

Library Learning Commons in a Post Pandemic World is One of Windows, Mirrors and Sliding Doors **by Lisa Lewis**

When kids read books, they are looking to see themselves. And their friends. And their siblings. And their parents.

My ideas about this paper have been percolating for a few years. In 2020-2021, my school board closed all Library Learning Commons (LLC) and re-assigned teacher-librarians (TL) to the classroom. I taught a grade three class and my classroom was in the LLC. My students therefore had access to the library's collection and resources. That year, I read to the class a book called *Macy McMillan and the Rainbow Goddess* (Green, 2017), a book about a young girl in grade six whose life is stressful and changing, and who is deaf. The book received numerous award nominations, and in 2019, The International Board for Books for Young People (IBBY) selected it to be on its "Collection for Young People with Disabilities" list (Toronto Public Library, 2019). The book was so well-written, and my students were able to empathize with Macy and feel her struggles and worries. The experience of reading this book to the children reinforced to me the importance of reading to children and organically discussing the stories in books.

Unpacking challenging topics can be difficult but doing so is necessary in order to support children as they develop emotionally, socially, intellectually and physically. "On average 13% of students will have some form of disability that impacts their ability to access their education. Of these, 35% are thought to have a specific learning disability, which means they have a specific deficit that impacts how they take in, process and retain information" (Landau, 2019, April 13).

How is it best for me to really understand what people with disabilities are going through? How are children able to understand and support their classmates? How can I, as an educator, support my students and community?

I always knew that reading and discussing books with diverse subjects was critical to my students' capacity to empathize with those who have challenges, and understand tough situations, powerful feelings or complex topics. What I didn't know was that the

more I read books with neurodivergent characters and stories, the more I wanted to share these endearing stories with my students, parents and other teachers; that is, those in my school community. “The terms neurodivergent and neurodivergence are now used to describe all people whose neurological conditions mean they do not consider themselves to be neurotypical...Neurotypicality is used to describe people whose brain functions, ways of processing information and behaviors are seen to be standard” (The Brain Charity, 2022, May 11).

There were many challenges for teachers during the covid years, but one challenge that is sometimes overlooked is that children, many with learning differences, were stuck at home, felt more isolated than ever before, and didn't have access to the incredible books that were available to help them feel included. Closing the LLCs for a year meant that children and their families were cut off from the resources (non-fiction and fiction) that children adore. When the LLC program was cut, the children lost the opportunity to read books to allow them to identify with characters and stories. This loss heightened the children's feelings of loneliness and separation.

As the students, teachers and educational community were figuring out what school would look like and feel like during and after covid, I thought more about visible and invisible challenges that students and their families were facing, and I began seeking out books with diverse characters and themes. It was this quest to search out books with neurodivergent characters that showed me how many resources there were that could make a difference for children. Discussions about what neurodiversity and neurotypicals are happening in more and more elementary classrooms as teachers strive to build inclusive environments. These conversations are critical, especially for those who have learning differences.

When the school board re-opened the LLCs in 2021 - 2022, I made it a priority to add more books with neurodiverse topics and characters to our already culturally-relevant and responsive collection. I wanted students with learning differences such as autism spectrum disorder (“ASD”), attention-deficit hyper disorder (“ADHD”), obsessive compulsive disorder (“OCD”), anxiety, or depression to be able to relate to characters in stories and see themselves in the books. I wanted them to feel validated and accepted.

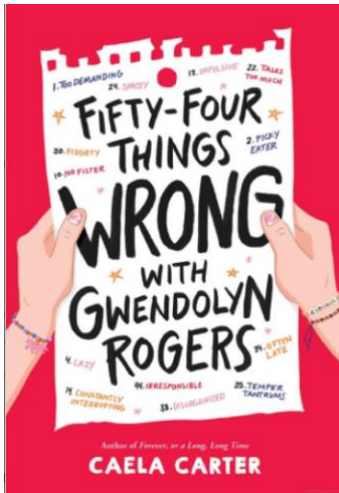
I also wanted their classmates to get a better understanding of what they were feeling and going through. I wanted parents to know that people were writing stories about

children with learning differences, I wanted the greater-school community to have more information on how to better support children with differences. Learning differences make people unique. When people read stories that they can relate to, they make connections to the characters, and that builds empathy, understanding, compassion, thoughtfulness and caring.

I purchased a number of books for my school LLC that had characters with learning differences, and as I read more of these books, I realized how essential they were to everyone. I began thinking about the larger community and started speaking with my school psychologist because I believe that the special education department at my school board should be aware of these extraordinary resources. These books helped me understand and relate to difficulties young children faced by conveying what children struggle with, need, and aspire to understand. I gained insights by reading these books, and now feel better able to support children with learning differences.

Teacher-librarians are in an excellent position to assist school psychologists by highlighting literature that is accessible to children in all grades. I am hopeful that this discussion will continue and that I will be able to connect with the broader special education department at my school board. I intend to discuss the ideas in this paper with my school board's special education department and the library department.

This brings me back to my opening statement that when kids read books, they look for themselves, their friends, their siblings, and their parents. Very few books with neurodiverse themes and characters existed fifteen years ago. It's a gift to students and staff that literature exists about children who have ADHD, OCD, Down Syndrome and other learning differences. It is critical that educators choose materials for their classes that embrace the diversity of the human experience so that children see and learn about themselves, their friends and their community. As we move along and figure out how to maneuver through this post-pandemic world, it would be beneficial for teacher librarians to promote the resources that enable the teachers, the students and their families to move forward in a nurturing environment. Below are some novels that would be excellent read aloud in junior classes.

