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# Students' Conceptions of Deafness While Reading *El Deafo*

*Using collaborative reasoning, the author examined how students responded to conceptions about disability as they read a graphic novel memoir.*

*Funny—I may be inside the bubble of loneliness . . . but it is not so lonely anymore! It is actually kind of fun to share my superpowers[.]*

—CECE BELL, *EL DEAFO*

When I was a public school teacher and due to my own position as a woman who happens to be deaf, I worked hard to teach my students to consider and care about the many faces, aspects, and experiences that come with being an individual who is deaf/Deaf or hard of hearing.[1] By doing so, I wanted my students to realize that my deafness does not define me, but is just one small part of who I am. When we read a story that had stereotypical depictions of a Deaf girl, I wanted to challenge and complicate the narrow depiction of deafness as shown in the textbook the state adopted for our use. However, I was troubled and thus motivated by the absence of accurate, sensitive, and well-rounded portrayals of deafness in the canon of children's and young adult literature—from the elementary to secondary levels.

Today, as a teacher, educator, and researcher, the call for diverse and inclusive books, especially those with thoughtful, intelligent, and genuine representations of disability, is even more important to me. Readers must engage in conversations around depictions of disability, challenging stereotypes or misunderstandings they have about people with disabilities. Putting books into the hands of middle-grade students is not enough if we, as educators, want to move them away from ideas where persons who are disabled are seen as "inspiring," or somehow uniquely qualified to overcome everyday obstacles, which Stella Young, the late advocate for disability rights, labeled as "inspiration porn." Students should, and can, be empowered to consider questions around representation, problematizing any perceptions and misconceptions they have around depictions of disability. Ultimately, as readers they can create with their teachers a more complex understanding that is separate from and challenges the societal tendency to objectify people with disabilities (Dunn 51–68). Nonetheless, such problematizing conversations may be difficult or uncomfortable for teachers to begin, but they are necessary for our students in our diverse world that calls for social justice and equity.

The purpose of this article is to present a single case study based on a literature circle comprised of fifth graders and consider the representations of deafness the students experience while reading the graphic novel memoir *El Deafo* by Cece Bell. The book is a top choice for secondary students, since reading, analysis, and understanding of *El Deafo* can influence their schooling at these levels. Students access representations of deafness through positioning, point of view, and agency; each of these is explored through the discussion method named collaborative reasoning. Last, the use of literature circles with comics literature is considered to examine early adolescents' conceptions around ability and deafness



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and ways we teachers can begin conversations that sustain students in understanding difference and creating new, more nuanced, conceptions of people with hearing loss.

## *EL DEAFO*

*El Deafo* tells the story of the author losing her hearing at age four and navigating her way in the hearing world. Cece, both the author and main character, is outfitted with hearing aids, which enables her to better hear the world around her; however, the graphic memoir depicts the difficulties she still faces in communicating with her family, making friends, and participating in school, situations everyone, regardless of ability, experiences. Additionally, Cece creates an alter ego she names El Deafo, who helps her deal with her feelings of loneliness, rejection, and differences handling the insensitive comments her classmates make. This alter ego helps Cece view her hearing loss and hearing aids as a superpower, enabling her to see her hearing loss not as a deficit, but as an asset and important part of who she is, helping Cece open up to her friends with new ways of seeing the world before her.

The book *El Deafo* fills the absences of quality, well-intentioned, empowering depictions of someone with a hearing loss in the world of children's and young adult literature (Blaska). Bell provides readers a door to beginning to understand the experience of being deaf beyond just reading about the deaf experience. She uses multiple modes of narration and comics elements. These modes are the "components and conventions of representing, expressing, and communicating meaning" and, in multimodal texts like *El Deafo,* they allow readers multiple ways to construct meaning within the text (Dallacqua et al.[3]).

