainbow Tree by Leonard Shargel (2017)
Rword.org
Ed Roberts by Carson (2013)

and kinds of support. This can be an opportunity for children to discuss how *they* learn best, and brainstorm ideas for what the whole class might need, to have a successful school year.

Young children can explore the problematic nature of stereotypes and its connection to bullying. Teachers might introduce the idea through video clips from the perspective of a child with a disability or use a variety of children's books. For younger grades, *The Berenstain Bears and the Wheelchair Commando* can be used to explore the nature of stereotypes about people with disabilities, followed by watching a video of a disabled athlete participating in the regular Olympics (Berenstain, 1993). In these ways, all young children can learn about issues pertaining to living with a disability in the context of ableism. Furthermore, moving away from an understanding of disability as impairment alone, or as something to be "fixed," they can come to understand the experience of disability as related to issues access in society for all people (Table 3).

Goal 4: Each Child Will Demonstrate Empowerment and the Skills to Act, With Others or Alone, Against Prejudice and/or Discriminatory Actions

Once children learn to value difference and diversity and have gained some language and understanding about unfairness or discrimination, a next step is for them to learn that they can be a part of making change in their communities. Certainly, early educators can discuss with children how they can take action if they see bullying or if they notice someone being treated unfairly, or how they can simply befriend another child appearing lonely. Although, we urge teachers to extend these lessons by developing more structured and focused "social action" projects aimed at affecting local change. One example of such a project is for children to work collaboratively toward increasing access for all children. This project could start with children learning basic information about the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements for accessibility. Once children review and explore these guidelines through lessons embedded in academic areas like math (e.g., counting accessible elevators; measuring the width of doorways or the height of sinks) or science (looking at the slopes of ramps), they can conduct a checklist survey of accessibility and prepare an accessibility report of their own school building, playground, or any community facility. Then they can write a persuasive class letter or create a video that documents their findings about the importance of accessibility and make recommendations for things that need to change. These can be presented to an audience of their school administration or town officials (Table 4).

Conclusion

Through this article, we call on all early educators who are invested in issues of equity and social justice to re-imagine educational communities in which all aspects of human diversity are valued, and in which young children can engage in meaningful dialogues about human differences. We hope that our pedagogical suggestions provide a catalyst to begin to think differently and purposefully about disability, ableism, inclusivity, and EC/ECSE curricula. Indeed, young children with and without disabilities can, and should, be invited to consider the nature of oppression, be provided with the language and tools necessary to recognize and resist ableism, and be positioned as agents of social change. By addressing ableism within anti-bias curriculum, we can support all young children to build an understanding of inclusivity as a core value, and a recognition of the full range of human variation as a natural and welcome aspect of life. In doing so, we can begin to create true communities of belongingness.

Table 4
Additional Anti-Ableism Activities Based on Derman-Sparks and Edwards's (2010) Goal 4

Goal 4: Each child will demonstrate empowerment and the skills to act, with others or alone, against prejudice and/or discriminatory actions.
Activities
Generate ideas for creating an inclusive playground, gym, or art room.
For early elementary students, use videos created by self-advocates or disability rights advocates for ways in which each of us can make change in our communities. Watch *What Would You Do?* to begin the discussion.
Hold an assembly on diversity and strategically include guest speakers who share their stories.
Interview teachers or other children about what it means to be a part of an inclusive school or community. Share the big ideas from the interview with classmates.
Invite children to create a classroom slogan that is empowering and has an inclusive theme. The slogans will be shared at a school assembly.
Invite children to create posters about what it means to be part of an inclusive school and display posters around the school community.
Create art, dance, and songs that represent inclusivity.
Resources
"What would you do?" episode: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVu98Sa2MHY
She Persisted Around the World by Chelsea Clinton (2018)

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