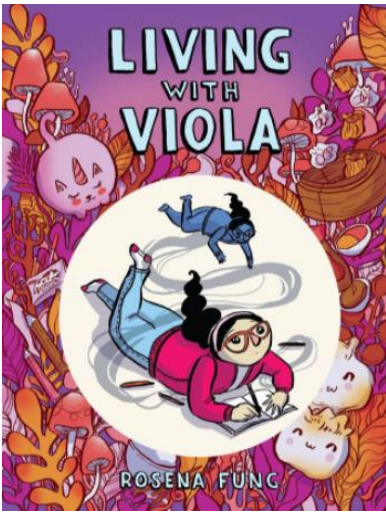


One of the books I read was called *54 Things Wrong with Gwendolyn Rogers* (Carter, 2021). It is about a young girl in grade five who is diagnosed with ADHD. She struggles to explain to her teachers and other adults what she needs and is frustrated at not being able to articulate her needs and why she is so impulsive. The book is written in Gwendolyn’s voice, and we hear her inner voice. She talks about how it feels when she is angry, upset, struggling, and trying to cope. Inevitably her approach upsets others, they then get frustrated with her, and no one’s objective is met. The reader is able to feel her pain and experience her struggles.

Gwendolyn, an 11-year-old, read a report about her that listed 54 things that were “wrong” with her. She couldn’t distance herself from this list; the things that were “wrong” occupied a huge part of her brain. She wanted to have nothing wrong with her, but so often saw these things causing her and others stress and she couldn’t help but think that there were so many things wrong with her. In the book, anger is described as something that is “swelling between my ribs until they start to ache.... [A]nger breaks through his shell and digs his pointy head between two of my right ribs and stabs me there so that it hurts, and I have to yell” (Carter, 2021, p. 25).

The author writes from her own experience. She had undiagnosed ADHD as a child and struggled to cope. Now that I’ve read the book, I have a better sense of how to help children with ADHD. The book is poignant, eye-opening and tender. You and your community will fall in love with Gwendolyn.

Living With Viola (Fung, 2021)



This graphic novel tells the story of Livy and her anxiety. Her anxiety is humanized and portrayed as a character called Viola. Rosena Fung's image of Viola is a young girl that is painted purple. Viola constantly negates Livy's feelings, actions and thoughts. The illustrations in the book are astonishingly powerful and moving. This book describes the pressures individuals put on themselves, pressures from family and pressure from friends, and the book is written in an honest and caring manner. You find yourself cheering for Livy. One idea for teachers to share the lessons of the book is that they may want to use a document camera while reading it aloud. The students would see the illustrations and feel both the words and pictures.

Teachers could then discuss with the students what feelings Livy experiences. Rosena Fung pulls from her experiences with anxiety, growing up in a Chinese immigrant family.



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Living With Viola (Fung, 2021)



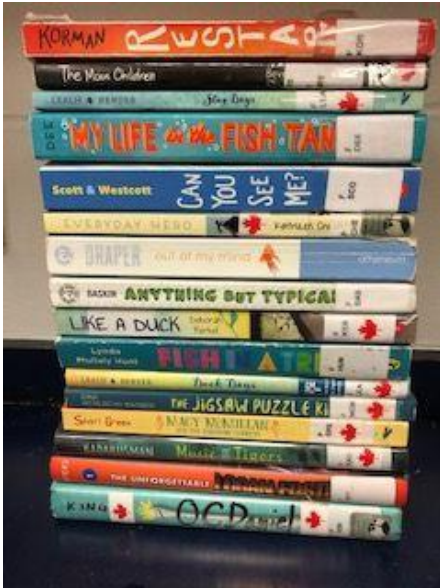
Music For Tigers (Kadarusman, 2020)

In this novel, readers go on a journey to the remote Tasmanian rainforest where they meet Louisa, an 11-year-old girl, who is being sent from her home in Toronto to spend time with her Uncle Ruff, who lives in the family's sanctuary in Tasmania. While in Tasmania, Louisa discovers much about her family's history and the animals that live there freely. She becomes friends with a young boy named Colin who lives close by with his mother. Colin has Asperger's which helps Louisa understand more about what Asperger's is.

The reader learns about the challenges Uncle Ruff faces because of a mining company's plans to develop the area. Environmental protection is a big topic in the book.

Kadarusman is a master at weaving stories that touch our hearts and help us understand neurodiversity. I shared this book with the students and parents in the Adult/Child Book Club I organized for grade four, five and six students at my school. During the discussions, the adults and children shared many of the challenges they themselves experienced. We had conversations about neurodiverse characters and gained a deeper understanding of individuals with learning differences.

The Adult/Child Book Club was a highlight for my community. Each session had about 20 participants eager to participate and share their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the books. The parents and children were required to read the book before each session. Our small community forged a sense of compassion for each other, and parents and children shared memorable stories and had thoughtful conversations. The LLC post-pandemic was starting to bloom. To learn more about the adult/child book club please read the paper *Ignite a Lifelong Love of Learning: Create an intergenerational book club in your library learning commons and invite your community to explore the diverse world of the human experience*, (Lewis, 2020), I wrote for Treasure Mountain Canada 2020.



Book List

This picture has a small sample of literature available for teachers, their students, and families. There are many more books with neurodiverse characters being published every year and I encourage you to look for them. You will be moved by each and every one. The characters and their stories resonate with a wide audience and in doing so have a long-lasting nurturing impact.

To end this paper, I would like to reference a quote that is as strong and impactful today as when it was written. “Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through imagination to become part of whatever world has been created and recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror...” Sims Bishop, R. (1990).

Librarians strive to ensure their LLCs are places of compassion, inclusion, and thoughtfulness every day. In order to do that, they must ensure their community is aware of resources and opportunities for engagement that are available. To accomplish this, the collection should have books so that when kids read them, they see themselves, their friends, their siblings, and their parents.

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