**Bell complicates the notion of a one-dimensional disabled character by providing readers with multiple avenues into understanding, not romanticizing, her experiences through the multimodal nature of the graphic novel.**

Examples of modes in this text include comics elements such as speech bubbles, narration boxes, point of view, and other visual elements (Dallacqua 278) (see Table 1).

TABLE 1.
**Comics Elements in *El Deafo***
Five comic elements are used in *El Deafo*.

| Comics elements | Definitions |
|---|---|
| Speech Bubbles | Speech bubbles allow words to be understood as representing speech or thoughts. |
| Narration Boxes | Narration boxes are rectangles or squares in which a narrator shares special information with readers. |
| Panels | Panels are individual frames depicting a single moment. They position readers to see that moment in a specific manner as designed by the author. |
| Frame | The frame is the outline of each panel. |
| Gutter Space | The space between the panels of comics is called gutter space. |

Instead of placing her characters in places of pity, as some disability literature is wont to do, Bell positions her character central to the story, establishing her agency, revealing how her friends, classmates, and social environments challenge and diminish her deafness (Bailes 8). Moreover, Bell complicates the notion of a one-dimensional disabled character by providing readers with multiple avenues into understanding, not romanticizing, her experiences through the multimodal nature of the graphic novel.

## USING COLLABORATIVE REASONING

As a discussion method, collaborative reasoning supports small-group discussion that moves away from a teacher-centered practice that can favor one correct answer and how some discussions around literature have been used in middle-grade classrooms (Clark et al. 182). The standard method of classroom discussion, teacher-question, student-response, and teacher-evaluation, may limit students' abilities to

respond thoughtfully and make reasoned judgments about multifaceted issues. In contrast, collaborative reasoning provides a framework for students to "listen to one another think out loud" and strengthens their abilities to engage in sophisticated argumentation about the text (Clark et al. 183). Discussions framed via collaborative reasoning "offer students opportunities to expand their repertoire of responses to literature by learning to think in a reasoned manner and to explore diverse views prompted by what they read" (Waggoner et al. 582).

Xiaoying Wu et al. found that in a study of fourth- and fifth-grade students' motivation and engagement during literature-based classroom discussions, students who joined in collaborative reasoning were more engaged and interested than their counterparts who participated in teacher-led whole-class discussions (629). The researchers attributed the higher engagement with collaborative reasoning to several factors. One factor was the sense of satisfaction students experienced from peer collaboration; another factor was collaborative reasoning "probably produces a greater sense of personal agency than conventional discussion" (629). The autonomy students experienced through collaborative reasoning supported student ownership of their ideas, with freedom to create and state opinions about the text without a teacher governing the discussion process. Moreover, collaborative reasoning treats students as capable of contributing to classroom discussions.

Since the intention of collaborative reasoning encourages students to explore and even argue about different perspectives pulled from the text, there is a framework in which to establish and support discussion (see Table 2).

TABLE 2.
**Collaborative Reasoning in Action**
**Teachers can follow these steps for collaborative reasoning.**

| Steps in Collaborative Reasoning | Activity Snapshots |
| --- | --- |
| 1. First, set behavioral expectations to cultivate a safe and healthy space for dissenting opinions among the students. | Behavioral expectations can include:<br>• asking students to focus on the topic at hand.<br>• encouraging students to pursue all relevant conversational threads.<br>• expecting students to be polite with each member of the group. |
| 2. Once behavioral expectations have been set, teachers can begin discussion of the novel by proposing a Big Question. | • Over the course of one novel, the teacher can propose multiple Big Questions.<br>• The teacher can propose yes or no questions since the focus of collaborative reasoning is on the discussion.<br>• Once the teacher has proposed the Big Question, the teacher takes an ancillary role in discussion. |
| 3. When students understand the Big Question, the teacher can take an ancillary role and watch and support the students as they engage in collaborative reasoning discussions. | The teacher can support the students to:<br>• take critical stances on topics relevant to the Big Question.<br>• disagree with classmates, yet explain how they came to their opinions.<br>• understand they do not need to agree on an answer but must support their stances. |

Questions posed during collaborative reasoning can be yes or no questions (Clark et al. 189), since the focus is on the discussion and students being able to support and explain how they came to their opinions. Collaborative reasoning is not about students agreeing on a correct answer to the Big Question they are focusing on at that time; it is about interactive dialogue.

