

The lessons of 'Wonder'



Sam Drazin talks with students about empathy and acceptance of others during a Changing Perspectives visit.

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It isn't often that my son jumps in the car after school full of excitement over a class assembly, but that's what happened when Vermont native and educator Sam Drazin visited to talk about empathy and what it means to be different. Drazin was born with Treacher

Collins syndrome, the same rare congenital disorder that the character Auggie Pullman has in “Wonder,” R.J. Palacio’s best-selling book that inspired the just released hit movie

My son does not have a physical disability, but he immediately connected with Drazin’s story.

Drazin’s presentation last semester included a discussion about growing up with the kinds of facial anomalies that characterize Treacher Collins and undergoing seven painful surgeries while attending public school, but his message was not centered on his personal story.

Rather, Drazin, 30, uses his experience to start a wider discussion among students.

“After college I taught elementary school for five years, and over time, started to notice that my classroom was getting more and more diverse, and that a lot of the differences were invisible differences,” Drazin explained when I met with him recently. “I wanted to create a culture where everyone was accepted and everyone was valued. How could I do that without having conversations about differences? I wasn’t really given any tools or resources on how to have them, so I ended up using a lot of personal stories and things about myself to fuel conversations.”

In 2012, the year the book “Wonder” came out, Drazin put together a presentation and was invited to speak to about 30 schools. Two years later after seeing the impact the discussions were having, he founded the Bradford, Vt., nonprofit Changing Perspectives to provide disability awareness programming to schools. The curriculum, which includes educator training and content on awareness, moves the conversation away from specific disabilities and inspires broader discussions and reflections about all kinds of differences. Not surprisingly, interest from schools has surged following the film’s mid-November release.

“We live in a society where it’s frowned upon to discuss these issues,” Drazin said. “The ‘Don’t talk about it; don’t stare; don’t point’ sort of mentality. And I think that kids want to talk about it, and some parents don’t know how to have those conversations.”

Drazin recalled that he wasn’t bullied so much as a child, but when he began high school, he struggled with isolation and going the entire day without speaking to another student.

“Sometimes I think that being ignored is even worse than being recognized, even in a negative way,” said Drazin. “It would have been easier if kids noticed my differences.”

Drazin said in an e-mail that because Treacher Collins is rare he doesn't often encounter students with the disorder in his regular travels but in June he spoke to a group who had the syndrome at a retreat at Cincinnati Children's Hospital.

Shelburne Community School in Vermont, which has 720 students from pre-K to eighth grade, was one of the first schools to have Drazin speak, as well as to pilot the awareness curriculum, which it has been using for three years.

“A lot of people who identify with a minority group don't see themselves in the world,” said Natalie Lodge, an elementary teacher at Shelburne, and a developer of materials for Changing Perspectives.

She told me that several students with disabilities or medical issues credit the program with allowing them to have conversations with classmates that they may not have had otherwise. It's also helped give students the tools and confidence they need to reach out to classmates who use augmented and alternative communication, such as an iPad, to communicate.

“Some students don't know how to have a conversation with someone who doesn't speak back in a traditional way, and there can be some discomfort around that,” Lodge said.

At the nearby Bradford Elementary School, Christine Smith implemented the Changing Perspectives curriculum to teach her fourth-graders about a fellow student who had Down syndrome.

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“Learning about the science behind Down syndrome and watching videos of students their age with Down syndrome participating in all-inclusive activities helped students view their classmate with a different perspective,” said Smith, who has been teaching for 20 years.

“There was also advice from children with Down syndrome on how to help them be better understood.”

She added that disability awareness training creates an opportunity for students to understand the challenges faced by other students, and to learn how to help a peer be successful. This is one of the central themes of Drazin’s presentations.

“Every kid has their own insecurities and things that they wish they could change about themselves and things that they’re trying to overcome,” said Drazin. “At the end of my presentation, I talk to the students about how some of our disabilities are invisible, and some are physical, but we all have challenges, and everyone deserves a round of applause for the things they overcome. After one talk, a kid came up to me and gave me a note that said, ‘I don’t have any friends. I feel so alone.’ For him to give that to me means that I created a safe space for that hour where he felt that he could be vulnerable.”

The Changing Perspectives curriculum is being used in about 30 schools in New England, but Drazin’s goal is to take it nationwide, to teach kids disability awareness but also differences awareness, which he says translates to empathy.

“A lot of schools throw around the word empathy, but they don’t really teach it explicitly, Drazin said. “Awareness is the foundation for empathy, and the only way to create a more inclusive society is to talk about our differences.”

Nancy Mugele, head of the Kent School, a private school for pre-K through eighth grade in Maryland, said independent schools do a good job of talking about diversity and respect, but fall short when it comes to disability awareness.

Drazin gave his presentation at Kent after students in fourth through eighth grades read “Wonder,” and the school has also used parts of the Changing Perspective curriculum.

“We don’t have a community with physical disabilities, but Sam is many things; he’s kind, compassionate, warm, but he’s also really funny and connects with students on a fun level,” Mugele said. “Even though he stood out in school because of his physical appearance, some of our students connected with him because they stand out in other ways.”

Drazin's experience will resonate with any child who has ever felt ostracized, alone or different. In other words, just about every kid.

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