Since research with collaborative reasoning has been completed in middle school and high school classrooms, I found collaborative reasoning to be the ideal strategy to empower the fifth-grade students to pursue new paths of inquiry they otherwise may not have by examining these alternate points of view. Combined with a text like *El Deafo*, students gained numerous ways to approach the story precisely because the visual nature of the text allows students

to *watch* Cece grapple with her varied situations. Collaborative reasoning with *El Deafo* fostered active inquiry around social justice, specifically disability, but supported students in articulating their thoughts while moving away from a one-dimensional view of disability, encouraging exploration of the text and leading to "expanding, rather than restricting, ways for children to talk and think in school" (Clark et al. 198).

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

A fifth-grade classroom teacher at a Title I school with a focus on STEM education knew of my interest in working with literature on disability experiences and graphic novels and invited me to lead a literature circle in her classroom as a teacher-researcher. There were six students in my literature circle; four of the students were female and two were male. The six students had been in the same reading group all year and had a rapport with each other. Only one of the students had previously read a graphic novel.

## COMICS AND LITERATURE CIRCLES

I spent two months reading and discussing *El Deafo* over the course of sixteen, thirty-minute literature circles during the students' morning English language arts block. Before the students began reading *El Deafo*, the first four sessions were spent studying the comics form. In comics, authors use images and other artistic elements in an intentional manner to convey information (McCloud 9). I introduced them to these images in comics strips, and we discussed the role and purpose of the panels, gutters, speech bubbles, and positioning of characters (Dallacqua 278). Then, in other sessions, we read the first chapter together and noticed the comics form applied by Bell. The students pointed out several panels, including one speech bubble appearing in nonsensical English. In particular, this prompted questions about *hearing* versus understanding with students. The students realized just because Cece was hearing the voices around her due to her hearing aids (which was indicated by the presence of words in the speech bubble), she was not *understanding* what was said because the words in the speech bubble were not coherent (see Figure 1). Charles (all names pseudonyms) added, "I didn't know that. That's good to know."

In the fifth and sixth sessions, we read chapters together and aloud during our literature circle time. I introduced and modeled the collaborative reasoning. After those sessions, I assigned chapters for the students to read during their sustained silent reading time and we began having collaborative reasoning discussions during the remaining literature circle discussions. These earlier discussions required more teacher input as the students learned how to have a voice with and contribute to these discussions.

FIGURE 1.
**Visual Representation of Cece. © 2014 by Cece Bell.**
Cece puts on her hearing aid for the first time.

*EL DEAFO*. COPYRIGHT © 2014 BY CECE BELL. IMAGE REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF THE PUBLISHER, AMULET BOOKS, AN IMPRINT OF ABRAMS, NEW YORK, NEW YORK.

After multiple sessions, students developed more familiarity and confidence with collaborative reasoning, which resulted in one Big Question, which we discussed over the course of two literature circle meetings. What follows is conversation from that discussion.

## ONE BIG QUESTION AND STUDENTS' ANSWERS

I wanted students to question the choices the author made in telling the story and how her choices directly affected their reading and understanding of the storyline, deafness, and representation. Since the framework of collaborative reasoning asks students to consider outside viewpoints and support their own answers with examples from the text, students' discussion required them to confront misconceptions about deafness. Thus, the Big Question that resulted in the conversations explored in this paper was: "Should the author Cece Bell have used the comics form to tell her story about losing her hearing?" The reason this was one of the questions asked during collaborative reasoning discussion was that the dual nature of the comics form and the written dialogue creates a unique experience in not only reading about deafness but also seeing how Cece's deafness affected herself, her environment, and the dynamic between Cece and her friends and family (Kersten 289–93).

Understanding that people with disabilities have multiple facets to their character besides disability is essential to conceptualizing full, complex ideas around disability. Moving away from seeing Cece as a deaf character to a character who happens to be deaf via collaborative reading further guides students toward deeper realizations of disability.

## STUDENT POSITIONING AND POINT OF VIEW

Mary Kay Thompson Tetreault describes positionality as personal beliefs, backgrounds, and cultures of the participants (139) that can direct, support, or reinforce their attitude for others or themselves. Several of the students acknowledged "I can hear" and "She [Cece] cannot," recognizing they had a different perspective to the story. However, positionality is not binary, and the students were positioned as more than insider and outsider and instead were able to bring their own experiences of being able bodied, lonely, new at school, making friends, and being sons or daughters to their reading. The students oscillated between what they knew, what they were learning, and what they were challenging, precisely because of the comics form and Bell's visual narration.

Elizabeth explained how sometimes her own thoughts are in direct contrast to the situation happening around her, like when her parents get upset with her and she thinks they are wrong. Getting to see Cece's inner mind really helped this student see how she felt, underlining this contrast. Readers were not being told how Cece felt or how people with hearing losses should behave or feel. Instead, they were being shown and asked to consider.

## AGENTIVE STANCES ABOUT DISABILITY

Students who are agentive are empowered to construct their own understandings. While discussing the Big Question, "Should the author Cece Bell have used the comics form to tell her story about losing her hearing?" the students took an agentive stance by questioning the choices the author, Bell, made. By being confident and asking about the story, they became storytellers (Johnston 31). This agentive stance encouraged students as active readers to consider representations of deafness as depicted in the book. When I asked the Big Question, the students did not answer yes or no, but instead went through the book to show me examples of how the comics form did help them learn about Cece and her hearing loss. Lucia initiated the discussion when she grabbed her book, flipped open the pages, and said, "Let me show you!" She and her groupmates proceeded to show me how the combination of image and text in the book helped them understand Cece's feelings about losing her hearing and her struggles with communication.

Midway through the book, readers experience the character, Cece, inside a "bubble of loneliness"

(Bell 47). Lucia pointed out the use of the bubble surrounding Cece as needed for readers to see and to fully understand how isolated Cece felt in the hearing world. Lucia's groupmates provided other instances where Cece felt lonely as indicated by positioning within panels and moments where Cece was drawn away from her friends. In contrast, Elizabeth brought attention to the image where Cece and her friend's hands extend beyond the panels to grab each other's, indicating belonging and friendship (see Figure 2).

When one student questioned why it was important to know Cece was lonely, Isaac explained that the readers needed to know how it felt for Cece that there was no one willing to talk to her in a way she could understand. Isaac elaborated, making a personal connection, talking about how lonely he felt when he moved to the school at the beginning of the year. By seeing and talking about the bubble, the students questioned *why* the author made the decision to place Cece inside a bubble, label it the "Bubble of Loneliness," and show it multiple times throughout the story. This agency considers all aspects of Cece's story and allows students to posit, question, and elaborate on questions important to them.

Students also discussed how the visual representation of Cece's friends' point of view helped them understand her struggles in communication. Jacqueline pointed out how Ginny over-enunciated while talking to Cece (see Figure 3), commenting that it seemed like her friends did not quite understand how to communicate with her.

Jacqueline continued, saying Cece's friends seemed to be trying to help her with how they were talking, yet she asked, "Why didn't she [Ginny] ask Cece if this bothered her?" The students discussed whether or not Cece should have told her friend how she felt.

One student argued that it is probably hard for Cece to tell Ginny how over-enunciating made her feel, while another student stated she should be a good enough friend to treat Cece well. They were learning about the role able-bodied people play in how disability is conceptualized (Wheeler 339–40). The graphic novel format invited such dialogue because the visual nature gave them a point of reference from which to speak. *Seeing* Ginny talk slowly and over-enunciate versus solely *reading* about it cultivated a different type of response allowing for larger and safer spaces of introspection, formulating a more inclusive picture of someone with a hearing loss as someone who does make mistakes and hurts feelings on her way to her own self-discovery.

When referring to the Big Question, students discussed how the visual nature of the comics form put the students in places of empathy. For instance, Elizabeth said, "The illustrations and words make me feel what the character is feeling." Isaac mentioned it felt "pretty cool" seeing and beginning to understand how Cece felt because of noticing the symbols and metaphors. In Chapter 3, the character Cece is depicted wearing a Sherlock Holmes hat and holding a magnifying glass to tell readers the different clues and cues she has to use in addition to reading lips to help her understand what others are saying. In one panel, Cece says she uses visual, context, and gestural clues to help her tell the difference between visually similar words that people say, such as *pear* and *bear*. Toby commented how helpful it was to see the

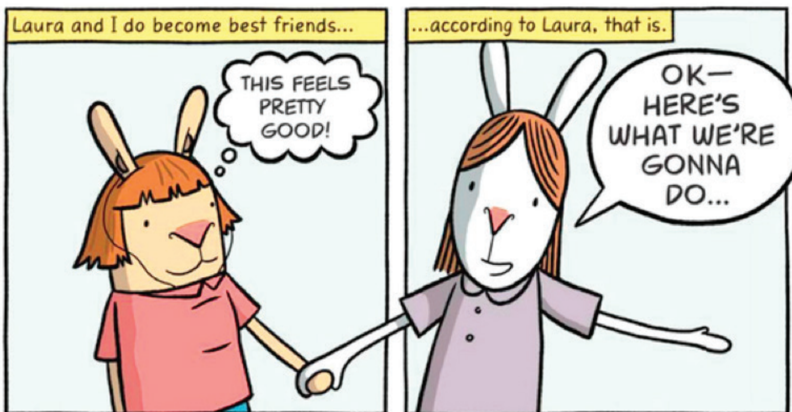


FIGURE 2.
**Cece Befriends Laura © 2014 by Cece Bell.**
The author's panel communicates a friendship.

FIGURE 3.
**Ginny and Cece Speak © 2014 by Cece Bell.**
The use of speech bubbles articulates Cece's troubles with communication.

different things Cece had to pay attention to just to understand people talking to her. Isaac's conception of communication was expanded when he stated that he doesn't have to pay attention when people talk to him. He added, "I just hear them." Lucia said she never paid attention to how people say words and how words like *pear* and *bear* can look so similar, and "lip reading seems harder than I thought." The students recognized how the visual aspect of the book helped them learn more about how Cece's deafness affects her daily life.

Interestingly, this initiative in questioning their own stances and being critical about their readings led them to take agency by considering the experiences of deafness depicted in the story. Since my role in collaborative reasoning was in the background, helping direct conversation and/or asking clarifying questions, I was mindful not to let my experiences, as a woman who is deaf, steer their thinking. The belief in one's own agency is not a given for students. For the six students participating in my research, the collaborative reasoning framework and discussions permitted them to experience personal connections, acknowledge their own abled abilities, and consider whether the choices Cece as a character and Bell as the author made helped them as readers to begin to understand how deafness affects daily life. By discussing the Big Question, the students felt empowered to question the choices the author made, support their opinions, and engage in interactive dialogue with each other.

## NEXT STEPS IN READING AND TEACHING LITERATURE

In this literature circle, the students were asked to participate in a collaborative reasoning discussion and examine how disability was represented in *El Deafo*. By doing so, they were empowered to consider questions around representation and reflect on their conceptions of deafness. Although this study was conducted in a fifth-grade classroom, collaborative reasoning and multimodal text use are applicable across grade levels, including middle school and high school levels. These types of critical discussions are ideal for secondary students (Nystrand et al. 2–7, 21). Martin Nystrand et al. also argue that students make stronger growth in reading comprehension when they are involved in highly dialogic conversations where they are required to participate, reason, trade ideas, and, in short, share their thinking (72). Adam Gamoran and Martin Nystrand specifically reference adolescent students in their research, suggesting these dialogic conversations are important given that students who see their conversations as merited may be more inclined to participate in class (281, 282).

The classroom teacher commented that she had never seen the students so excited about and invested in a book. She even remarked that the students would frequently share what they were discussing in the literature circle with their classmates. Furthermore, the collaborative reasoning conversations the students had with *El Deafo* supported their inquiry-based negotiations and conversations as they made sense together. Creating the time and space to facilitate these discussions is imperative so everyone—teachers and students—grows in conceptualizing the multiple dimensions inherent in a disability experience (Kersten 299–300) as noted in this case study research.

Another question to consider is: How can teachers create more affirming classrooms in which collaborative reasoning discussions are supported? First, teachers can create agentive environments for student-led discussions to encourage opinions, ask Big Questions while reading, and listen to students' voices more purposefully. In addition to collaborative reasoning, there are other approaches such as Socratic seminars, pyramid discussions, and concentric circles, among others. Any discussion procedure that prioritizes students' voices and ownership over the teacher's point of view is one step toward guiding students to feel empowered and to share their thinking among their peers.

Second, choosing books that explore social justice issues such as race, gender, or disability in accurate, sensitive, and compelling manners can support students in experiencing meaningful conversations on these topics (see Table 3).

Multimodal texts such as graphic novels provide another mode for students to engage with the text besides the words on the page (Kersten 289). Having the visual aspects of the story can help students see, and possibly better understand, what they are learning.

When I first began my case study research and the literature circle, I was not sure what to expect. However, when I took a backseat to the discussion and let the six students explore the evidence they had to support their answers to the Big Question, the conversation became rich, lively, and incredibly enlightening as students found example after example of how the images in the text helped support their understandings of Cece and her hearing loss. Their collaborative conversations and the visual nature of the graphic novel introduced different points of view as they questioned the positioning of characters and their own able-bodiedness. In fact, they became agentive readers with strong ideas to share. The book provided multiple means for the students to question what it meant for Cece, as someone with a hearing loss, to live in the hearing world. As a result, the literature circle revealed young readers understanding difference, questioning their own preconceptions, and formulating new understandings to become informed and empathetic members of society. EJ

TABLE 3.

**Recommended Social Justice Books**

**These titles address social justice issues for secondary-school readers and teachers.**

| Social Justice Books for Young Adults |
|---|
| • *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang |
| • *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas |
| • *Hello, Universe* by Erin Entrada Kelly |
| • *Moonshot: The Indigenous Comics Collection, Vol. I and II* by Hope Nicholson (editor) |
| • *Out of My Mind* by Sharon Draper |
| • *Tomboy* by Liz Prince |
| • *Town Boy* by Lat |
| • *When the Moon Was Ours* by Anna-Marie McLemore |
| • *You're Welcome, Universe* by Whitney Gardner |

### NOTE

1. The term *deaf* is used to describe the degree of hearing loss, which ranges from severe to severely profound. *Deaf*, with a capital D, refers to those who are culturally deaf and are part of the Deaf culture. Persons who identify as Deaf typically use sign language as their primary mode of communication.

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**READWRITETHINK**CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

**Stereotyped images create false ideals that real people can't hope to live up to, foster low self-esteem for those who don't fit in, and restrict people's ideas of what they're capable of. In this lesson, students explore representations of race, class, ethnicity, and gender by analyzing comics over a two-week period and then re-envisioning them with a "comic character makeover." This activity leads to greater awareness of stereotypes in the media and urges students to form more realistic visions of these images as they perform their makeovers. https://bit.ly/2D87DyG**